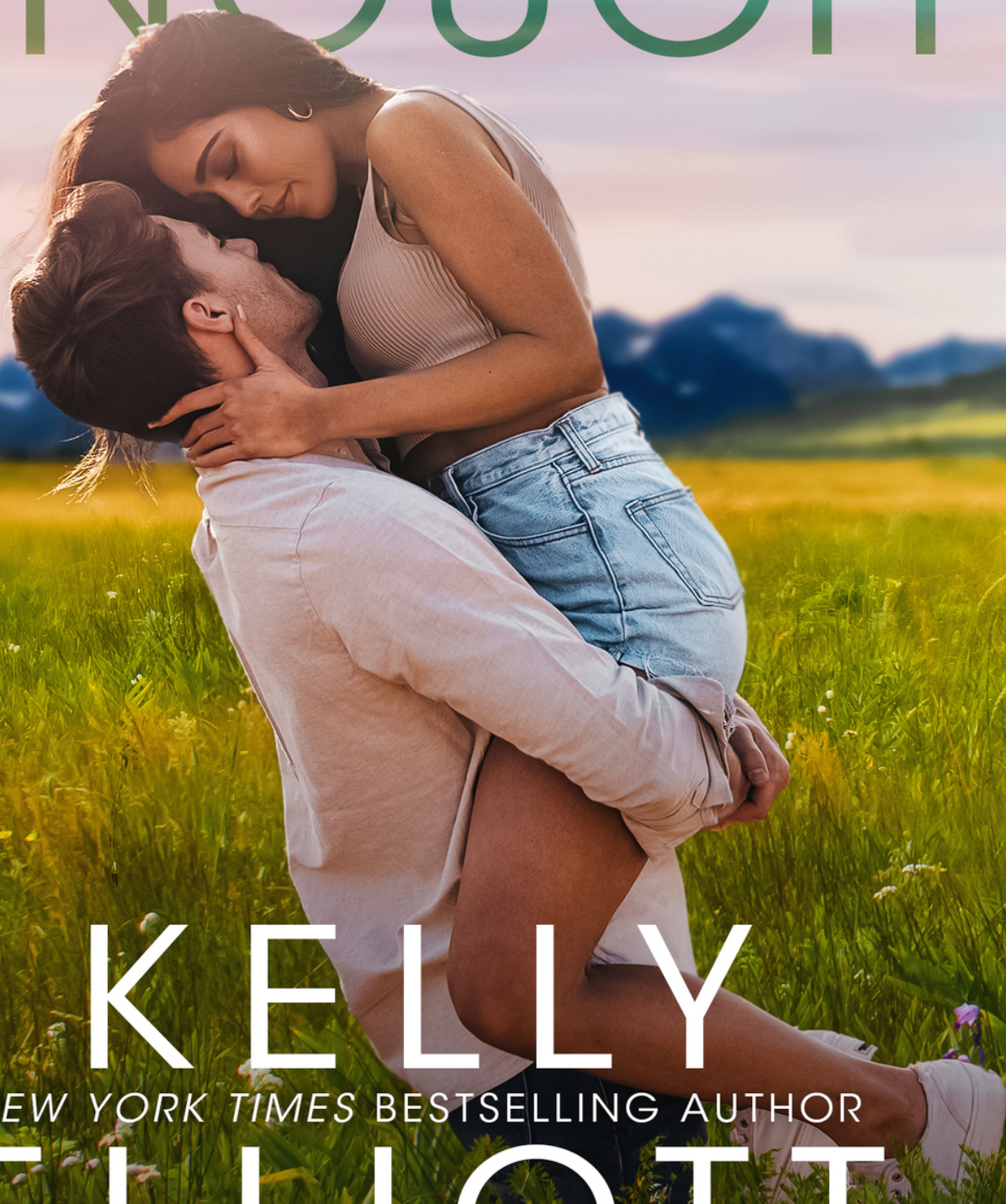


LOVE IN MONTANA SERIES

# LOVED ENOUGH



KELLY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELLIOTT

LOVED  
ENOUGH

*Loved Enough*

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For more information on Kelly and her books, please visit her website [www.kellyelliottauthor.com](http://www.kellyelliottauthor.com).



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## About the Book

Even though they'd never dated, Lily Shaw always just assumed she'd eventually end up with Ben, the boy who's been her bestie since they were toddlers. So she's understandably shocked to learn he's getting married—and having a child with his fiancée. Shocked...but not terribly upset. The truth is, she's been feeling butterflies every time she's near a particular horse trainer on her parents' ranch. Unfortunately, though attracted to Lily, Maverick's decided he has nothing to offer her beyond a good time.

The Shaws are all about family, something Maverick Prescott admires. But despite his boss treating him like another son, and Maverick wanting the man's daughter in the worst way, how can he start something he doesn't think he can finish? He has nothing to offer Lily, not even his own heritage. Just a past filled with so much pain, he decided a long time ago he's best off spending his life alone, tending to the rescue horses who are just as damaged as Maverick.

Lily, however, is a typical Shaw—stubborn as the day is long. Getting into Maverick's bed is the easy part; getting into his heart is the real challenge. But maybe if he feels loved enough, he'll be willing to give them a chance.

Hey there! Before you dive in to Lily and Maverick's story, have you read Rose and Bryson's story in *Daring Enough*?

Each book can be read as a stand alone, but for a better reading experience, I suggest reading each book in order.

Morgan and Ryan's story is book two, [\*Cherished Enough\*](#).

Hunter and Kipton's story is book three, [\*Brave Enough\*](#).

Rose and Bryon's story is book four, [\*Daring Enough\*](#)

Now back to our story!

# Other Books by Kelly Elliott

## COMING SOON

### **Love in Montana (Meet Me in Montana Spin Off)**

*Fearless Enough*

*Cherished Enough*

*Brave Enough*

*Daring Enough*

*Loved Enough -*

*Forever Enough - April 30, 2024*

*Enchanted Enough - July 23, 2024*

*Perfect Enough - October 15, 2024*

*Devoted Enough - January 7, 2025*

### **Boston Love Series**

*Searching for Harmony*

*Fighting for Love*

*Falling for Her (March 19, 2024)*

\*Available on audiobook

### **Holidaze in Salem**

*A Bit of Hocus Pocus*

*A Bit of Holly Jolly*

*A Bit of Wee Luck*

*A Bit of Razzle Dazzle*

### **The Seaside Chronicles**

*Returning Home*

*Part of Me*

*Lost to You*

*Someone to Love*



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*The Journey Home\**

*Who We Were\**

*The Playbook\**

*Made for You\**

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**Boggy Creek Valley Series**

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*Playing with Words\**

*She's the One\**

*Surrender to Me\**

*Hearts in Motion\**

*Looking for You\**

*Surprise Novella TBD*

*\*Available on audiobook*

**Meet Me in Montana Series**

*Never Enough*

*Always Enough*

*Good Enough*

*Strong Enough*

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**Southern Bride Series**

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*Delicate Promises*

*Divided Interests*

*Lucky in Love*

*Feels Like Home*

*Take Me Away*

*Fool for You*

*Fated Hearts*

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**Cowboys and Angels Series**

*Lost Love*

*Love Profound*

*Tempting Love*

*Love Again*

*Blind Love*

*This Love*

*Reckless Love*

\*Series available on audiobook

**Austin Singles Series**

*Seduce Me*

*Entice Me*

*Adore Me*

\*Series available on audiobook

**Wanted Series**

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*Believe*

*Cherished\**

*A Forever Love\**

*The Wanted Short Stories*

*All They Wanted*

\*Available on audiobook

## **Love Wanted in Texas Series**

Spin-off series to the WANTED Series

*Without You*

*Saving You*

*Holding You*

*Finding You*

*Chasing You*

*Loving You*

Entire series available on audiobook

\*Please note *Loving You* combines the last book of the Broken and Love Wanted in Texas series.

## **Broken Series**

*Broken\**

*Broken Dreams\**

*Broken Promises\**

*Broken Love*

\*Available on audiobook

## **The Journey of Love Series**

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*Unforgettable Love*

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*Stay With Me*

*Only With Me*

\*Series available on audiobook

## **Speed Series**

*Ignite*

*Adrenaline*

\*Series available on audiobook

**COLLABORATIONS**

*Predestined Hearts* (co-written with Kristin Mayer)\*

*Play Me* (co-written with Kristin Mayer)\*

*Dangerous Temptations* (co-written with Kristin Mayer)\*

\*Available on audiobook

# LOVED ENOUGH

KELLY  
ELLIOTT





# Shaw Ranch

HAMILTON, MONTANA



# Chapter One

## LILY

“What is it about weddings that make me feel so depressed?”

I glanced up to see Renee Sanders, one of my friends from high school, standing beside me and frowning out at the dance floor. My eyes followed her gaze, and I couldn't help but smile. My cousin Rose was dancing with her new husband, Bryson, at their wedding reception. I'd never seen her look so happy or so beautiful. They met in Seattle a year ago at a party Bryson had at his place. He retired from the Seattle Mariners after injuring his pitching arm, and now he lives right outside of Hamilton in a house that Rose herself designed. They honestly were the cutest couple.

“Because you're ready to be the bride?”

Renee shrugged. “Probably.”

“Rose looks beautiful,” I stated, my eyes sweeping over the rose-colored wedding gown that my other cousin Morgan designed. Morgan co-owned a boutique in downtown Hamilton with our cousin Blayze's wife, Georgiana. They were known for their custom-designed wedding dresses and bridesmaids gowns.

In a twist that only Rose would do, she wanted a colored wedding dress, and her attendants wore white and cream. Morgan had been all over that idea and had designed the gown in record time.

“She does, indeed,” Renee replied as she sat beside me. “I especially love her hair.”

Laughing, I looked at her. “Is that because you *did* her hair?”

She gave a one-shoulder shrug. “You have to admit, her hair looks stunning with those tiny roses in it.”

“You could make anyone's hair look stunning, Renee.”

With a smile, she winked at me. “Hey, do you think Bryson could introduce me to a few of his former friends? Particularly that blond over there who keeps eye-fucking me.”

I followed her gaze and saw one of the guys who used to play with Bryson on the Mariners looking our way.

I let out a huff. “Excuse me, but how do you know he’s not eye-fucking *me*?”

Renee laughed. “Do you *want* him to be looking at you?”

I shrugged. “I might want him to be looking at me.”

“Who?” Ben, my other best friend—and the guy I’ve been secretly in love with for as long as I could remember—asked as he sat down between me and Renee.

“The hot baseball player in the corner over there currently looking at either me or Lily, or possibly both of us. That might be kind of fun.”

I screwed up my face. “I didn’t need that visual, Renee.”

Ben laughed.

“You never did tell me why Abby didn’t come with you?” I asked Ben as he slid a glass of wine in front of me, then gave Renee his drink.

He shrugged. “She said she didn’t feel like coming.”

Renee lifted a brow as she took a sip of wine.

I let out a humorless laugh as I asked, “She didn’t give you a reason?”

Looking frustrated, Ben snapped, “No, Lily, she didn’t.”

I drew back. “Wow, okay. Don’t bite my head off. I was simply asking about her, that’s all.”

He sighed and pushed his hand through his hair. “She thinks I’m spending too much time with you, now that you’re out of school. She accused me of not being able to let you go, said she doesn’t want us hanging out anymore. I told her that she was talking crazy. I’ve explained time and time again

you're like a sister to me, and I don't have romantic feelings toward you."

*Ouch. Well, that was a dose of reality I probably needed.*

Nodding, I took a sip of my wine.

"I mean, I can see where she's coming from," Renee stated as I shot daggers at her. She wasn't catching on, though, since she was still staring at the baseball player while she talked. "It's not every day a guy has a woman for a best friend. And a hot one at that, with amazing breasts."

Ben glanced at my exposed cleavage then quickly averted his eyes as if he'd just burned them. I frowned and looked away.

"I'm trying to be understanding. But she told me today that *she* should be my best friend."

I nearly choked on my own spit. "I'm sorry, but first she says we can't hang out, now she wants to completely take my place as your friend?"

Ben looked at me with an apologetic expression. "I know, Lily. And I'm sorry, but...I think maybe we need to step back from seeing each other so much. That would make Abby feel better."

"Ben, we've been best friends since we were old enough to talk. Don't you care about my feelings, too?"

"Of course, I do, but she's my girlfriend, and I need to prove that she means more to me."

"Wow," Renee stated. "I didn't realize Abby was so insecure in her relationship with you, Ben. Is she that threatened by Lily?"

Ben shot her a dirty look. "She's not insecure. Put yourself in her shoes. If you were dating a guy who had a female best friend, wouldn't you feel the same way?"

I wanted to say that I thought I would feel more secure in my relationship, but I kept my mouth shut. As much as I didn't like Abby, I wasn't in her shoes, no matter how much I wanted to be.

“Clearly, she *is* insecure, if you’re just tossing Lily to the side. Girls come and go, Ben, you know that. But Lily has been by your side for everything. It’s just strange to me that you can’t find a middle ground. And Abby has been jealous of Lily since day one, and you know it.”

“Renee,” I softly said. “It’s okay. You have to do what you have to do, Ben. After all, you love her, right?”

“Of course, I love her. But I love you, too, Lily.”

I felt my cheeks heat.

“Not in the same way, you know that. I love you like a sister.”

Forcing myself to smile, I said, “Then we simply cut back on the time we spend together.”

Ben sat back in his seat. “I still want to help with the riding camp this summer. I committed to one day a week, and I won’t back out.”

“My parents will appreciate that.”

He smiled...then looked beyond my shoulder and frowned. “What’s Maverick doing here?”

Glancing over my shoulder, I smiled. “Granddad wasn’t feeling good, so my mother asked him if he would be Grams’s date.”

“That is so hot,” Renee said. “I would fall over right here on this table for him if he asked me to. I mean, look at him. Tall, hair that looks soft enough to run your fingers through, and eyes that look so light blue, I could swim in them for days.”

Ben gagged.

Laughing, I looked back at Renee. “His eyes are gray.”

“How do you know?” Ben asked.

I focused back on Maverick, taking in his strong body and easy smile...and a tingling sensation swept over my body. “I see him every day on the ranch, Ben. It’s hard not to notice. And,” I said as I directed my attention to Renee, “he’s not only

handsome but also one of the nicest guys I've ever met. My father thinks of him as a part of the family."

"Yeah, he eats dinner with you guys more than I ever did."

I looked at Ben. "What? Is that jealousy I hear in your voice?"

He scoffed. "Over that guy? Don't be ridiculous. I see the way he looks at you, though. I don't like you being alone in the barn with him. Who knows where he even came from."

My mouth fell open. "You don't even know him, Ben. Have you ever spoken two words to him?"

He snarled his lip. "I've met guys like him. He's a nobody, and your dad better be careful, or that guy could try to take advantage."

I stared at him in disbelief. When had he become such a snob? Had he always been, and I'd just never noticed before?

Renee hit Ben on the arm. "Shut up! He's coming this way!"

I felt a strange sensation in my chest as Maverick walked up and stopped at the table. "Renee, Ben." Turning to me, he smiled bigger. "Lily."

"Hey, Maverick," Renee replied with a megawatt smile. Was she batting her eyelashes, or did she have something in her eye?

"What's wrong with your eyes?" Ben asked.

Renee's smile faltered for a second before she looked at Maverick once again.

Laughing, I glanced back at him and couldn't help but notice how incredibly good he looked tonight. I'd never seen him in a suit, and my, oh my. His gray eyes almost seemed like a light baby blue, after all, against the blue tie he wore. And Renee was right about his light-brown hair. He wasn't wearing his usual cowboy hat or baseball cap, and his hair looked so thick and silky that my fingers itched to run through it and see if it was as soft as I imagined. He was maybe around five-foot-eleven, not as tall as some of the men in my family, but he was



built. Even in the suit, you could see how broad his shoulders were, and I knew if I touched his arm, I'd feel the muscles there as well.

I swallowed and looked down at my wineglass for a moment. Why was I thinking about touching a guy who worked for my father? But peeking at him again, I smiled wider. He wasn't just *any* guy who worked on the ranch. Since I'd graduated from college and moved back home, we'd gotten to know each other better, and he really was a nice guy. And *really* nice to look at.

"Would you like to join us?" Renee asked.

Ben shot her a scowl, then looked at me. Before I could second Renee's request, Maverick spoke.

"I came over to ask Lily for the next dance."

"Why?" Ben asked with a snarky laugh.

My head snapped to my left to look at him. "What do you mean, *why*?"

Moving nervously in his seat, Ben looked from me to Maverick and said, "It's just, you *work* for her."

"He doesn't work for me, Ben. He works for my father."

"Wow, snob much, Ben?" Renee said under her breath.

Maverick cleared his throat. "It's okay, I'll just go..." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

With a smile in my direction, he walked toward where Avery and Morgan stood. Avery was my younger cousin, and I knew *she* wouldn't turn down a dance from Maverick if that was where he was heading.

For some reason, I wasn't okay with him dancing with Avery. She was a lot younger than Maverick. Eighteen to his twenty-six.

Standing, I reached for his arm to stop him.

Yep, just as I'd thought. Hard-as-rock muscle lay underneath that suit. I'd seen him in T-shirts, of course, and I could only imagine what the rest of him looked like.

“Wait. I’d love to dance with you, Maverick.”

His eyes lit up, and I couldn’t help but grin at the look of happiness on his face.

The song ended, and he extended his arm for me to take. I wrapped my hand around it, and we started toward the dance floor. When I glanced over my shoulder, Renee gave me a thumbs-up as Ben scowled and shook his head.

*What is his problem?*

The next song started, and it was slow, one I hadn’t ever heard before. Maverick placed his hand on my lower back and kept a respectable distance between us.

“Be honest,” I said with a grin. “Did Grams tell you to come over and ask me to dance?”

He laughed. “Truthfully?”

“Yes, please.”

“No, she didn’t. I wanted to dance with you.”

My stomach did a little flip. “Oh. Well, you’re a very good dancer, if no one has ever told you before.”

“I actually took dancing lessons when I was seven.”

“Really?” I asked, instantly intrigued. “You never talk much about your childhood. Why is that?”

He did a slow spin of our bodies and moved us across the dance floor with seamless grace. He hadn’t answered my question, and I thought for sure he wasn’t going to. But he surprised me.

“I lived in foster homes growing up. When I was seven, this younger couple took me in. They’d been trying to have a baby and couldn’t get pregnant. They decided to do foster care. I was their first kid.” He smiled as if thinking of them. “They were dancers, both of them. I lived with them for over a year. It was the longest I ever spent in a foster home.”

My chest tightened as his words settled in. “What happened?” I asked.

He tried to smile again, but it didn't reach his eyes. "They decided to adopt me. The day they told me, I was so happy. I honestly don't ever remember being happier."

I swallowed hard as I tried to hold back the tears that wanted to build in my eyes at his emotional tone.

"Up until them, all the places I'd stayed were pretty much hell. The people only wanted me because they got money for fostering. I never felt like one of the family until Mindy and Justin. They treated me like I was there son. Made me feel deserving of their love. It had been a new experience for me."

"Did they adopt you?" I asked as he turned us once more.

"The day the adoption was to take place, there was a car accident. Mindy and Justin both died, and I was in the hospital for a few weeks."

I gasped and lost the battle to hold back the tears. One slipped free. I quickly reached up and wiped it away. "How terrible! Oh, Maverick, that must have been so devastating for you."

He gave me a weak smile. "I was almost nine by that point. After I got out of the hospital, I went to an orphanage for a bit before I was tossed back into the foster care system."

"And you didn't find another forever family?"

With a shake of his head, he looked past me. "This is a beautiful wedding."

And that was the sign he was finished telling his story. I wondered if my parents knew his history. I made a mental note to ask my mother.

"What made you start working with horses?" I asked.

When he looked back down at me, his eyes were full of life again. "I ran away from the foster home I was in when I was sixteen. Got a job at a horse ranch and started out mucking the stalls. Then moved on to grooming the horses. I followed the ranch owner around as much as I could to learn everything it took to raise and train horses. He wouldn't let me do any of the training myself, but he was still a great guy.

Never asked me why I showed up on his doorstep, practically skin and bones from not eating much and with no proof of who in the hell I was. The only thing I really knew was my name, anyway. It was the only thing my birth mother ever gave me, besides my life,” he said with a nonchalant, one-shoulder shrug.

“Maverick Prescott,” I whispered.

He winked, and oh my, did it send a jolt through my body. I clearly needed a visit with BOB, and soon. I wasn’t even sure when I’d last had sex. Not that I had a very active sex life. I’d dated a few different guys. I had been stupidly waiting for one particular guy to come to his senses and see that we were made for one another.

He was currently dating Abby, though...and for the first time, showing a side of himself I wasn’t a fan of.

“Why are you frowning?” Maverick asked, one brow arched.

“Was I?”

“You don’t like my name?”

“I do! I love your name. Keep telling me about the horses.”

The song changed, and it was another slow number, so we kept dancing.

“Well, it took me a few years and moving my way up the ranks on the ranch, but Dustin finally let me start training. He said I had a way with them, especially the cranky ones, and the ones that had emotional issues.”

“You do,” I said with a smile. “Have a way with the horses. My father calls you a horse whisperer. Said you can take any horse and make them trust you.”

His cheeks turned pink, and it was the sexiest thing ever to see. Not many rough-and-tough cowboys blushed, but when they did, it made a girl’s insides warm. Or maybe it was just *this* cowboy who had that effect on me.

I chewed my lower lip and jumped in his arms when he spoke again.

“I love horses more than people, so that’s probably why they like me back.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s more than that. I’ve seen you with them. You have a way about you that makes them feel at ease. I think it’s the way you touch them.”

His fingers tightened on my waist for a moment before they loosened. I found myself drawing in a quick intake of air.

Looking away, Maverick scanned the room.

“Will you be coming over for my dad’s birthday dinner?”

“Your mom asked me to join the family, but I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Maverick, my father thinks of you as a son.”

Something passed over his face before he cleared his throat and stepped away, just as the song ended. “Thank you. For both dances, Lily.”

Strangely, I missed his touch. I brushed off the feeling and smiled at him. He was, after all, incredibly handsome. What woman *wouldn’t* want to be in his arms? “It was nice dancing with a man who doesn’t step on my toes. Ben is terrible at dancing.”

He chuckled. “Well, I better let you get back to your friends. I’ll walk you back to your table.”

Grinning at him, I said, “A horse whisperer *and* a gentleman.”

He lowered his voice and said, “I’m not a gentleman all the time, Lily.”

The way his eyes turned dark when he said those words made me bite down on my lip. Had he meant for that to sound so sexual? Or had I just imagined it? My mind instantly went to an image of Maverick’s mouth on my body, and I shivered.

“Are you cold?” he asked, a slight smirk on his face.

I shook my head but wasn’t able to muster up any words.

Before I could think on it another second, he stopped walking, and I realized we'd returned to my table. "Thank you again for the dance."

Feeling out of sorts, I nodded. "Um, yes, thank you."

Maverick turned to Renee and Ben, wished them a good night, and turned to walk across the room toward my mother and father.

"Now *that* is eye-fucking."

I hadn't realized I'd been staring at him retreating until Renee's words pulled me away. "What?"

"You, eye-fucking the hot cowboy who cleans up real nice. How did it feel dancing with him?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Renee. They danced, it wasn't like they were dry humping on the dance floor."

I slipped into my seat and picked up my water. My mouth had gone dry. When I finished drinking, I glared at Ben. "How could you make him feel like he's less than me?"

Ben's eyes went wide. "What do you mean?"

"The comment you made about him working for my father. So what? He's more than just a ranch employee, Ben."

"Oh really? You sneaking into the barn with him, are you?" he asked, a smirk on his face.

Every part of me wanted to say yes, just to see what his reaction would be. So when the next words tumbled out of my mouth, I wasn't the least bit surprised.

"Maybe I am. And maybe he's the best I've ever had."

Renee nearly spat her wine across the table. "*What?* Are you sleeping with him?"

Ben's mouth hung open in utter shock.

My only reply was a one-shoulder shrug.

"No way. You would have told me!" Renee stated.

"You would have told *me*," Ben practically growled as he crossed his arms over his chest.



I raised a brow. “Would I? I don’t recall ever talking to you about the men I’ve slept with.”

“Men? How many have there been?” he asked.

“Plenty,” Renee stated before I could answer. “But if you tell me you’re hooking up with cowboy hot cakes, I’m going to scream right here and now.”

Before I had a chance to say anything else, the baseball player who’d been staring at Renee walked over and asked her to dance. Then Ben’s phone rang, and he excused himself to talk to who I assume was Abby.

As I sat alone at the table, I looked around the room and frowned when I saw Maverick talking to the female bartender. She looked to be around his age, twenty-five or twenty-six. The way she was obviously flirting made me roll my eyes. Maverick flashed her that sexy smile of his, and I watched as she practically melted in front of him. She slid a piece of paper across the bar and he took it, reading it before he slipped it into his pocket.

“Looks like someone will be getting lucky tonight,” I grumbled as I watched Maverick walk away from the bar, the bartender staring after him the entire time.

“What’s with that look on your face?”

I jumped when I heard Rose. Standing, I quickly pulled her into my arms and hugged her tightly. “I can’t believe you’re a married woman now!”

She beamed back at me. “I know! It’s so surreal.”

“Did Bryson tell you where he’s taking you for the honeymoon?”

“He did,” she said with a wicked smile. “Fiji.”

I gasped. “Shut up!”

“Then we’re going to Australia for a week to explore the Great Barrier Reef.”

Slowly shaking my head, I said, “I’m not even going to lie. I’m so jealous!”

She laughed and took my hands in hers. “I’m so crazy happy, Lily.”

Tears welled in my eyes, and I released her hands to wave at my face in a sad attempt to keep from crying.

“Don’t cry. You’ll make *me* cry,” Rose demanded as she dabbed at the corner of her eye.

Tucking a piece of her blonde hair behind her ear, I smiled. “I’m so happy for you and Bryson. I hope you know that.”

We hugged again, and she drew back to give me a look. “Did I see you dancing with that hotter than hell Maverick?”

Feeling my cheeks heat, I looked away and caught sight of him again. He was dancing with my grandmother.

Rose sighed. “That man is seriously easy on the eyes.”

Laughing, I looked back at her. “He is. He’s really nice as well, and Mom and Dad adore him.”

She narrowed her eyes. “And what about you?”

“What *about* me?”

“How do you feel toward him?”

A bubble of nervous laughter came out. “Me? I don’t feel anything other than friendship.”

She lifted a single brow in question. “Is that why you were glaring at the bartender after she slipped him that piece of paper?”

“I was not! And what are *you* doing watching him? You’re married now.”

Laughing, Rose replied, “I walked up and said your name. You were so engrossed in watching what he was doing, you didn’t even hear me, Lily.”

I waved her off. “It’s nothing like that, Rose.”

Her smile faded. “Lily...you’re not still hung up on Ben, are you?”

“Of course not.”

Rose exhaled. “You never were a good liar.”

I gently pushed her shoulder. “Oh, be quiet. The only thing I feel toward Ben is friendship.”

She gave me a knowing look. “That’s a lie, and you and I both know it.”

“He’s in love with Abby.”

“And have you told him how you feel about him?”

I exhaled in defeat. “I don’t really know *how* I feel about him, Rose.”

She was about to say something when, thankfully, Aunt Kaylee announced it was time to cut the cake, and all talk of me and my feelings for Ben floated away.

And when the man himself reappeared and put his hand on my lower back...it was only then that I realized it didn’t make my stomach leap or my heart skip a beat. Not like it had when Maverick touched me.

I turned to see Ben staring down at his phone, reading a text from Abby, a wide smile on his face.

Standing straighter, I took a step away. He dropped his hand and started to text her back while I forced myself to focus on Rose and Bryson cutting their cake and looking ridiculously in love.

A feeling of longing washed over me. Would I ever have a man look at me the way Bryson looked at Rose?

I glanced at Ben and saw him still grinning at his phone. I ignored the way that made my stomach drop. When I looked across the room, my gaze met Maverick’s. He smiled, and my heart damn near tripped over itself.

Jesus. What in the hell was wrong with me? Did I have feelings for Ben...or for Maverick?

Or both?

## Chapter Two

### MAVERICK

The guy was an idiot. How could he *not* see how Lily looked at him with those big honey-colored eyes was beyond me.

“Fucking idiot,” I whispered as I lifted the beer and took a long pull.

“Who’s a fucking idiot?”

Turning to see Nathan, Lily’s younger brother, I smiled. “No one.”

“If you’re talking about Ben and my sister, I’m right there with you.”

I narrowed my eyes at the seventeen-year-old who stood next to me. He was dressed in a black suit with a cream-colored tie. The kid was already drawing looks from nearly all the single women in the room. Young *and* old. He was tall, muscular from working on the ranch, and he had the craziest-colored eyes. They almost looked silver. He was the spitting image of his father, Tanner, but had his mother Timberlynn’s kind disposition. Undoubtedly, he’d be leaving a long line of broken hearts in his wake as he went through life.

“I was, in fact, talking about him,” I replied.

In the three years I’d been working on the Shaw Ranch for Tanner and Timberlynn, I’d grown pretty close to Nathan, so I wouldn’t lie to him now. He was like a little brother to me, and there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for him. Hell, for the entire Shaw family. To say they made me feel like one of their own would be putting it lightly.

A small part of me, though, was waiting for the floor to drop out from under me. It took me at least a year before I’d even accept any kindness from Tanner or Timberlynn. The only thing I took was orders for my job and a place to sleep. Every dinner or party invitation was turned down until Timberlynn finally broke me.

That first night I joined the family for dinner was the first time I truly allowed myself to see Lily as more than my bosses' daughter.

She was home from school and was filled with stories about her time at college. I was entranced. Her smile, her eyes the color of golden sunrays in the morning, her zest for life, and her love of horses. It took everything I had not to stare at her like a lovesick puppy.

From that point on, I knew the moment she was near. I could sense her. Feel her. It was the strangest sensation. The last year, anytime she came home, she'd hung out in the barn more and more when I was working. Said she wanted to observe me with the horses. To say she was horse crazy would be an understatement. Lily loved horses, and she was damn good with them. Since moving back home for good, though, I felt like she was *constantly* around—and that wasn't working out for my dick so much. Every time I saw her, I got hard.

There'd been so many times when I wanted to lift her chin and take her mouth with mine...but I loved my job. And Lily was hung up on her stupid idiot best friend, who'd been dating another woman for a good while. It was shocking to see how he hadn't noticed what was right in front of him.

“What do you think we can do to make Lily see Ben isn't the guy for her?” Nathan asked conversationally as we watched Rose and Bryson feed one another a slice of cake.

“It's not for us to do anything, Nathan. Lily has to figure that out for herself.”

I could see him shake his head in my periphery. “He's comfortable.”

Glancing at him, I asked, “Excuse me?”

Nathan shrugged. “That's why she thinks she loves him. He's a comfortable presence in her life. Or a...I don't know, a familiar thing. Lily never was one to like change. So it makes sense she'd fall for her best friend.”

I raised a brow. “Are you sure you're only seventeen?”

He laughed, but then his face grew serious. “Why can’t she like someone like you? You’d make a great boyfriend for her. You both love horses, my dad likes you and can’t stand Ben. You’re better-looking, you for sure have better hair, and you’re a great guy. Ben’s a total ass. I don’t get how my sister doesn’t see that.”

Clearing my throat, I replied, “Wow, thanks for all the compliments.”

He just grinned.

I looked back over the crowd. Lily had since walked away from the douchebag, who was now back at their table with his head hung over his phone.

“One of two things will likely happen here,” I started. “He’ll finally open his eyes and see what’s in front of him, or Lily will finally learn that he doesn’t share the same feelings as she does.”

Nathan sighed. “And then my sister will get hurt, and I’ll want to beat the living shit out of her best friend with a baseball bat.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Remind me to never get on your bad side.”

“Why are two of the most handsome men in the room standing off here in the corner?” Timberlynn asked as she walked up to us.

“I don’t know about Maverick, but I’m hiding.”

Timberlynn’s eyes went wide. “From what? Or should I ask from whom?”

Nathan glanced around the room and practically shrank back into himself. “I’m hiding from Haven Larson.”

Looking over her shoulder, Timberlynn asked, “Why?”

“Don’t look at her, Mom!” Nathan whisper-shouted.

Whipping her head back to face us, Timberlynn gave her son a questioning look. “Again, why are you hiding from her?”

“She keeps asking me to dance.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Timberlynn asked as I tried not to smile. Little Haven Larson wasn’t the type of girl I pictured chasing after a boy relentlessly. As a matter of fact, I’d seen her ask Nathan if he’d like to dance just once. When he said no, she turned and walked away with a shrug.

“Yes! She’s obsessed with dogs! And cooking.”

That time, I did laugh. “And what’s wrong with liking dogs and cooking?”

“I second Maverick’s question.”

Sighing, he said, “All she talks about is how she’s going to run her own business someday, and it will revolve around dogs. Why would anyone make a living with dogs?”

Timberlynn and I exchanged a confused look.

“I hate dogs, Mom.”

“Since when?” Timberlynn asked.

“I mean, I love our two dogs and the ranch dogs, but I don’t like *other* dogs. Remember that one dog that tried to bite my hand off? I’ll never forget the look in his eyes. He was ready to tear me limb from limb.”

Timberlynn’s mouth fell open, and she blinked at her son for a good thirty seconds before placing her hands on her hips and tilting her head in question. I imagined that was the look most mothers gave their kids when they were exasperated by them.

“Do you mean the little Yorkie you tried to feed a piece of bacon to...when you were *seven* years old?”

“That dog wasn’t little. And it bit me!”

Rolling her eyes, she smirked at me before drawing a deep breath, then focused back on Nathan. “Son, that dog didn’t weigh more than five pounds. It nipped your finger, and you screamed bloody hell, causing the poor dog to bark at you. She ran and hid behind her owner’s purse!”

I coughed to cover up my laugh.

Nathan glared at me. “You weren’t there. You didn’t see how ferocious that dog was.”

“For the love,” Timberlynn whispered.

“Oh God! She’s coming this way now. Thanks a lot, Mom!”

“What did *I* do?”

Before Nathan could say another word, Haven appeared. She smiled, revealing the two dimples in her cheeks. They made her look adorable.

“Hi, Mrs. Shaw,” Haven said with a wide grin.

“Hi, Haven, sweetheart. And please, call me Timberlynn.”

She nodded. When she turned to look at Nathan, her smile slipped a bit. Then she turned to me and her smile grew bigger. “Hey, Maverick.”

With a nod, I replied, “How are you, Haven?”

“I’m okay, but I have a favor. My friends dared me to ask you to dance, and Rory—the one with the super-white hair—said there’s no way a guy as handsome as you would dance with a girl like me.”

I frowned. “What does she mean, a girl like you?”

“What a little bi—”

“Mom!” Nathan quickly interrupted Timberlynn.

“Haven,” I said as I deposited my beer on a table, then held out my hand. “I would be honored if you’d allow me to dance with you for the next song.”

Her smile erupted once again, and her cheeks turned red. “You’re asking *me*?”

Nathan groaned, and Haven shot him a dirty look. Ignoring him, I went on, “Yes, I am. Care to dance?”

She placed her tiny hand in mine. “I’d love to dance, thank you so much!”

As we headed out to the dance floor, I watched as Haven turned back around, but not to look at her friends—instead, to



give Nathan a smirk. Somehow, I got the feeling I'd just been duped.

Once we were on the dance floor, I asked, "Is this dance for Rory or for Nathan?"

The cheeky little thing winked. "Both."

I tossed my head back and laughed. "Good Lord, Nathan better hold on tight with you."

Her answering grin made me laugh even harder.

As I spun Haven around on the dance floor, I couldn't help but notice Nathan—as well as Timberlynn and Lily—watching us. Lily must have joined them after I'd left. Both women wore smiles, and Nathan was shooting me...or Haven, or possibly both of us...daggers.

Haven looked up at me. "Is he watching us?"

"Oh yes, indeed, he is."

"I know you're way too old for me, Maverick, but thank you for dancing with me."

My brows rose. "I'm glad you realize that."

"You have no idea how many women lust after you."

That statement caused me to trip.

"Oh, sorry! Did I step on your foot or something?"

"Um, no. You caught me off guard by your, er...by what you said."

She laughed. "It's true! My mom was telling her best friend Louise that you're the hottest man she's ever seen, and if she was younger, she'd be all over you and teach you a new way to ride."

"Ahhh..." It was the only sound I could make as I made a mental note to stay away from Haven's mother.

"And a few months ago, I was working in the school library. I'm an aide in there during fourth period—I love to read, so it's like a dream come true for me. Anyway, I overheard the librarian, Brandee Norman, talking to one of the

English teachers about how you make her all hot and bothered and she would *kill* to have you notice her. I mean, she *is* rather pretty, in a book-nerdy kind of way. I think you should ask her out. It sounds like she would for sure have sex with you on the first date.”

I tripped again, and Haven once again apologized but went on.

“She told Ms. Poe, who’s the English teacher she was talking to, that she thinks about you when she’s taking a bath and using something called a water slide? I wasn’t sure what that was, so my friends and I looked it up.”

I closed my eyes and prayed the song would end early. “Haven, I think we’ve gone into an area of conversation that we shouldn’t be having.”

“Oh, right, sorry! Anyway, all the ladies think you’re hot, so you dancing with me just elevated my status. Thank you for that!”

The twinkle in her eye caused me to laugh. “If only I was seventeen again, Haven.”

Her cheeks turned bright red. “That’s so sweet of you, Maverick, and thank you, but I’m totally in love with Nathan. I just needed you to help make him jealous.”

The song ended, and I quickly stepped back. “Good luck with that.” *And I’ll be sure to send up some good luck—and a warning—to Nathan.*

She bounced on her toes. “Thank you!”

Haven turned and bounded off to rejoin her friends. When I turned to look for Stella, Lily’s grandmother, my eyes caught on none other than Brandee Norman.

Nerdy librarian and friend of Rose’s, hence why she was at the wedding, she was talking to Rose’s mother, Kaylee. I’d met her once when she’d come to the ranch. She was probably a few years older than me and very pretty. Blonde hair swept up in some kind of fancy twist. The glasses she kept pushing up her nose made her even more attractive.

She must have felt my gaze on her because she looked up and our eyes met. A dark flush appeared on her cheeks, and I smiled.

*Just go ask her out, Mav. When was the last time you got laid?*

When her tongue darted out and ran over her lower lip, the decision was made.

## Chapter Three

### LILY

June in Montana was one of my favorite times of the year. The nights and mornings were cool, but the day heated to the low eighties and made it perfect to do things outside. However, I liked to ride when it was still cool enough in the morning that my horses didn't overheat and we could get some good running in. Plus, Aurora was so active early in the morning. Hence her name, which meant goddess of dawn. Ever since birth, she was a spitfire first thing in the morning.

Stepping into the barn, I expected to see Maverick but found Clay instead. He worked mostly for my cousin Blayze, who ran the cattle side of the Shaw Ranch, but would help out my dad if Maverick went on a vacation or needed time off. Both of which were very rare.

I frowned, now that I thought about it. I don't *ever* remember Maverick going on a vacation. He normally had Mondays and Wednesdays off, and for a second, I had to stop and remember what day it was.

Sunday. Duh. The day after Rose and Bryson's wedding.

"Hey, Clay, what brings you here?" I asked as I headed to the tack room to get Aurora's saddle and tack.

"Maverick called in sick this morning and asked me to exercise a few of the horses."

I stopped abruptly and turned to look at him. "He's sick? I've never known Maverick to be sick before."

Clay shrugged. "He didn't really say much else."

Chewing on my lower lip, I nodded. "I'm going to take Aurora out for a ride. Maybe I'll swing by his place and make sure he doesn't need anything."

Glancing at me, Clay smiled. "That's awfully sweet of you, Lily. I feel like that boy has never had anyone look after him like you kids and your folks do."

I gave him a small smile in return. “He’s like family. *All* you guys are like family, you know that.”

Clay winked. “Go on now, and stop flirting with an old man.”

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head and headed in to grab everything I needed to go for a ride. Clay was far from old. If I had to guess, I’d say he was maybe in his late thirties or early forties. He’d worked on the ranch from the time I could remember, and his wife owned a bakery in town.

After I got Aurora saddled up, I started off from the barn and made my way to the trail that led to Maverick’s place. He was one of the few ranch hands who had his own little cabin here on the property. Most of the single guys lived in the large ranch hand quarters that Uncle Brock had built a number of years ago.

My father had the small cabin built just for Maverick when he realized what a gem he had on his hands. He’d told my mother they couldn’t afford to lose him, and offering him a place of his own was something they hoped would keep Maverick here for the long haul.

I had a feeling it was also because of what I’d learned about him last night. I’d asked my mother just this morning if she’d known about Maverick growing up in foster homes. She told me he’d briefly mentioned it just once. It had broken her heart as well. They truly did think of Maverick as another son. I suspected the cabin was their way of making him feel at home here.

As I rode up the trail, it opened into a large pasture area. I could see two of the horses Maverick had been working with were out to pasture and eating the dew-covered grass. The way the sun hit the drops of water, it looked like jewels had been sprinkled on the ground. I smiled when both animals looked up and watched as Aurora and I made our way closer.

Maverick’s truck, a Ford F-150, was parked in the driveway. For some strange reason, my stomach filled with butterflies. Was I being too forward by stopping at his place unannounced? I’d been here a dozen or more times when I’d

come to check on a horse's progress, but never on a more personal level. Come to think of it, I'd never come alone, either.

I pushed away the sudden nerves and stopped when I got to the gate of the fenced-in pasture. "Want to say hi to the boys?" I asked Aurora. I'd decided not to put a full saddle on her, so it was easy to slip off the riding blanket and toss it over the fence. I slipped off her bridle and placed it over the blanket.

The two horses who'd been grazing were now watching our every move. The gelding flipped his ears back and forth as he watched me unlatch the gate to allow Aurora to walk in. Like a typical mare, she ignored the other horses and started to eat the moist grass. I watched them for a few minutes before I turned and headed to the front porch.

The house was quiet, and I paused. Maybe Maverick was still in bed. It would make sense if he didn't feel good. Why hadn't I simply texted him to ask if he needed anything instead of riding over here and possibly bothering him?

Another few steps closer to the door, and I raised my hand to knock—but stopped when another thought hit me.

What if he wasn't alone? What if he'd hooked up with the bartender from the reception last night, and she was still here, and *that's* why he called in?

"Shit," I whispered. Now that that idea had occurred to me, it was all I could think about.

I went to turn to leave when I heard something on the other side of the door. It sounded like glass breaking. Quickly making my way back, I knocked loudly three times.

"Maverick? It's Lily," I called out.

The sound of footsteps approaching the door had me placing my hand over my stomach. What was wrong with me? Why was I so nervous? It was Maverick, for goodness sake. I'd known him for three years.

The door opened—and I sucked in a breath at the sight before me. I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

That's not true; what sounded like a moan slipped from my mouth as I stared at a bare-chested Maverick. A bare-chested, sweatpants-wearing Maverick. My eyes did a slow sweep of his impressively sculpted chest, down to the ripples of ab muscles and lower still, to the bulge that clearly showed the man was sporting a very nice...tool.

I closed my eyes and internally groaned. *Tool, Lily?*

When I opened my eyes again, I was still staring at his pants, so I shot my gaze up to see his light brown hair was a mess. Then I noticed his handsome face looked pale. Way too pale.

"Lily?" he barely said, his voice sounding as if he hadn't spoken a word in years. "What are you doing here?"

He swayed some, and I quickly reached for him.

"Whoa, Maverick, you're about to fall. Come on, let's get you to bed."

He mumbled something under his breath that I couldn't understand, but he allowed me to help him down the hall and into the bedroom. There wasn't much in the way of furniture, and everything was very tidy. A king-size bed, a dresser, a TV. In the corner was an oversized chair and ottoman positioned to see the bed and the impressive view out the large sliding-glass doors if you were sitting in it. There was a small deck, but I'd never personally spent time on it.

Maverick all but fell onto the bed. He rolled over and moaned as he pulled, or attempted to pull, the covers over him. I reached down and felt his forehead and gasped.

"You're burning up."

"S'okay, Lily. I'm okay."

Frowning, I shook my head. "Maverick, you have a fever. Do you have something to take your temperature with?"

When he didn't answer me, I looked around and found a thermometer on the side table next to his bed. Clearly, he'd either taken his temp already or planned to. Grabbing it, I prompted him to open his mouth.

“Here, can you hold this in your mouth for just a few minutes?”

He weakly opened his mouth, and I slipped it under his tongue. It must have been a fast-read one because it wasn't long before it beeped.

My eyes nearly popped out of my head. “A hundred and three point five. Oh my God.”

“I'll be fine.”

“You will not be fine, Maverick! You have a fever of almost a hundred and four. We need to get you into a lukewarm bath. I'll get the bath going, then we'll need to get you out of these pants.”

His eyes shot open at that, and he stared at me. “Excuse me?”

“You need to soak in a lukewarm bath to get the fever down.”

He shook his head slightly. “No,” he muttered. “Not appropriate.”

Rolling my eyes, I pulled my phone out of my back pocket and called my father.

“Hey, sweetheart, what's going on?”

“Dad, I'm with Maverick, and he's really sick.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Clay said he called in sick, so I rode over to his cabin to check on him. Dad, his fever is almost a hundred and four, but he won't let me help him get into a bath. I need your help.”

My father cursed. “I'll be right there. In the meantime, ask if he's taken anything like Motrin or Tylenol. Then see if you can get him to suck on some ice and drink some water. It's important he stays hydrated.”

“Okay. Dad, if you're still at the house, grab the beef bones Mom has in the freezer.”

“Why?”



“Bone broth is really good for you when you’re sick. Just ask Mom for them, please.”

“Okay, give me a few, and I’ll be there.”

Hitting End, I placed my hand back on Maverick’s forehead. He was asleep and breathing steady, which was a good sign. I pulled the covers off him but left the sheet, before I quickly made my way out of the room.

The cabin wasn’t big, by any means, but it was cozy. There was a pretty good-size kitchen with everything you needed to cook a good meal. There wasn’t a table, but the island had four seats, serving as both food prep and a place to dine.

The living room had a large sectional sofa that Maverick must have bought, along with a recliner. Three large picture windows looked out over the back deck and the mountains in the distance. I was surprised to see plants scattered throughout the place. It was hard to picture a man like Maverick with a green thumb.

I stepped into the kitchen and came up short. A bowl was on the floor, broken into pieces.

“That explains the sound of glass breaking,” I said as I searched for the broom. After quickly cleaning that up, I filled two cups with ice and added water to one. I also filled a bowl with ice water before making my way to the only bathroom across the hall from Maverick’s bedroom.

I paused. Had Maverick redone the bathroom? I didn’t remember the large soaker tub or the walk-in shower with a huge showerhead.

An image of a naked Maverick popped into my mind, and I nearly dropped the two cups and bowl. I shook away the visual. “The man is sick, for goodness sake, Lily Shaw. Get it together!”

I set one cup on the counter and opened the medicine cabinet. It felt wrong to be looking through his stuff, but hardly anything was in it. Some Tylenol, Motrin, first-aid items, and a prescription for something. I wasn’t about to look

and see what it was. I grabbed the two bottles of pain medicine, then a washcloth, and I rushed back to the bedroom.

Maverick had kicked off the sheet and had his arm thrown up, covering his eyes. I took the moment to study him again. I'd never seen a man so beautifully built. Not even Ben looked as good as Maverick. Probably the age difference and the hard labor of Maverick's job, I told myself.

Something caught my eye, and I moved closer to see a scar on Maverick's side. It appeared to run around to his back. I set the two cups down and leaned in closer. Had he been cut? It was a pretty big scar, and I had the urge to roll him over to see how far it went.

When Maverick suddenly moved, I nearly screamed and jumped back.

With a hand over my heart, I pulled the sheet back up to his waist. First, I wet the washcloth in the ice water and placed it over his forehead. Maybe I was supposed to put it on his wrists? I remembered being overheated one time, and my mother putting an ice-cold bottle of water against my wrist.

"She also put a washcloth over your head when you had a fever," I muttered to myself.

Next, I sat on the bed and took a piece of ice in my hand. "Maverick?" I whispered as I placed a hand on his chest. My fingers itched to feel every inch of him, and I silently berated myself for having such thoughts when he was unconscious. And anyway, Maverick was like a brother to me.

Chewing on my lip, I looked down at his abs.

"Okay, maybe not a brother," I softly whispered. I'd never truly thought of him that way; he was just too damn good-looking. I was just trying to rein in my thoughts.

"Maverick?" I said again as I tapped my hand lightly on his chest.

His eyes flew open, and his hand covered mine, causing me to jump.

"Jesus! You scared me."

He frowned. “What’re you doing here, Lily?”

I swallowed and forced myself to speak slow and clear. My heart pounded in my ears, and I wasn’t sure why. When I looked down at his hand over mine, I realized his heart was racing as well.

From the fever, you idiot, not your touch.

“You have a fever, Maverick. A very *high* fever. Have you taken anything like Tylenol or Motrin?”

He shook his head.

I put the ice back into the cup and slid my hand out from under his and reached for the water. “Can you lean up and drink some water for me while I give you some Tylenol?”

Maverick’s gaze searched my face. “Why’re you here?” he asked again.

“I was worried about you when Clay said you were sick, so I rode over to check on you.”

Something in his eyes changed, and his stare became sharper. “You came here for me?”

Smiling, I nodded. “Of course, I did. When you answered the door, it was clear you weren’t feeling well. I helped you to bed, and when I suggested a bath, you said no.”

His brows drew in some. “A bath?”

“To help lower your fever. Here, put these in your mouth, then take a drink of water. Let me help you.”

Putting my hand behind his neck, I helped lift his head slightly so that he could take a drink of water. When he finished, I slowly put his head back on the pillow. He sighed and closed his eyes. The simple act of leaning up and drinking seemed to wear him out.

“How long have you been feeling sick?” I asked as I took an ice cube out of the cup.

He shrugged. “Don’t know. Hit me when I got home last night and just got worse from there.”

“Were you not feeling good at the reception?”

Drawing in a breath, he slowly exhaled. “I...I don’t remember. I think I felt fine. I brought Stella home and was gonna go out, but I...started...feeling tired and hot.”

I made a mental note to check on my grandmother since she’d spent so much of the evening with Maverick.

“Here, open your mouth a bit.”

When I pressed the ice to his lips, he jolted.

“It’s okay, it’s only ice. Suck on it.”

His eyes lifted to mine, and I swore they grew dark with... was that lust? Desire?

With the ice pressed to his lips, I waited for him to open his mouth. The water was melting quickly, and I watched it roll down his neck and onto the pillow.

“Maverick, please. You need to cool yourself off.”

He opened his lips, and I held the ice so it would drip into his mouth.

“Can you put it in your mouth and suck on it? I don’t want you to swallow it or anything.”

He groaned.

“I know, I know. But it’ll be okay. I promise we’ll get you feeling better soon.”

Reaching up, he grabbed my hand and pulled it away from him. Then he maneuvered my wrist until I was pressing the ice against my own mouth.

I grinned slightly. “You want *me* to have the ice?”

He opened his hand, and I stared at it, confused. “You want to...hold the ice yourself?”

With a barely there nod, he waited for me to put it into his hand. “Let me get you a bigger piece,” I said as I reached for more ice. Once I put the cube into his fingers, he lifted it and traced the ice over my lips.

I shivered, and instinctively reached for his wrist. “Not me, Maverick. *You* need the ice.”

“I want to...I want to put the ice...everywhere...on you.”

Nothing he said made any sense.

“Okay, well...for now, let me have it, and let’s see if we can get you to at least suck on some.”

Maverick closed his eyes and opened his mouth. I slipped the ice cube in and watched him carefully to make sure he didn’t swallow it.

He sucked on it for a bit, then chewed. “More?” he asked.

“Yes. Of course, here’s some more.”

I wasn’t sure how long I sat there and fed him ice cubes, but I grew more worried as time passed. Maverick didn’t look good at all.

“Dad, where are you?” I mumbled.

When Maverick let out a weak groan, grimacing as if in pain, I reached for his hand and kissed the back of it. “Please, Maverick. Please hold on. He’ll be here any second.”

## Chapter Four

### MAVERICK

I opened my eyes to the sun shining into the sliding-glass doors. I must have forgotten to close the curtains. It was bright as hell, so I slammed my eyes shut again and tried to shake off the fog I seemed to be in.

With a deep breath, I rolled over and slowly started to sit up. When the room spun, I stopped and lay back down—but not before I caught sight of Lily sleeping in the chair in the corner. Her head rested on her fist, and a book was sprawled open on her lap, which was covered up with a blanket from my hall closet.

Frowning, I looked around the room.

*What in the hell is going on?*

On the side table sat two cups. One was glass, so I could see it contained water. The other was a Yeti tumbler, so I had no idea what was in there. Tylenol, as well as Motrin, sat beside them, along with...

“Theraflu?” I whispered, my voice barely coming out.

I attempted to sit up again, pushing past the feeling of nausea, but failed.

Movement at the door to my bedroom caused me to look over and see Timberlynn standing there, a smile on her face. She put a finger to her mouth and motioned for me to be quiet as she pointed at Lily.

As she made her way over to me, she picked something up off the side table. She sat on the bed and whispered, “She finally fell asleep about an hour ago. I don’t have the heart to move her, but she’s going to have one hell of a stiff neck.”

“Why are you both here?” I asked.

Timberlynn opened her mouth, mimicking for me to do the same. I looked down and saw she held a thermometer in her hand. I did as she requested, and after she gently put the

thermometer in my mouth, she said, “You don’t remember anything?”

Frowning, I slowly shook my head. When the thermometer beeped, Timberlynn quickly checked to make sure her daughter was still asleep. Seeing that she was, she turned back to me and set the thermometer on the table again.

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

I thought for a moment. Damn, my head pounded. “Taking Stella home. I came back here to change for a date, but I started to feel pretty bad. It felt like it hit me out of the blue. I thought maybe I’d eaten something bad, but my stomach didn’t hurt. I remember lying down for a few minutes on the bed...” Bits and pieces of last thing that I remember came back to me. “I called Brandee at some point to cancel the date, and I do remember talking to Clay...maybe mentioning I wasn’t going to be able to make it in.”

Timberlynn nodded. “Clay told Lily, and she came over to check on you. That’s when she found you with a high temperature and called Tanner. He came over and got you into a lukewarm bath, with the help of Joshua and Nathan. When your temperature wouldn’t come down, we finally called Dr. Waters. He helped us lower your temperature, told us to keep you hydrated, and agreed with Lily that you should sip on some bone broth. As much as we could get you to take in.”

I snarled my lip. “Bone broth?”

She chuckled lightly. “Lily insisted.”

“The horses—” I started, attempting once more to sit up.

Timberlynn placed a hand on my shoulder and gave me a slight push, easily keeping me down. “Are fine, Maverick. Nathan isn’t in school at the moment, so he’s been a huge help. His best friend Johnnie is also helping with the horses, and so is Josh.”

I nearly groaned. “Not Johnnie. He doesn’t know the difference between a horse and a cow.”

She covered her mouth to keep from laughing.

Sighing, I added, “I’m sure I’ll only be down for the one day. I can work Monday to make up for it.”

Her brows shot up. “What day do you think it is?”

“Um, last night was the wedding, so...Sunday?”

The corners of her mouth twitched. “It’s Wednesday morning.”

“*What?*” My voice still sounded a bit gravelly, but I must have spoken louder than I thought because Lily stirred and curled up more on the chair. With a shake of my head, I lowered my voice and looked at Timberlynn. “I’ve been in bed for four days?”

She nodded. “You were pretty sick, Mav. Dr. Waters thinks it was most likely the flu.”

I closed my eyes. I was going to be so far behind on things. Who the hell got the flu in June?

“The horses—who’s been exercising them?”

With another smile, she said, “Nathan and Johnnie. Don’t worry, Hunter has stopped by a few times to help out, and so has Ryan. Tanner needed his help with a rescue that came in. Ryan ended up taking the horse to his ranch since you were laid up. Everything’s been fine, but I do believe the horses are pretty worried they haven’t seen you.”

I looked back over at Lily. “Has she been here the whole time?”

Timberlynn cast a quick look at her daughter. “She wouldn’t leave your side. She cares about you, Maverick. We all do. You’re a part of this family, and I’ve told you that time and time again. Nothing will ever change that. Tanner was beside himself when he first got here. Said he’d never felt anyone so burning hot. You gave him a good scare. He was ready to take you to the hospital, but Dr. Waters got here in time to stop him from carrying you to the truck.”

My chest squeezed tightly, and I couldn’t pinpoint the exact emotion that came with Timberlynn’s words. I’d never in



my life had anyone take care of me, much less when I was sick.

No, that wasn't true. Mindy and Justin had the one time I'd gotten sick. Mindy never left my side, and she even slept in the same bed as me.

"Thank you, for, um, taking care of me while I was sick."

With a sweet smile, she stood. "You can thank that one in the corner. She was the one who made you drink water and bone broth and wouldn't stop forcing ice cubes into your mouth."

A memory flashed through my mind of me holding an ice cube to *Lily's* mouth. It must have been a dream during the fever because that would never happen.

"Would you like some crackers? Maybe more of Lily's famous bone broth? It's actually pretty good."

I nodded. "I can get it," I said as I attempted to sit up one more time, only to feel the room spin. "Or maybe I'll let you get it."

Timberlynn winked and made her way out of the bedroom.

I turned my attention to the sleeping beauty in the corner. Fuck if she wasn't the most beautiful woman I'd ever laid eyes on. What in the hell was wrong with that stupid friend of hers? How could he *not* see the way she looked at him?

My heart ached with jealousy, and I tore my gaze away from the one thing I wanted more than life itself—and would never be able to have.

"You're awake."

Her soft words drew my gaze back to her. The braid in her brown hair hung to the side of her head, just over her shoulder. Those honey eyes twinkled with a brightness that was all Lily. Everything about her was sunshine. From her eyes, to her smile, to the way she lit up a room when she walked in. Or the way she focused solely on the person she was speaking to at that moment. It was like everyone else faded away when her attention was on you.

Leaning forward, she stretched, and the book fell to the floor. When she pushed the blanket away, I realized she wore one of my T-shirts. And fuck me, if she didn't look good in it.

“Lily.”

It was the only word that would come out of my mouth. I was struck yet again by the power she held over me. At the wedding, when we'd danced, I'd almost whispered into her ear all the things I wanted to do to her with my hands and mouth. She fit against me so damn good, like she was custom-made for me. Did she not see that? Blinded by her best friend who wanted nothing to do with her in that way?

I closed my eyes to rid myself of the memory of how she felt in my embrace.

“Maverick? Are you okay?”

She was closer. Next to me. The mattress dipped, and I had to concentrate on not thinking about her in my bed.

When I opened my eyes, I saw concern in her gaze.

Not lust or desire. *Concern*. That was like a gallon of cold water, and just what I needed to get myself—or more importantly, my dick—under control.

“Slight headache.”

She placed the back of her hand over my forehead, and my body shivered. Frowning, she said, “You don't feel hot anymore, but you're shivering.”

I wanted to laugh. She had no idea the impact she had on me. It was like fire and ice at the same damn time. “Just a chill, I guess.”

Smiling, she picked up my hand in hers. “I think your fever has finally broken.”

“It has,” Timberlynn said as she walked into the room carrying a tray. “I checked it a few minutes ago, and he's at ninety-nine.”

Lily sighed in relief and whispered, “Thank God.”

“Lil, you really need to head home and get some sleep,” Timberlynn stated as she gave her daughter a worried look.

When Lily released my hand, I wanted to cry out in protest. I missed the warmth of her touch instantly.

“I’m fine, Mom.” She frowned. “Two bowls?”

Timberlynn nodded. “You need to eat as well, and if bone broth is good for Maverick, it’s good for you too. I put some crackers on your plate, Maverick. Don’t eat too much or you might upset your stomach.”

Lily helped me to sit up and then adjusted the tray over my lap. “Lean forward, and I’ll put a pillow behind you,” she said as she leaned in so close, I could have turned my head and kissed her.

Moving back, she looked at me with the sweetest expression. A mix of concern and something else I couldn’t read. “How’s that?”

I cleared the lump out of my throat. “Um, fine. It’s good. Thank you.”

She flashed me a brilliant smile and then slid one of the bowls closer to her. It appeared we were going to share the tray.

“You really don’t have to stay, Lily. I think I’m out of the woods.”

“Well, just because the fever broke for now doesn’t mean it won’t come back. I texted Nathan to pack a bag with some of my stuff. I’ll stay here until you’re feeling like yourself.”

I nearly choked on the bone broth, which I had to admit tasted like a fucking hundred-dollar steak. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was.

“That’s not necessary,” I said, glancing at Timberlynn, who was clearing away glasses of water off the bedside table. “Timberlynn, please tell her it’s not proper for her to stay here with me.”

Both women paused and stared at me. Then Lily bursted out laughing.

“Oh my God! This isn’t the eighteen hundreds. And you’re *Maverick*. You’re like a...”

Lily’s voice faded, and I wanted to ask her to finish what she’d been about to say. I was like a what? A friend? A brother? Someone she wanted to crawl into bed with and let me explore every inch of her body?

“Tanner won’t...”

It was my turn to trail off as Timberlynn put a hand on her hip. “Tanner thinks of you like a son, and I know he trusts you. Besides, once this one makes up her mind to do something, good luck changing it.”

She glanced at Lily, who nodded. “You can’t be alone. Besides, you’re too weak to make a move on me.”

Both women laughed, and I tried to smile, but internally, I pictured every single one of the ways I could make a move on her.

There was no way I could have Lily sleep under my roof. None. I’d go fucking mad.

“I can have Nathan stay with me, or maybe Clay. You really don’t have to trouble yourself, Lily.”

For a moment, I thought I saw a hurt look cross her face before she looked at her soup, then back up at me. She wore a smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

*I did hurt her feelings. Fix it, Mav. Fix it right now.*

“But...I doubt they can make a bone broth as good as you do.”

Her eyes lit up, and her smile widened. “No, they cannot.”

When I took a chance to look at Timberlynn, she was smiling warmly. She gave me a wink and said, “I should get going. Lily, give him some Tylenol in about an hour. And once you feel like you can move around without getting dizzy, you should take a bath or shower. It’ll make you feel better. But don’t let yourself get a chill.”

I nodded. “Thank you, Timberlynn. For everything.”

With a quick peck on my cheek, she drew back and said, “Of course. You call me or Tanner if you need anything, and please do not stress about getting back to work. In the years since you’ve worked for us, you’ve never taken a single day off.”

Nodding, I thanked her again.

Once Timberlynn was gone, I got back to eating the broth. I could feel Lily’s eyes on me, but I forced myself to stay focused on my bowl.

“Why haven’t you ever taken a day off?”

I finally glanced up. “I’m sorry?”

“My mom said you’ve never taken a day off. Now that I think about it, I’ve never known you to take a vacation, either.”

Shrugging, I replied, “I don’t have anywhere to go.”

Lily’s mouth fell open. “You could go anywhere you want to, Maverick. There isn’t anywhere you’d like to visit or see?”

I thought about it for a few seconds. “I mean, there are places I’d like to go, I guess.”

She smiled and set her bowl back on the tray and crossed her legs. “Tell me.”

Laughing, I set my spoon down. “Um...Glacier National Park.”

“You’ve never been there?”

“Nope.”

“Maverick, why not?”

“It’s not much fun going to places like that alone. None of my friends ever wanted to go, so I never went.”

Her teeth dug down into her lower lip.

“Don’t do that, Lily.”

“Do what?” she asked.

“Feel sorry for me.”

She looked away, then back at me. “What about a girlfriend? They never wanted to go?”

“I traveled around too much for a steady girlfriend. Hamilton is the longest I’ve ever stayed in one place.”

Her brows shot up. “Really?”

“Really, really,” I replied.

“So”—she chewed on her lip again, then smiled—“no girlfriend ever?”

I gave a one-shoulder shrug. “I dated one girl for a bit when I was in Utah. I was younger, and she was older. She lived on the ranch next to the one where I worked.”

“How much older was she?”

Laughing, I said, “Twenty-two years older.”

“What!” Lily shrieked. “How? You have to tell me!”

“You really want to hear this?”

She nodded her head like a little girl ready for a story.

“Well...Lori was her name, and she was a widow. She was thirty-nine, and I was eighteen. She’d come over to ask Hank, the rancher I worked for, if he had any strong ranch hands who could unload a tractor of hay and put it in her barn. He sent me and two other guys. When we were done, she asked me to stay and help with a few other things, so I did. As the weeks went on, she asked Hank if she could use me for more and more stuff. She started bringing me iced tea, then food, encouraging me to take breaks. Then it became lunch in the house, then dinner. Until one night she told me she wanted me to, um... take her over the table.”

Lily’s eyes went wide. “Oh my God. Is that how she actually said it?”

I could see the wild curiosity in Lily’s eyes. “No, she bluntly asked me to fuck her over the table.”

“Did you?”

I laughed. “I was a horny eighteen-year-old boy attracted to an insanely hot older woman, so yes, I did. Had no idea what she wanted from me, really. I’d had sex before, but it was just with girls my own age. I’d never taken anyone over *anything*.”

“Did she teach you things?” Lily asked.

I felt my cheeks heat.

“You’re blushing, and you can’t blame it on the fever, so that means she totally did! Tell me what she taught you.”

“Lily, this isn’t really a—”

Holding up her hand, she said, “If you say ‘proper conversation,’ I’m going to punch you, sick or not. I want to know! This is like a movie where an older woman seduces a young boy and teaches him everything naughty.”

I laughed.

“So did she?”

“Teach me naughty things?” I asked, the corner of my mouth pulled up in a smirk.

Her eyes fell to my mouth. When her gaze lifted and clashed with mine, she licked her lips and whispered, “Yes.”

I looked back down at the tray. “She did. She told me exactly what she wanted me to do that first night, and I did it.”

“Her on the table?”

I couldn’t believe we were having this conversation. “She wanted me to fuck her from behind. So I did. The next time I came over, she had me do something else.”

“What?” Lily asked, breathless.

“Oral sex.”

Her eyes went wide. “Oh. On her? Or her to you?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Lily, we’re friends, but this seems...”

“Are you embarrassed to talk about sex?”

“No, but it’s *you*.”

“So? I’m curious, and I think that’s healthy and nothing to be ashamed of. I’ve also had a very vanilla sex life.”

“Do I get to ask questions about *your* sex life?”

She held up her hands. “I’m an open book. It’s kind of boring, and I’ve never had a guy bend me over a table or give me oral sex—”

I groaned. “Lily, please don’t tell me things like that.”

The brightness in her eyes faltered some. “Why?”

I exhaled. “Friends or not, I’m still a guy. You’re still a beautiful woman.”

“Does it turn you on to talk about what you and Lori did?”

*No, but thinking about doing it to you does.*

All I could do was shake my head.

“So...? The oral sex?”

The moment I started to talk, I knew I’d regret telling her. My dick would be hard for an hour. I’d dream of being with Lily now and would most likely need to jack off in a cold shower. Fuck the lukewarm one.

“She showed me what she liked, taught me things other women would like, and did the same to me. Showed me things women could do to make oral sex more pleasurable.”

Lily swallowed hard, and I prayed she wouldn’t ask me what those things were.

“Did you love her?” she asked.

Her question caught me off guard. “Love her? No. Not at all, and she didn’t love me. It was...an affair. Once she had her fill of me and taught me everything I needed to know—according to her—she stopped asking for me to come over.”

“How long did the affair go on?”

“Four months. I left the ranch not long after that and came back to Montana. I was tired of working with cattle and repairing fences and wanted to work with horses, and Hank



said I was still too young. So the next ranch I went to, I lied and told them I was twenty-four and had years of experience.”

“Did you lie to my dad?”

I shook my head. “No. Told him I was twenty-three—which I was at the time—and was honest about my work history. Asked him to give me an hour with a horse no one else could handle. He did, and I showed him what I could do. He offered me a job on the spot.”

She smiled. “There haven’t been any other women like Lori?”

“By like Lori, do you mean...”

“Have you dated anyone longer than a few months? Weeks?”

I shook my head. “No. Like I said, I never stayed around long enough. And I didn’t date Lori. It was simply sex, and that was it.”

Lily’s eyes met mine. “And why have you stayed for so long *here*?”

Our gazes locked for what felt like an eternity before I finally said, “It’s the closest thing I’ve felt to a home in my entire life.”

Her eyes glazed over with unshed tears before she looked at the soup bowl. “You should finish that, then drink some water.”

Picking up our spoons, we finished our small meal in silence. Neither of us uttered another word until Nathan showed up with her bag.

As Lily carried the tray back to the kitchen, a part of me wondered if I shouldn’t have shared the story about my affair...but something in me loved the way her eyes turned darker when I said I’d fucked Lori over a table. And she was obviously curious about oral sex. How could a woman so beautiful *never* have experienced oral sex? What kind of morons had she dated?

Then I thought about Ben and wanted to laugh. If they were anything like him, then I could see the problem.

What I wouldn't give to show her how much pleasure I could bestow upon her with my mouth.

I shook that crazy thought away.

But when I heard the water in the shower turn on, I squeezed my eyes shut and tried like hell not to picture Lily naked in my bathroom, only a few feet away from me.

I was definitely going to have to take a cold shower daily as long as she was under the same roof.

## Chapter Five

### LILY

I braced my hands on the bathroom counter and looked at myself in the mirror. Why had I pressed Maverick to tell me about his time with Lori? And why was I so insanely jealous of a woman I'd never met?

When I closed my eyes, an image of Maverick with his head between my legs caused me to gasp. My eyes snapped open, and I pushed away from the counter. "What is wrong with you, Lily?"

The only man I'd ever had those types of thoughts about was Ben. And even then, I never thought about him throwing my leg over his shoulder and doing naughty things to me with his mouth. Not once. I'd wondered how he kissed. What his hands would feel like on me. Whether or not sex might be good between us.

"Okay," I told myself, "it's only because Maverick was talking about sex, and it's been a very long time since you've been with a guy. And hello...Maverick is hot as hell, even when he's sick."

I reached my hand into the shower and felt the hot water. Once inside, my body felt like it would catch on fire. I couldn't ignore the pulse between my legs, and the hot water made it worse.

Reaching over, I turned the handle to cold. I sighed in relief when the cooler water instantly tamed my libido...until I reached for the soap in the shower. I lifted it to my nose and drew in a long breath. It smelled like Maverick. Or part of what Maverick smelled like. He also smelled like the woods after a spring rain. Clean and crisp with a hint of something darker.

Rubbing the soap over my body, I couldn't help but think about Maverick's words. "*She wanted me to fuck her from behind.*"

My hand slipped between my legs, and I found the swollen bud that ached for release. Closing my eyes, I thought of Maverick. Of what it would be like to have him do that to *me*. I moved faster, my entire body burning with the release I so desperately needed.

I could almost feel him moving in and out of me.

He grabbed my hair and pulled as he picked up speed.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Faster. Harder!”

Slipping my fingers into my body, I pumped while the palm of my hand rubbed my clit.

I was close, so close, but I couldn’t reach the end.

“Come for me, Lily. That’s it, baby. Come for me.”

I glanced over my shoulder and imagined Maverick, his hands on my hips as he pushed into me hard and fast. I nearly screamed out when my orgasm hit me so hard, and I almost slipped in the shower.

With both hands on the wall to hold myself up, I dragged in deep breaths while attempting to calm my racing heart. “Okay, that was a first.”

It hit me at that moment that Ben, the man I thought I wanted, never once crossed my mind as I got myself off. In fact, not a single time in the four days since I’d been here with Maverick did I give a second thought to Ben.

I frowned and finished soaping up. I rinsed off, wrapped a towel around my body, then used my hand to wipe the fog from the mirror.

My other hand covered my mouth to stifle a giggle. I could *not* believe I’d just pleased myself in Maverick’s bathroom while freaking thinking of him fucking me from behind. How shameless of me! Should I tell Renee? Maybe Rose or Kipton?

They’d fall into a fit of laughter and want every detail of what had happened to get me so horny. But it wouldn’t feel right to tell them about Maverick and Lori. That was his story, not mine.

I tried to tell myself I was only horny because of Maverick's story. The only reason I'd done what I had. Nothing more.

Realizing I'd been in the bathroom way too long, I quickly dried off, pulled on my sleep pants, and slipped Maverick's T-shirt back on. I told myself it wasn't because it smelled like him, but rather that it was comfortable.

I wrapped a towel around my wet hair and opened the door to the bathroom. When I stepped into the hall, I paused. The cabin was quiet. Tiptoeing across the hall, I peeked into the bedroom and found Maverick sound asleep.

I sent up a prayer he hadn't heard me in the shower before he drifted off.

On the way to the living room, I unplugged my phone on the kitchen counter to see I had a text from Ben.

*Ben: Hey, where have you been? I've been trying to call you since Sunday. I felt bad about how we left things at the wedding.*

*Me: Sorry, been helping take care of a sick friend. Everything okay?*

*Ben: Shit, Lily. I was about to call your mom and see if you were alright. Everything's fine. I'm free tonight. Abby is in Missoula shopping with her mom. Want to hang out?*

Was that really how it would be from now on? Sneaking around, doing things only when his girlfriend was out of town? I know if I were in Abby's shoes, I wouldn't have wanted that.

If she wasn't comfortable with us being friends, there was nothing I could do about it. But I wouldn't be a part-time friend, I wouldn't be Ben's little secret, and I definitely wouldn't be the girl who snuck around to hang out with the guy she was crushing on.

I had to wonder if I even *had* a crush on Ben anymore. Was that possible, when I was thinking about Maverick every other moment?

*Me: I can't tonight. I'm sorry.*

I paused for a moment, realizing that, had I gotten this text from Ben a mere four days ago, I would have dropped everything to hang out with him. Now, I had no interest in doing so. I didn't want to leave Maverick.

Glancing down the hall toward his bedroom, I told myself it was simply because I knew he wasn't out of the woods yet.

When my phone vibrated in my hand, I jumped.

*Ben: Bummer. I was really hoping to get to hang out.*

*Me: How about this weekend? Maybe we could grab dinner and a movie, if Abby doesn't mind me being a third wheel.*

The three little dots moved up and down on my phone for what seemed like forever before his reply came back.

*Ben: I don't think Abby would be down for that.*

Frowning, I typed out my reply and practically broke my phone in two when I jammed the send arrow.

*Me: Message received, loud and clear.*

His reply came back almost instantly.

*Ben: I already told you how she felt about you, Lily.*

I couldn't help but laugh.

*Me: So two friends can no longer hang out together WITH your girlfriend there? We did before, and she didn't seem to have an issue with it.*

*Ben: Lily, I don't want to argue about this. I told you at the wedding how Abby feels about you. Please don't make me choose between the two of you. I love Abby, and I'll always choose her.*

My heart felt like it dropped to the floor.

Drawing in a deep breath, I started to type out my reply, then stopped. Instead, I set my phone on the coffee table and walked over to the TV and turned it on. At the moment, I couldn't tell if I was upset about Ben being in love with Abby, or the fact that I was losing his friendship.

The last thing Maverick had been watching was Hulu. When it opened, I couldn't help but smile. An episode of *Only Murders in the Building* was waiting to be finished. Deciding to go back to the beginning, I made a mental note where Maverick had left off and started on season one, episode one.



The sound of water running caused me to pop up from where I'd been lying down on the sofa. Then I heard a loud crash, and without thinking, I ran to the bathroom.

Throwing open the door, I let out a small yelp at the sight in front of me.

Maverick.

A *naked* Maverick, leaning against the wall.

“What are you doing?” I asked, rushing over to help him.

“It’s okay. I’m fine. I got dizzy and bumped into the small table next to the tub.”

Glancing down, I saw a bottle of what looked like soaking salts on the floor. Did Maverick like to take baths? It would make sense, especially if his muscles ached after a long day of work.

I shook my head. Was I really justifying why Maverick would soak in a tub with bath salts? *Jesus, Lily.*

“Let me help you get into the shower,” I said as I wrapped an arm around his waist to guide him. “You’re still weak. This is the first time you’ve been out of bed in days.”

He groaned, and I stopped moving. “Am I hurting you?”

“In more ways than one. Please, just let me go. I can get into the shower without your help.”

“Bullshit, Maverick. Forget your damn male pride for one second and let me help you into the stupid-ass shower, will you?”

He turned to look at me—then smiled. “You have a dirty mouth, Lil.”

My heart did a weird little trip over itself, and I wasn’t sure if it was from the nickname or the way he’d said the word *dirty*. How could he make one single word sound so sexual?

“Do you need me to help you bathe?”

“No!” he quickly said. “I’ve only got so much strength left in me, and the last thing I need is your hands on me.”

“Men,” I scoffed.

“That’s right. *Men*,” he replied as he got himself under the shower and motioned for me to shut the glass door. “And

when a beautiful woman has her hands on your naked body, your mind gets taken over by only one part of your anatomy.”

I took a step back, and my gaze instantly went to his midsection. I covered my mouth with my hand, my eyes going wide.

He was big. Lord, he was big and beautiful.

“Lily,” he groaned. “Please don’t look at me like that. I’m already as weak as a newborn baby.”

Chewing on my lower lip, I glanced around the bathroom. Reaching for a towel, I put it on the hook right outside the shower. When I turned to see him running a bar of soap over his body, I had to reach for the wall to hold myself up.

*Look away, Lily. Leave him alone and go watch TV.*

“You think I’m beautiful?” I heard myself asking.

Maverick paused his motion but didn’t look at me. “I think I’m good, Lil. You can leave now. Just keep the door cracked, and if I get dizzy again or need help, I’ll call you.”

All I could do was nod. I turned to leave, and Maverick suddenly called out.

I stopped and looked back at him. The glass windows in the shower were starting to fog, but I could still see him. And just as I turned to leave, I heard him say almost under his breath, “Yes. I think you’re beautiful, Lily. Both inside and out.”

I didn’t know what to say to that without tearing up. All the years I’ve wanted to hear those same words from Ben, my best friend, and instead, I get an impersonal text from him reminding me that he’d always choose Abby. So I told Maverick the only thing I could say, “Th-thank you.”

I turned again and left, forcing myself not to look back. I mean, come on, I was only human, and my libido was telling me to get in that damn shower with Maverick.

Once the door was nearly shut, I practically ran to the kitchen.



With my hand over my beating chest, I closed my eyes and replayed the last five minutes as I leaned against the kitchen counter.

I knew Maverick had a nice body, but holy shit, he was built like a Greek god. And his...his...*wow*. Wait until I tell Rose and Kipton about this. And Avery. She already had a little crush on Maverick. She'd be totally beside herself when I told her I'd seen him naked. And in the shower.

Renee would most likely tell me I was a fool for not dropping to my knees and taking him in my mouth.

Letting out a slow exhale, I frowned. If I still had feelings for Ben, would I honestly be lusting after Maverick so hard?

"You're pathetic," I whispered as I pushed away from the counter, determined to keep myself busy. Maverick would most likely be ready to eat something a bit more fulfilling than bone broth, so I opened his fridge to see what my mother had stocked after her trip to the store yesterday.

Thank God my parents hadn't been there when I'd barged into the bathroom and seen Maverick in his birthday suit.

I placed my hands on my cheeks as I felt them heat. How was I ever going to be able to look him in the eye again?

There was a knock on the door, and I quickly stepped over to answer it.

"Nathan, hey. Back so soon?"

"Mom made some chicken and mashed potatoes if Maverick is up for eating something a bit heavier. At the very least, she told me to make sure *you* eat." I smiled as he put everything down on the island. "How's Maverick feeling?"

"I think better. He's taking a shower now. Still a bit weak, though."

"Does he need any help?" Nathan asked.

"You might want to knock on the door and make sure he's okay. I accidentally went into the bathroom when I heard a loud noise, and let's just say I got a show. A *full* show."

Nathan tossed his head back and laughed hard. “Did you see his junk?”

I tilted my head and gave my brother a look. “What do you think?”

“By the way your cheeks are bright red, I’m going to say you did.”

“Just go ask him if he needs help, will you?”

He held up his hands and laughed again before turning and heading down the hall. I heard him knock and call out to Maverick.

“Hey, Mav. Need any help?”

Maverick’s reply was muffled. The door to the bathroom opened, and I heard them both talking. Curious, I walked over and peeked down the hall, only to see Maverick with a towel wrapped around his trim waist. As Nathan walked into the bedroom, I quickly made my way back to the kitchen to make up two plates of chicken and potatoes.

Less than thirty seconds later, Nathan was back in the kitchen. “Man, you weren’t kidding when you said he was still a bit weak. I think he’s lightheaded as well. He’s getting dressed. I helped him get some clothes, but he said he could sit on the bed and get dressed.”

I nodded. “Thank you for checking on him. Have you eaten already?”

My brother laughed. “Of course, I did. It’s all yours. It should still be pretty warm.”

“It is. I’m wondering if Maverick will even feel like eating.”

“He does.”

Nathan and I both turned at the sound of Maverick’s voice. He stood in the kitchen looking pale, but far better than earlier this morning. He was dressed in sweatpants, a black T-shirt, and his hair was wet, with a stray strand hanging over his forehead. I had the strongest urge to push it back.

“Um, my mom had Nathan bring over some chicken and potatoes.”

The corner of his mouth rose. “That sounds a hell of a lot better than bone broth.”

“Hey,” I stated. “That bone broth cured what ailed you, didn’t it?”

“Did it?” Nathan asked, watching Maverick carefully make his way over to the island. He ran over and pulled a stool out for him as Maverick practically fell into it.

“Man, I don’t ever remember feeling this bad.”

“You look like shit, dude,” Nathan deadpanned.

Maverick let out a chuckle. “Leave it to you to tell it like it is.”

My brother shrugged. “Call it as I see it.”

After serving the food, I walked over to Maverick and set a plate down. “I’m, um, I’m really sorry about earlier.”

He gave me a soft smile. “It’s not a big deal, Lily. You weren’t the first woman to see me naked.”

Nathan laughed, and I tried with all my might to return his smile, but a strange pang hit me in the middle of my chest—and I almost asked him if I’d be the last.

*Okay, note to self: have sex soon. Really soon. And not with your vibrator. Real sex.*

Maverick reached for my hand and frowned. “Hey, it’s alright, Lil. It doesn’t have to be uncomfortable. Okay?”

My gaze fell to his hand on mine, then I looked back up to say, “I’m not uncomfortable.”

He winked. “Good. Neither am I.”

“Want something to drink other than water?” Nathan asked as he looked in Maverick’s refrigerator. “Looks like you have beer.”

“Yes.”

“No!” I turned to Maverick. “You cannot have beer.”

“Why not?” he asked. “The last time I checked, I was of age.”

“You’re sick!”

“Of water and ice cubes, Lil. I want something else.”

“Stop being such a mom, Lily,” Nathan said as he walked over and handed Maverick a beer. When Maverick reached for the bottle, Nathan held it back. “Remember this when I ask you to buy my friends and me beer.”

Maverick laughed.

I shook my head as I walked back to get my plate of food and water. When I sat two stools away from Maverick, we ate like we hadn’t had food in months.

“What are we watching?” Nathan asked as he flopped onto the sofa.

“Do you feel like sitting out here for a bit and watching TV after you eat?” I asked Maverick.

“It would be a nice change of scenery, that’s for sure. I also think I need to change my sheets after sweating the past few days.”

“I’ll change them for you.”

He shook his head. “How about you *help* me change them?”

Grinning, I replied, “Deal.”

Nathan broke into our conversation. “You were watching *Only Murders in the Building*?”

Looking from my brother to Maverick, I said, “I started at the beginning, but I remember what episode you were on.”

“Do you like it?”

I nodded. “I do. It’s a cute show.”

“How far did you get?”

Nathan answered for me. “She’s on season one, episode five.”

“I was falling asleep, so I turned it off.”

“Have you gotten any sleep at all over the past few nights?”

I nodded.

“Lily, your phone’s ringing. It’s Ben.”

Maverick cleared his throat and went back to eating.

“Just let it go to voicemail.”

Nathan looked down at my phone. “Now he just texted. Wants to know why you’re not answering his calls or texts?”

I glared at my brother. “Do you mind?”

He shrugged. “Your phone is sitting right here! If you don’t want people reading your stuff, put a lock on it.”

“Trouble in paradise?” Maverick asked.

When I looked at him, he wore a smug expression. “What?” I asked, confused. “You know we’re not dating.”

“He’s calling again,” Nathan grumbled. “Jesus, dude, can’t you take a hint? He has a girlfriend, for fuck’s sake.”

“Nathan!” I called out as I stood abruptly, nearly knocking over the stool. I marched over to where my brother held my phone up and snatched it out of his hand.

“Don’t kill the messenger!”

“That isn’t how you use that line, you idiot.”

Hitting the button to accept the call, I practically yelled, “What?”

“Jesus, Lily! What’s wrong with you?”

Sighing, I closed my eyes. “Did you need something, Ben?”

“I was going to swing by your place if you’re around.”

“I’m not home, sorry.”

I noticed Nathan and Maverick exchanging a smile, and I wondered what that was all about.

The line was quiet for a few moments before Ben asked, “Still with your friend?”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, I am. I have to go.”

“Lily, wait! I’m sorry about earlier and the texts. Abby just doesn’t understand our friendship, and she means the world to me. You do, as well, it’s just...I love her, and I don’t want to hurt her.”

I felt tears well up in my eyes. “That’s great, Ben. Thanks for the reminder. I’m happy for you and glad to know you’re willing to hurt me instead.”

“That’s not fair.”

I sighed. “Maybe not. Doesn’t make your words any easier to hear.”

“What do you want from me? Why are you so mad at me?”

“I can’t talk right now.”

He let out a low laugh, but it didn’t sound friendly at all. “Right. I’ll let you go. Give me a call when you’re finished taking care of the cowboy.”

My eyes narrowed. “What did you say?”

“Your mom told me you were at Maverick’s house. That he’s sick. Watch out for that guy, Lily. I don’t trust him. If he had the opportunity, he’d crawl right into your pants.”

“And you assumed I’m so weak-minded I’d just let him?”

Ben laughed. “Please! I’m not blind. I see the way women look at him. Hell, he hooked up with Brandee Norman the night of the wedding.”

I glanced at Maverick. He was standing up and taking his plate to the kitchen sink. “And how do you know that?”

“Overheard him asking her out for drinks later that night. The guy’s a player.”

My mind quickly sifted through what Maverick had said about that evening. He’d brought Grams home, and he’d

mentioned something about going back out but started to feel bad.

“It doesn’t matter. I need to go.”

“Be careful with him, Lily.”

Was that a hint of jealousy in Ben’s voice? Looking away from Maverick, I lowered my voice. “Maybe I don’t *want* to be careful, Ben. Maybe what he has to offer is exactly what I need.”

Ben went silent again, then he sighed. “Lily, I just don’t want to see you hurt. A guy like Maverick? He’s out for more...experienced women.”

My mouth fell open. I was shocked by his words—then angry.

“Hmm,” I said as Maverick headed down the hallway. I heard the bathroom door shut. “He wasn’t complaining earlier when I helped him get into the shower.”

“*What?*”

Smiling, I said, “Don’t worry about me, Ben. After all, I’m not your girlfriend, remember?”

I pulled the phone away from my ear and hit End. Walking to the kitchen, I dropped my cell on the island as Nathan jumped up to find out what was going on.

“So...not answering his calls? Why are you mad at Ben?” he asked.

I forced myself to shrug. “I’m not mad at him. Just been busy and tired.”

“Why don’t you head home, then? I can stay with Maverick. He seems to be a lot better.”

What I wouldn’t give to sleep in my own bed. Glancing down the hall, I looked back at my brother. “I want to make sure he drinks plenty of liquids, and by that, I don’t mean beer.”

Nathan rolled his eyes. “The poor guy has been through hell, Lily. Give him a break.”

His phone buzzed, and Nathan pulled it from his back pocket. “Oh! I’ve got to go. I mean,” he quickly backtracked, “if you really want to leave, I’ll stay.”

With a wave of my hand, I said, “Go. I’d stay whether you were here or not.”

Grinning, Nathan said, “Don’t forget to finish eating.” He rushed to the front door and was gone before I’d even made it back to my plate.

“Where’d Nathan go?” Maverick asked as he made his way over to the sofa while I finished my food.

“Not sure. He got a text and hightailed it out of here so fast, I never even got to say goodbye.”

Laughing, Maverick picked up the remote and sat down. “A girl.”

“Huh?” I asked, still thinking of my conversation with Ben.

“It was a girl. Who texted. That’s why he rushed out of here so quickly.”

Rolling my eyes, I stared at the food on my plate. I wasn’t hungry anymore, so I got up and tossed the rest in the trash.

“Lil, you don’t have to babysit me. I feel a lot better.”

“I’m not babysitting you. I’m simply around if you need anything. Besides, you’re still a little dizzy.”

He smiled, and I couldn’t help but return it.

“You almost fell in the bathroom, need I remind you.”

“I haven’t gotten dizzy since, and to be honest, after eating a good meal, I’m already feeling like my old self.”

“Good. Then do you want to watch this episode of *Only Murders in the Building*?”

Laughing, he said, “Wait, why do *I* have to re-watch them?”

“Because I haven’t seen them.”

He sighed. “Fine.”



I squealed. “Really? I thought I would have to argue with you a lot more. Let me grab you a water first.”

“And bring my beer back while you’re up!”

## Chapter Six

### MAVERICK

Pure. Torture.

That was what it was to have Lily snuggled up next to me on the sofa while we watched my favorite show. Sure, having her hands on my naked body earlier nearly drove me insane, but having her so close to me, like we were a couple, played with my head. Not being able to take her hand in mine or kiss her pink lips any time I wanted... Agony. She smelled like my soap, and fuck if that didn't turn me on.

At least the pillow I'd strategically placed on my lap was hiding the hard-on. It ached so bad, I was sure my dick would fall off at any moment.

When I felt my eyes growing heavy, I fought to keep them open. It wasn't until I felt a light pressure on my arm that I realized I'd fallen asleep.

"I'm all caught up now."

Drawing in a deep breath, I leaned forward and scrubbed my hand down my face. "With?"

"The show," Lily replied with a light chuckle. "I think we should get you to bed."

I stood, and dizziness set in just a bit, causing me to sway slightly.

Lily grabbed hold of me. "You okay?"

"Yep, the room spun for just a second." I turned to look at Lily. "Lil, *please* go home. I'm really okay, and you need to get a good night's sleep."

"It's almost three in the morning. I'm not leaving to go anywhere this late. Does your neck hurt?"

I rubbed the back of my neck and shook my head. "No, I'm fine."

“I’ll crash out here, and if you’re feeling better tomorrow and your fever hasn’t come back, I’ll leave you alone, I promise. I’m sure you hate having someone in your space.”

My eyes caught hers, and I slowly shook my head once again. “I don’t mind having you here. But you do have to stop walking into the bathroom and seeing me naked.”

Lily’s cheeks turned pink. “I’m so sorry about that.”

I shrugged. “How about you sleep in my bed, and I’ll sleep out here?”

Her eyes went wide. “No way! Come on,” she said, taking my hand in hers. I tried to ignore the way it sent a bolt of electricity through my entire body. “You sleep in your own bed. I’ll be fine on the sofa.”

“Okay, but I don’t need you to walk me to my room.”

She chewed on her lower lip before she dropped my hand. “You really scared me, Maverick.”

It felt like someone kicked me in the chest when I saw the concern in her eyes. “When?”

Letting out a disbelieving laugh, she replied, “When I showed up here Sunday morning and found you barely conscious! Then when I felt how hot you were. I was terrified. It didn’t help when my dad showed up, and he was just as scared. You mean a lot to us, Mav. Sometimes I don’t think you realize how much. Or maybe you’re trying to keep all of us at a distance as some sort of protection. I don’t know, but... I guess I just feel the need to explain why I’ve camped out here the last few days. You’re a good friend, and well...I’m glad you’re okay.”

I placed my hands on her upper arms and leaned in to kiss her forehead. “Thank you for being here for me. For coming and checking on me. If you hadn’t, I’m not sure what would have happened.”

She laughed. “My mother would have come the moment she found out you’d called in sick.”

“You’re probably right.”

Lily winked. "I know I am."

Dropping my hands back to my sides, I let out a breath. "Good night, Lily."

Her eyes searched my face, and I had the feeling she wanted to say more but was holding back. "'Night, Maverick."

When I started toward my bedroom, she called, "Maverick...are you dating Brandee Norman?"

I stopped walking and closed my eyes, drawing in a slow breath before turning back to face her, a neutral expression on my face. Or at least I hoped it was. "No. Why?"

She shrugged.

"I asked her out for drinks the night of Rose and Bryson's wedding, but I obviously never made it since I started to feel bad. Did she call or something?"

Lily wrung her hands together. "No. You mentioned the date, and I just wondered if you guys were dating."

"I'd only asked her out that night, so..." I shrugged, curious why she was really asking.

Lifting a hand almost as if she was waving goodbye, Lily said, "Sleep good."

With a smile, I replied, "You too."



"How are you feeling?"

Tanner's voice caused me to turn away from the horse I'd been working with and smile. "Like a human again. Thank you for everything you, Timberlynn, Nathan, and Lily did for me. It was mighty kind of you."

Tanner grinned and slapped me lightly on the shoulder. "As much as you refuse to believe it, you're family, Maverick. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you."

I wondered if he'd feel that way if he knew how many dirty dreams I'd had of his daughter over the past two weeks since she'd left my house. "I appreciate that, Tanner."

He turned his attention to the mare in the middle of the fenced-in corral. “How’s it going with her?”

I leaned against the pen. “She has trust issues, but we knew that already. Can’t seem to get her to slow down when she’s eating her feed. Even out to pasture, she eats fast. Most likely she always thinks it’ll be her last meal for days. I’ve gotten close to touching her, but only when I’m putting the halter and lead on. Other than that, she wants no part of physical contact.”

“That’s a pretty lonely life right there.”

Nodding, I said, “Juniper, the gelding that came in last week for you to train? She seems to be curious about him.”

“Is she curious about *him* or the barrels?” Tanner asked.

“She hasn’t seen him on the barrels, so it’s not that. I was going to talk to you about putting them together in the small west pasture with the lake to see what happens. I’d also like for her to watch when you’re training him. Maybe if she sees Juniper allowing people to touch, ride, and love on him, this shy girl might be willing to give it a go.”

Tanner chuckled. “Ahh, the power of love.”

I laughed. “Something like that.”

“Lily’s getting ready to work with him now, if you want to head on over. They’re in the indoor arena. I mean, if you can get this girl over there, that is.”

“Oh, trust me, all I need is a carrot if she knows that Juniper’s out and about. I may just walk her around the outside area where Lily’s training.”

Tanner gave me another tap on the side of my arm. “I’ll head over now and let her know what you’re doing. By the way, she needs a name.”

I glanced back at the mare, who lifted her head and stared at me. “Tesoro.”

“Sounds Italian, if I’m not mistaken. What does it mean?”

I grinned. “Treasure.”

“I like it. What woman doesn’t want to be considered a treasure? Tesoro it is.”

The mare gave a little head bob, and we both laughed.

“I think she likes it.”

With a quick nod, I agreed. “I think she does.”

It only took a few seconds to get the mare to let me put her lead back on and head her over to where Lily was working with Juniper.

When Lily saw me, she waved a hand and took Juniper slowly around the barrels. I walked the mare around the large pen, and she stopped every so often to check out the action going on in the arena.

“You like him, don’t you, girl?” I softly asked as I raised my hand and slowly placed it on her neck. She jumped but stood still while she watched Lily and Juniper working. Whenever Juniper did something Lily wanted, she gave him praise and a treat. Some trainers looked down on treat training, and Lily didn’t do it often, but she did choose to use it on some horses.

“That could be you. You’ve got it in you. I see it. I just need *you* to see it as well. No one is going to hurt you, Tesoro. I promise.”

“She’s beautiful,” Lily said as she walked up to the side of the pen and brought Juniper to a stop. “What did you call her?”

Smiling, I watched as the horses stared at one another with curiosity. “Tesoro.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means treasure in Italian.”

“Treasure?” she softly asked. “That’s a beautiful name for her.”

Turning to Tesoro, I held my hand out in hopes she would at least smell it. When she did, I grinned. “She’s lost right

now, but I know the moment she comes out of her shell, she'll do great things."

When I glanced back at Lily, she was staring at me.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I, um...nothing at all. I'm going to work him a bit more. Dad said you wanted her to watch us?"

Nodding, I replied, "I'm hoping she'll see what life could be like if she simply let me get a bit closer."

Lily laughed. "Dad also said she has a thing for Juniper, and I have to say, I think the feeling is mutual."

"She's interested, that's for sure."

Lily turned Juniper and started walking him around the barrels, then trotted him around the pen as I slowly walked Tesoro along the outside. The horse watched intently and stopped every time Juniper trotted by.

"You want to do that too, right, girl?" I whispered as I softly ran my hand down her neck. She let out a little snort that caused me to chuckle. I was pleasantly surprised she'd let me touch her as much as she had. Juniper for the win on the distraction factor.

When Lily rode up again, she brought Juniper to a stop. "You going to let her watch me cool him down also?"

"I think so. I'm going to stall her next to Juniper each night, and I was hoping we could put them out to pasture together. I think she needs a friend."

Lily winked at me as she pulled back on the reins. "Everyone needs a bestie."

Before she walked away, I called out her name. "Lily!"

With a quick glance over her shoulder, she asked, "Yeah?"

"Thank you again. For helping me when I was sick."

Her eyes sparkled as the sunlight hit her face. "That's what friends are for, right?"

I ignored the slight stab of pain in my chest as I nodded, unable to say anything else as Lily walked Juniper around to start his cooldown.

“Come on, girl,” I said, as I eventually took Tesoro’s reins and led her toward the barn, where Lily would be bringing Juniper. “Let’s admire them both from afar.”



# Chapter Seven

## LILY

I watched as Maverick started to lead Tesoro away from the arena and toward the barn. The name was beautiful, and there was something so sexy about a man who would think of a horse as a treasure. Especially a horse who was broken like that mare.

Following behind them, I walked Juniper to a smaller pen to let him cool down a bit more. The sound of tires coming down the gravel road caused Maverick to stop walking and me to look at who was coming.

Ben pulled up and parked his truck as I walked Juniper. He waved as he got out and made his way to the railing. When he saw Maverick, he frowned.

Maverick looked back at me. “Thanks again for letting us watch today,” he called, continuing toward the barn.

“Anytime. Will you be putting her out to pasture today with Juniper?”

“If you don’t mind.”

Smiling, I replied, “Not at all. I think he’ll be thrilled.”

Maverick laughed, and I couldn’t help but notice how the sound sent a little shiver over my body. I quickly ignored it and focused on Ben. He leaned on the top railing of the pen. I was still a bit pissed at him after our last conversation, and I could hear it in the cold tone of my voice. “I’m almost done cooling him down.”

With a smile, Ben said, “No worries.”

After finishing the cooldown, I led Juniper to the gate Ben had opened for us.

“What a beautiful bay,” he remarked as Juniper headed over to the water. I slid off and started to untack him.

“Dad has been training him on barrels. He’s really good. We just finished in the enclosed barn before you pulled up.”

“I haven’t seen you run barrels in a long time.”

Glancing up, I shrugged. “Well, I don’t see you that much anymore.”

I couldn’t read his expression, but he ignored the dig. “How have things been?”

“Good. Busy, but that’s always a good thing.”

He handed me a sponge and I started to wipe off Juniper’s sweat. Once I had as much sweat off him as I could get, I rubbed him with a towel.

“You didn’t call me about helping with that class like you said you would,” Ben said as he handed me the reins.

I turned to face him, frowning. “Um, yes, I did. I left a message on your cell about it being moved to next week.”

“You did?” he asked, looking confused.

“I did.”

Ben rubbed the back of his neck. “I didn’t see any voicemail from you.”

It took everything I had not to tell him that he most likely never saw it because of Abby. It wouldn’t have been the first time he’d had no clue that I’d called. I suspected Abby had erased more than one message or text from me.

I decided to let it go and shrugged. Strangely enough, it didn’t bother me.

Leading Juniper into his stall, I gave him a bit of hay and fresh water. I’d let him out to pasture in a bit with Tesoro, after he ate and drank more water.

Maverick walked up and opened the stall next to Juniper’s. He smiled at me, and I returned it. He glanced at Ben and nodded. “Ben, how’s it going?”

Ben grunted a hello.

Okay, I needed to talk to Ben about his attitude toward Maverick. There was no reason for it. “Mav, something’s come up. Will you turn Juniper out with Tesoro in about thirty minutes or so?”

“Will do,” he replied, tipping his cowboy hat toward me, then Ben. “Good seeing you, Ben.”

“Yeah, you too.”

I watched as Ben shot Maverick a dirty look before he turned and faced me.

Moving away from the stalls and out of earshot from Maverick, I said, “Seriously, what’s with all the attitude toward Maverick?”

Ben shook his head. “Nothing. I’m just not myself today.”

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

He looked everywhere but at me.

“Ben?” I asked, worry evident in my voice. “What’s wrong?”

He cleared his throat and looked down at the barn floor. “I need to tell you something, Lily.”

“Is it something that can wait until we get out of the barn? I’m sure my mom has some lunch if you’re hungry.”

Ben shook his head. “No, I...I need to say it now.”

Tilting my head, I frowned. He looked so stricken. “Okay. What do you need to tell me?”

He swallowed hard, finally lifting his head, and our gazes locked. The little jolt to my heart when he looked at me was barely there anymore.

“I don’t know how to say it, so I’m just going to say it—Abby’s pregnant, and we’re getting married as soon as possible.”

It felt like someone had hit me in the chest with a hammer.

Of all the things I had expected him to say, that hadn’t been on the list. The air left my body all at once, and I

couldn't seem to remember how to breathe. "Wh-what?" I managed to get out.

Ben closed his eyes for a moment before they opened again. "Our parents want us married quickly to cut back on any rumors."

I blinked rapidly and stepped back. My foot caught on something. What happened next felt like slow motion...I thought I could regain my balance, but my ankle twisted, and I started to fall.

The whole time, Ben just stood there and stared at me in shock.

"Lily!"

Maverick shouting my name had me turning to look at him right before I hit the ground hard on my ass, then felt a sharp pain at the back of my head.

And then everything went black.



As my lashes fluttered, I could tell I was being carried. I felt warm and safe in the arms of the person carrying me.

When I finally managed to get my eyes completely open, I gazed straight into gray eyes laced with concern, looking right back at me.

I only managed to get out one whispered word. "Maverick?"

"You're okay, Lily. I've got you. It's okay."

The pounding in my head suddenly registered, making me feel sick to my stomach, and I closed my eyes once again.

"What happened?" I asked as I felt Maverick moving up steps quickly. Had he just taken the steps two at a time...while carrying me? Damn, he had the whole strong, rugged cowboy thing down.

"Oh my God! What happened?"

My mother's voice pulled me from my silly thoughts.

“She tripped, or lost her balance, and hit her head on one of the stall doors.”

“I would have, um, caught her, but...I was so surprised.”

The last voice was Ben’s. And that was when I remembered the conversation I’d been having with him before I apparently tripped and hit my head.

“I’ll call Dr. Waters—”

Maverick interrupted my mother. “Already called him. He’s on his way.”

“Then let’s get her up to her bedroom. Second door on the right,” she told him. Then, a second later, “Ben, please—you’re in the way.”

“Dr. Waters is going to start charging us extra,” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

I peeked my eyes open to see Ben standing at the base of the steps, staring at me...or maybe Maverick. I wasn’t sure.

“I would have gotten her, you know. You just swept in and picked her up before I could do anything.”

Maverick drew me even closer to his body as my mother stepped over to Ben.

“Are you seriously doing this right now? Get out of the way so Maverick can get Lily up to her room. This isn’t some kind of game, Ben.”

His cheeks turned bright red as he stepped out of the way. “Of course not.”

Maverick started toward the stairs.

“Stop—wait one second.”

Maverick froze.

Turning my head to look at Ben, I said, “You don’t have to stay. Go be with Abby.”

“But you fainted. Are you feeling sick? What even happened?”

Maverick mumbled, “Stupid bastard,” under his breath. He glanced over his shoulder. “She didn’t faint, she fell.”

“No. I’m pretty sure my news caused her to faint.”

My mouth fell open. “What the hell?”

“It’s okay, Lily,” Ben said as he stepped forward, attempting to take me out of Maverick’s arms.

“What are you doing?” my mother demanded.

“I’m her best friend! I can take care of her,” Ben argued as Maverick held me even tighter, stepping back.

“Ben!” I shouted, then winced when it felt like someone hit the back of my head with a two-by-four. “Just leave. You’re making things worse.”

My mother stepped in front of Ben, putting a hand on his shoulder to gently push him back. “Lily obviously doesn’t want to see you right now, Ben. Please, just head on out. She’ll call you later.”

Before I could say another word, Maverick flew up the steps, once again taking them two at a time. He walked into my bedroom and carefully laid me on the bed.

“I’m really okay,” I said as I tried to sit up. I stopped when the room spun slightly. Now I knew how Maverick felt when he was sick.

“You’re *not* okay, Lily. You hit your head pretty hard.”

“Maverick is right, sweetheart. Please just rest until Dr. Waters gets here.” Turning to Maverick, she said, “Will you find Tanner?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

And just like that, Maverick was gone.

“Mom, he took the steps two at a time while he carried me! Twice! Up the porch steps and then the steps up to my room!”

She chuckled. “You clearly didn’t hit your head *that* hard if you noticed something like that. Lily, do you know what happened? Why did you fall? Are you coming down with the

flu that Maverick had?” She placed her hand on my forehead to check for a fever and then used two fingers to hold my eyelids open as she studied my eyes. When she told me to open my mouth, I rolled my eyes.

“Mom, what are you doing?”

“Trying to figure out why you lost your balance and fell. Have you been dizzy at all?”

“No, I can tell you—”

“Did you maybe overheat while training Juniper?”

“I didn’t over—”

“You drank enough water today, right?”

“Mom,” I sighed as I rubbed my temples. The head throbbed. “I know why I fell, if you’ll just let me speak.”

She pressed her mouth shut and waited for me to go on.

I drew in a deep breath and blew it out. I suddenly felt foolish. I’d just been so utterly shocked by Ben telling me Abby was pregnant—and that they were getting *married*—that I lost my footing.

“I feel so stupid.”

Taking my hand in hers, she kissed the back of it. “Tell me, Lily.”

“Ben told me Abby was pregnant. And they’re getting married. I was so shocked that I took a step back and tripped over something. When I tried to regain my balance, my ankle twisted and I went down.”

“Wow. Well, that news would surprise anyone.”

I nodded. “Ben’s also giving up our friendship because Abby doesn’t like me.”

Then, without even knowing why, I started to cry.

“Oh, Lily, sweetheart.” Drawing me into her arms, my mother held me tightly.

“I don’t even know why I’m crying. Maybe because, after all these years, I realize that he doesn’t value our friendship at

all.”

Gently rocking me, my mother said, “Are you sure that’s the only reason?”

I drew back and wiped at my tears. “What do you mean?”

She pushed a piece of my hair back. “Do you have feelings for him, Lily? Other than friendship?”

“Would it matter? He’s going to be a father, and he’s marrying Abby.”

“I think all of your feelings matter.”

Shaking my head, I quickly stopped. “Ow. My head hurts.”

My father and Maverick appeared at the door. When I looked up and met Maverick’s gaze, I swore a look of anger crossed his face. Was he mad at me for some reason?

As soon as the look appeared, it was replaced by concern. “Are you hurt anywhere?” he and my father both asked at the same time.

Letting out a small laugh, I replied, “Only my pride.”

Dad walked over and sat down on the opposite side of the bed from my mother. Taking my other hand, he asked, “What does that mean?”

I closed my eyes and sighed. “I feel like an idiot, that’s all.”

Mom squeezed my hand. “Don’t say that.”

“What happened?” Dad asked.

I looked at my mother, and she nodded. “Ben told Lily he’s marrying Abby because she’s pregnant.”

I peeked back over at my father, and I saw the moment he realized. “You had feelings for him other than friendship.”

With a one-shoulder shrug, I looked over at Maverick when I answered, “I thought maybe I did...but I’ve come to realize I don’t.”

Maverick cleared his throat. “I’ll go wait for Dr. Waters.”



I called out after him, “Thank you so much, Maverick.”

“Yes,” Dad added. “And thank you for thinking so quickly and calling the doctor.”

He twisted the cowboy hat in his hands and gave a soft smile, then a nod, before he turned and walked away.

“Does Ben know how you feel about him?”

“That’s the thing I was telling Mom. I *don’t* have feelings for him anymore. Maybe I never did, and it was just a crush. We’ve been friends for so many years, and I was comfortable with him, and...I guess in my mind, I thought we’d just end up together. I don’t know. I’m not sad about him getting married. I *do* feel sad about losing his friendship, though.”

Squeezing my hand, my father placed his finger on my chin and lifted it. “It’s good that you realized you don’t have feelings for him, though, right?”

Nodding, I replied, “It is. But now I know she’ll never let me see him, probably won’t even let me talk to him. Doubt I’ll be invited to the wedding. We’ve been best friends since we were toddlers.”

She gave a soft smile. “Have you explained to him how you feel?”

I shook my head. “I’ve tried, but he’s made it clear he’ll choose Abby over our friendship. And if they’re getting married, I think he should.”

A knock sounded on the doorframe, and I glanced over to see Maverick was back.

“Sorry. Ben won’t leave because he says he really needs to see you. I think he still suspects you’re sick.”

I rolled my eyes, then laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Mom asked.

“When Ben asked me if I was sick, Maverick mumbled ‘stupid bastard’ under his breath.”

Both of my parents chuckled.

“You can have him come up. I know how he is, and he really won’t leave unless he hears from me that I’m fine.”

“Your head? Do you feel dizzy or sick?” Dad asked.

“It hurts, but I’m okay. Just a headache, I promise. No dizziness and I don’t feel sick.”

I looked at Maverick, who wore a stern expression. “You can let him up,” I repeated.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes...and Maverick? Thank you again. For calling the doc and, well...for picking me up and carrying me.”

He winked. “Of course.”

I smiled at him and something in his gaze shifted. A shiver went through my body, and I rubbed my arms to warm up.

Clearing his throat, Maverick said, “I’ll go get Ben.”

“We’ll leave you alone, but I’ll be right outside your room,” my father said. “If he upsets you, he’ll have to leave.”

“He won’t. But we do need to finish our conversation.”

Mom nodded right as Ben walked in. She and Dad left, leaving the door cracked open less than an inch as Ben walked over to the bed. I felt my cheeks heat.

“What in the hell happened? Are you okay? I nearly punched Maverick for not letting me come talk to you.”

“It wasn’t his fault. I didn’t *want* to talk to you.”

“Why?” he asked, clearly upset.

I closed my eyes and counted to five before I opened them and caught his gaze. “Ben, when you told me you’re marrying Abby, and she’s going to have your baby, I...well, I don’t know what happened. It was like you pushed a knife into my chest.”

He sat down on the bed. “Lily, I know I haven’t been the best friend to you lately. But I’ve already explained it’s because Abby is jealous. I’ve tried telling her over and over that there’s nothing between us, we’re just friends, but...

well...I don't know. I just know I love her, and now we're going to be having a baby together. Don't make me choose."

I nodded. "I'd never make you choose, even if I don't see why you'd *have* to choose. You're allowed to have friends. But Ben, up until a few weeks ago...I thought I had feelings for you."

He frowned. "What do you mean? Romantic feelings?"

"Yes," I said as I rubbed my hands down my jeans.

"What? So Abby was *right*? You want me?"

My eyes went wide. "Um—*no*. I mean, maybe I wanted more between us a while back, but that feeling has faded. And that alone tells me they weren't really true feelings at all. I think I simply felt comfortable with you."

"Did you ever plan on telling me this?"

Glancing down at my hands wringing in my lap, I shrugged. "I'm not sure."

When he didn't say anything, I looked up to see he had his eyes closed. Then he finally opened them, and I saw the truth. He'd truly never felt anything more than friendship for me.

"It's okay that you never felt that way, Ben. I just thought I should be honest. I care about you a great deal, and you've always been an important part of my life. I think that's why I was so taken aback by your news. I hated the idea that our friendship might be ending." I grimaced. "And I feel like an idiot for falling down after you told me about Abby."

"You're not an idiot, but Lily, I had no idea you felt that way. I honestly don't know how I would have responded if you'd told me earlier. I could see myself falling for you, but... I love Abby now, and I'm going to be a father."

"I know. I know. I'm not asking you to pick between us, I promise you that. But it breaks my heart that Abby won't even let us be friends. And when you called me while she was out of town, wanting to hang out, it made me feel like I'd been reduced to some kind of dirty secret." I held up my hand before he could reply. "I know you didn't intend for me to feel

that way, but if I were Abby, I wouldn't want my future husband sneaking around with a friend behind my back, purely because she's a female."

I sighed, then offered him a sad smile. "So...ultimately...I think Abby's right. I think it's best if we just part ways as friends and wish one another the best of luck. And I *do* wish you both the best. But I don't want to be a part-time friend, only good enough when Abby isn't around. If she can't come to terms with our friendship, I don't see any other option."

"Do you blame her? You just said seconds ago that you had feelings for me."

"*Had* being the keyword, Ben. I don't anymore. The past few weeks I've had my eyes opened to a lot of things."

He frowned. "Is that so?"

I could hear the jealousy in his voice, which struck me as odd, all things considered. "Another reason I wanted to talk is to ask why you have such a problem with Maverick."

Now a look of anger appeared on his face. "He's not good enough for you, Lily. He works on a ranch talking to horses all day."

Lifting my brows, I replied, "Uh...so do I. So do my mother and father. My brother. How are we any different?"

He shook his head. "I just don't think you should be...doing things with him."

My mouth fell open. "I'm sorry, what? You don't have room in your life for me because Abby is jealous, yet *you're* so jealous of Maverick, you think you can tell me who I can and can't be with? I'm sorry, Ben, but you don't have that right."

"You're being stupid, Lily. I'm not *jealous* of him. I don't even want you that way."

I shook my head slowly. "Wow. I don't know which statement to reply to first."

"You wanted me, and now that I'm having a baby with Abby and getting married, *you* want to act like a baby and

stomp your feet and go running off with some ranch hand. Fine. You don't want to be friends anymore? It's a done deal. I hope you enjoy the rest of your life, Lily."

What in the world just happened? Did Ben *really* just make my attraction to Maverick all about himself?

Ben headed to the door, flung it open, and stormed out.

My mother walked in a second later and said, "That boy is an absolute asshole—and I always thought so!"

# Chapter Eight

## MAVERICK

The moment that jackass opened the door and headed down the stairs, I followed. I'd thought for sure Tanner would stop me, but with all of us standing in the hall, I knew he'd heard the conversation as well—and most likely wanted to punch the jerk just as much as I did.

Before Ben got into his truck, I called out his name. He turned and glared at me.

“What do *you* want?”

“What in the hell was that all about?”

He scowled. “Do you make it a habit to eavesdrop?”

I grabbed him by the shirt. “You hurt her, you motherfucker. She was trying to be honest about her feelings, and you turned it all around on her, making it all about yourself.”

“Fuck you, Maverick! I see the way you look at her. You should be happy now.”

“You have no idea what you're talking about.”

He laughed, but there was no humor in it. “With me out of the picture, maybe you finally have a chance to get into her pants, unless you already have.”

Before I knew what was happening, I drew my fist back and punched him.

Ben stumbled back and nearly fell into his truck. He wiped the blood from his mouth and looked at me in shock.

I pointed my finger at him, my hand was shaking. “Don't you *ever* talk about Lily that way, do you hear me?”

Giving me another hard look, he slowly shook his head. “She'd never be interested in a guy like you. I've known Lily a lot longer than you, Maverick. You'd be a nice little plaything for her until she's found someone else. Just like her supposed

feelings for me that she magically got over once she heard I was getting married. She only wanted me because she couldn't have me."

I went to throw another punch, but someone grabbed my arm. I turned to see Lily's younger brother, Nathan.

"He's not worth it, Mav." He glared at Ben. "Get the hell off our property, and don't ever show your face here again."

Ben got into his truck. "Don't worry. I won't be back." He slammed the door and drove like a bat out of hell down the gravel drive.

"I never did like him," Nathan said, folding his arms over his chest. "Arrogant prick always thought he knew more about horses than anyone else."

I fought the urge to smile. Nathan may have only been seventeen, but it was clear he could already read people easily. Clapping him on the back, I replied, "Always thought the same thing. Thanks for keeping me from clocking him again."

Nathan nodded. "I was tempted to let you, but he'd be the type to sue. He knew he *deserved* that first punch."

A car drove up, and Dr. Waters stepped out. I walked over and shook his hand, as did Nathan.

"Dad told me to bring you right up to Lily's room."

"Lead the way," the good doctor said before he offered a goodbye to me and followed Nathan up the steps and into the house.

I glanced up to Lily's window. It took every ounce of strength I had not to follow them up, but I wasn't family. I didn't belong there. And Ben had been right about one thing—Lily would never fall for a guy like me.

I had nothing to offer. Nothing but my heart and soul, at least. And I wasn't even sure those were good enough...or that I could give them to *anyone*.

Drawing in a breath, I turned and headed back toward the barn. I'd go let Juniper and Tesoro out to pasture and call it a day.

No—change of plans. I'd text Tanner after I took the horses out, see how Lily was doing, and then head home to get shit-faced.



My phone had gone off three times in the last ten minutes. I lifted the beer to my lips and took a long drink. I set it down and swiped across my phone to see it was Bradly who'd texted. I knew he was in town for a few days since there was a break in the PBR tour. He'd sent a text asking if I wanted to go to The Blue Moose.

I sighed and was about to reply no, but decided maybe a night out on the town was what I needed. It had been a crazy-busy week on the ranch, and three weeks since I'd gotten sick, and a night off sounded amazing.

I'd spent a good portion of each day working with Lily and Juniper and Tesoro. It was thrilling and torturous to work so closely with her. Sometimes she'd look at me in a way that had my dick going painfully hard, and other times she was so wrapped up in the horses that she seemed to forget I was there.

So needless to say, after spending so much time in her presence but not being able to touch her...to pull her into my arms and kiss the shit out of her...I was ready to get wasted.

I closed my eyes and could practically smell her lavender and vanilla scent that drifted off her throughout the day.

“Jesus Christ. I need to get laid.”

Sending Bradly a text that said I'd meet him there, I quickly changed and headed out the door. When I walked into The Blue Moose minutes later, I saw Bradly sitting with two other guys at a table. I had no idea who they were, so I figured they were either bull riders or friends of his from Hamilton.

“Hey,” I said as I clapped him on the back. Bradly stood and shook my hand.

“Good to see you, Mav. I'm glad you came. This is Duke and Will, they both work on my father's ranch.”



Duke was a built motherfucker. Dark brown hair that almost looked black, and probably around the same age as me, maybe a bit younger. Will wasn't as big, but he had those Prince Charming good looks. Blond hair and clean-shaven face. He looked like he should work in a bank, not on a ranch.

Of course, sitting next to Bradley, with his black hair and eyes nearly the same color, they both paled in comparison.

Bradley looked a lot like his father, Dirk Littlewood, who owned a cattle ranch about twenty minutes or so from the Shaw Ranch. They also had a farm that was a pick-your-own during the seasons. He used to be one of the best bull riders around, next to Brock Shaw and Ty Shaw Jr., both of whom Dirk counted as best friends. Lily and Nathan had always called Dirk and his wife, Merit, aunt and uncle, and Bradley and his younger sister Avery were considered cousins, even though they weren't related by blood. That was just how the families were around here. Blood wasn't something that tied you to someone. What was in your heart did that.

Reaching my hand out, I shook Duke's, then Will's. "It's a pleasure to meet you both."

A waitress walked up and smiled down at me as I sat. "What can I get for you?"

"Whatever IPA you have in a bottle."

"Coming up. Everyone else good?"

The three men all nodded.

"I'm glad you decided to come out," Bradley said before a blonde walked up and smiled at him.

"Care to dance, cowboy?"

He smiled politely and stood, gesturing at the table. "Thank you, but I'm with my friends right now."

It was hard not to feel bad for her when her smile slipped. She glanced around the table, and I thought for a hot second she was going to ask one of us to dance. Instead, she turned and walked away.

“Damn, dude, that’s...what? The sixth or seventh woman who’s asked you to dance tonight that you’ve said no to?” Will asked. “Why are you turning them down?”

Bradly sighed. “I’m only in town a few days, and trust me, I get my fair share of buckle bunnies chasing after me on the road. I simply want to enjoy a night out with friends.”

Will smirked as he said, “So the next one who walks up, can you just point her to one of us? Because I’m more than happy to dance.”

We all laughed as the waitress approached and handed me the beer. I pulled out some money, but she waved it off. “The young lady at the bar bought it for you.”

Turning, I saw Lily sitting at the bar with Renee, one of her good friends from high school. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she wore painted-on jeans, cowboy boots, and a long-sleeve green shirt. It was too dim in the bar to tell, but I was sure the shirt would make her deep honey eyes pop against the darker color.

I picked up the beer and toasted it toward her, causing her smile to brighten.

Bradly turned to see who I was looking at, and he didn’t seem surprised to see Lily.

“She bought our last round,” he said as he turned back and pointed to Duke. “And the answer is still no.”

“No to what?” I asked.

“Duke wanted to ask Lily out, and I told him hands off.”

I set my beer down and raised a brow. “Why’s that? Because he’s just a ranch hand?”

The question seemed to take Bradly by surprise. It did Duke and Will, as well.

“No, not at all. Because he’s a player, and he admits it. I don’t want him *playing* with my cousin.” Bradly studied me for a minute. “You didn’t seriously think it was because he works on my father’s ranch, did you?”

Lifting the beer to my lips, I shrugged. “I was curious, is all. What about Will?”

Will shook his head. “Don’t drag me into this.”

Duke shoved Will’s shoulder. “He’s heartbroken right now. His ex crushed him when she decided she’d rather marry a lawyer than a ranch hand.”

I looked at Will. “I’m sorry to hear it.”

He shrugged. “What are you going to do? We met in high school and dated for eight years. I wasn’t what she wanted.”

“Took her long enough to figure it out. Rather, it took her getting caught cheating on you with the deadbeat lawyer,” Bradley scoffed.

“Ouch,” I said as I winced. “Sorry again.”

Will shrugged. “It’s honestly okay. I’m just not ready to jump back in yet.”

All I could do was nod.

The DJ took over since the band was on a break, and more people rushed to the dance floor when a pop song started. I glanced out to the floor and saw Lily dancing with Renee and another girl I’d seen at the ranch a few times, a girl whose name I couldn’t remember.

Bradley fell into a conversation with Duke and Will as I watched Lily dance.

As if she could feel my eyes on her, Lily turned to face me. She said something to Renee and made her way over to the table. I sat up straighter and wondered if she was going to ask her cousin to dance—or worse yet, Duke or Will.

Ever since the whole fiasco with Ben at her house, Lily had been going out with her friends more often. Of course, it could’ve just been because she was home for good now. Or maybe she’d always gone out a lot, and I’d just never paid attention.

It seemed like lately, I paid attention to every single little thing when it came to Lily.

Making her way over to me, she reached for my hand and gave it a tug. “Come dance with me, Mav.”

I shook my head. “Not tonight.”

Lily jutted out her lower lip into a pout...and I wanted to pull her onto my lap and suck on it.

“But I *never* see you out. You’re such a great dancer, and I’m tired of dancing with my friends.”

Bradly turned as if only just noticing Lily. “Hey, thanks for the drinks.”

She smiled. “No problem. Come on, Maverick. You owe me at least two or three dances.”

I laughed. “How do you figure?”

Instead of answering, she gave me one more hard tug, and I stood.

Setting my beer down, I said, “Looks like I’m dancing.”

“Have fun!” Bradly called out.

I didn’t recognize the song, but thank God it was a fast one. I wasn’t sure how my body would react to being up against Lily’s tonight.

We danced through two songs, and I was about to call it quits when I saw a guy by the bar watching Lily. He straightened as the song ended. I could tell he was about to come over and ask her to dance.

*Not tonight, asshole.*

I smiled to myself when a song I knew started. I spun her around and pulled her to me as Jason Derulo’s “Slow Low” began. I moved my body to the Latin beat, with Lily matching me step for step.

“Remember at Rose’s wedding, you said you wanted to see what moves I had?”

She nodded, and I couldn’t help but notice how her eyes turned darker as she moved her hips against mine.

“Ready?”

Biting down on her lip, she said almost breathlessly, “Yes.”

I shuffled my feet faster as the song sped up. I was impressed that Lily was keeping up with the salsa moves. I pushed her out, spun her, and pulled her back, then I did a fast dip and drew her up achingly slow, tightly against me, as the song slowed again.

Lily smiled as she fell right into rhythm with my hips. As the song sped up again, she moved faster. I placed my hands on her hips as Lily wrapped her arms around my neck, her body rolling against mine in a way that would have her father tossing me from the top of the barn if he saw us right now.

“You really are a great dancer, Maverick. But there’s no way you learned to dance like this at seven.”

Smiling, I replied, “So are you, Lily—and no, I didn’t.”

“Where did this come from?”

“I could ask you the same thing! But my excuse is that I took lessons a few years back when I had some free time.”

Her brows raised. “Well, you make it easy for *me* to be good when you’re the partner. Plus, I took lessons when I was younger.”

Smiling, I drew a bit closer.

The music sped up and slowed, and so did we. I dipped her slowly next time, letting her feel every inch of me as I eased her back and brought her forward until we moved fluidly together again.

“Jesus, Maverick,” she whispered as she dug her teeth into her lip.

I showed her a few more moves, then pushed her out for one last spin before pulling her back to me.

The song ended, and we stood still, with Lily’s arms around my neck and my hands on her hips. A slower song started, and Lily grinned.

“Dance one more with me?”

Ignoring the way my heart pounded in my chest, I nodded.

“I like this song,” Lily said.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard it before.”

She laughed. “Maverick, tell me you’re kidding.”

Returning her laugh with one of my own, I replied, “By the shocked look on your face, I’m guessing I should know it.”

“Yes! It’s Taylor Swift.”

I shook my head. “Never listen to her.”

Lily took a step back. “Oh my God, are you serious? I have to fix this. I need to fix this right now!”

I chuckled. “What are you going to do, ask the DJ to play all her songs?”

Her face lit up as she asked, “Did you drive here in your truck, or did I somehow miss you coming with Bradley?”

I gave her a confused look. “I drove here.”

The next thing I knew, Lily had my hand in hers and we were making our way toward the door.

“Um, where are we going?” I asked.

“Out to your truck.”

Pulling her to a stop, I asked, “Why?”

With a sexy-as-fuck grin on her face, she winked and said, “You’ll see.”

“I need to let Bradley know.”

We turned our direction and walked back to the table. Leaning down, she said something to Bradley, who looked up at me with a stunned expression.

“Dude—you’ve never listened to Taylor Swift?”

Duke and Will both said in unison, “What!”

“I know, right?” Lily said with a laugh. “I’m about to fix it.”

And with that, she swept us out the door and to my truck.

## Chapter Nine

### LILY

My heart began pounding in my chest the moment Maverick held me in his arms to dance. The whole Jason Derulo song had me even more confused about my feelings for Maverick. The way he moved, the feel of his body against mine...Lord, it made me want him desperately. The last few weeks, my nights had been filled with dreams of the man doing all kinds of naughty things to me.

We stopped at his truck, and I held out my hand. “Keys, please.”

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled them out and handed them to me. I tried to ignore the little jolt of electricity when his fingers brushed against my palm. God, what was wrong with me?

I wanted to laugh. I *knew* what was wrong with me. I hadn’t been able to stop thinking of Maverick since I’d stayed with him when he was sick. Then the constant working together, day after day. By the time each day ended, I was about to combust from all the sexual tension I felt.

Pushing my wayward thoughts aside, I pulled my phone out of my back pocket, then climbed into the driver’s seat and turned his truck on.

Jumping back out, I asked Maverick, “Slow or fast?”

His mouth opened and shut. I wished I could better see those gray eyes of his at the moment. He cleared his throat. “I’m confused by what you’re asking me.”

*Oh, how I know that feeling.*

Had he thought I’d brought him out to his truck to fool around? I’ll admit, after that Derulo song, I was so turned on I almost rushed to the restroom to splash cold water on myself.

“The song. Do you want a fast song or a slow song?”

He laughed and sounded relieved. “Fast?”

With a wink, I said, “Fast it is!”

The beginning of “Shake It Off” started. I gave him a questioning look to see if he’d heard it before.

“Nope, never heard it.”

I grabbed his hand, and he spun me around, then we both laughed when I danced like a crazy person. It didn’t take him long to join in, and it was awesome to see him acting so fun and free. Soon, we were swing dancing in the parking lot of The Blue Moose to a Taylor Swift song, and I had never had more fun. My cheeks hurt from smiling so much.

“Cute song!” he called out as he spun me around.

“Just wait until the bridge! It’s my favorite part!”

I pretended to have a microphone and lip-synced with Taylor as Maverick leaned against his truck and grinned. I ran a hand through his hair and shook my hips as he let his eyes move down my body. A rush of heat hit me that had nothing to do with the fact that I was now dancing and sweating. It was the way he looked at me. It was thrilling...like nothing I’d ever experienced before.

The song finally ended, and I hit pause on my phone. “Like it?”

“I *did* like it.”

I clapped and took it off pause. “I put it on random, so let’s see what’s next.”

We waited just a second before “All Of The Girls You Loved Before” started. I held my hand out, and he took it. I stepped into his arms, and we danced right there under the moonlight in the parking lot of a local bar. It couldn’t have been more of a perfect moment had we planned it.

I placed my cheek on his chest and drew in a deep breath, soaking in how it felt to be back in Maverick’s arms. How good he smelled. The way his heart seemed to race at the same pace as mine. I closed my eyes and thought about how I’d never had these feelings with Ben. Sure, my stomach would dip, and I’d get butterflies, but with Maverick, the feeling was



magnified. It wasn't one or two tickling butterflies. It felt like an entire swarm.

When I looked out my window and saw him punch Ben, something inside me irrevocably changed...and for the better.

The song ended, and Maverick took a step back as "Cruel Summer" began. Smiling, he reached for my hands, and before I knew it, he spun me around again as I dropped my head back and laughed.

If anyone was watching, neither of us cared. We were having too much fun dancing to my girl Taylor in the parking lot.

"Okay, I'll say after just these few songs, I like her."

I clapped my hands and grinned. "You Need To Calm Down" started, and I used my pretend mic once again as I sang along with Taylor while Maverick smiled and enjoyed the pretend concert. It was clear to me then that maybe I had an obsession with Taylor Swift, and the fact that Maverick was all in made me fall for him a little bit more.

When the song ended, Maverick laughed. "Okay, I liked that song too."

"I told you! How have you not heard any of these?"

The next song began—and I was stilled. The words to "I Think He Knows" drifted from his truck, and as Maverick listened, he stared at me with a look that made my entire body vibrate.

He pushed off the truck and reached for my hand, lacing our fingers together before pulling me closer.

Neither one of us said a word or moved at all. I could feel my heartbeat everywhere in my body. When Maverick's eyes drifted down to my mouth, I felt myself lift up. I wanted to taste him. I *needed* to taste him before I found myself jumping on the man. By the way he looked at me, I knew he felt the same.

"Lily."

The way he whispered my name had me releasing a small moan. He slid his other hand up my back and around my neck.

Just before our mouths pressed together, I heard my name being called out.

Maverick instantly stepped back, and I spun to see Bradley running toward us.

“Is your phone off?” he said as he ran up.

“No. I mean, I have it on silent. Why?”

“My dad just called. Tanner’s been trying to reach you—they think Grams had a heart attack. The ambulance is taking her to Bitterroot Hospital now.”

“*What?*” I asked as my legs felt weak, and I blindly reached for Maverick’s truck.

“Whoa! It’s okay, I’ve got you,” Maverick said as he wrapped an arm around me.

“Do you want to go with us? Duke’s going to drop me off at the hospital.”

Lily looked at me, then back to Bradley. “No, I’ll...I’ll go with Maverick.”

“Do you just want to ride with us?” Maverick asked.

Bradley nodded. “Sounds good. I’ll text Duke that I’m going with you guys.”

Without wasting a second, Maverick took my hand and helped me into the truck through the driver’s side door. I slid over quickly, turned off the radio, then buckled up.

Once we were all in, Maverick quickly made his way to the hospital. I turned my ringer back on and called my mother.

“Mom?” I said, my voice cracking the second I spoke.

“Where are you, Lily?”

“Bradley and I are with Maverick. He’s bringing us to the hospital. Grams?”

“I’m not sure yet. We’re all here waiting.”

“Granddad? Is he okay?”

She released a long breath. “You know the Shaw men. Fierce protectors. He argued until they agreed to let him stay with Stella. He’s with her now.”

“Daddy? Uncle Brock and Uncle Ty?”

“They’re all here, and all okay as of now. Tell Maverick to be careful driving.”

I glanced at him. “He’s driving safely, don’t worry. We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Okay, sweetheart, see you soon.”

Hitting End, I stared out the window as no one spoke. I wiped a tear away and forced myself not to cry.

“Grams is strong, Lil,” Bradly offered from the backseat. “Don’t worry, she’ll be fine.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and nodded. When Maverick reached for my hand, I instinctively laced my fingers with his. He gave me a soft squeeze, and I turned to look at him. With one single smile from him, I felt the pressure ease off my chest slightly.

I was so glad he was with me. I couldn’t describe the sense of calm I had just from touching him.

It was then I remembered he’d never had a family, perhaps he’d never gone through something like this.

But no—that wasn’t fair. Mindy and Justin had loved him, had wanted him before they’d died in a car accident. He was so young, had been happy for the first time in his life. Losing them must have been devastating for Maverick.

He looked back at me, and I offered a small smile of my own before staring straight out the window and sending up a prayer that my grandmother would be okay.



It felt like we waited forever as the entire family sat together, hoping to hear news about our grandmother. Blayze and Georgiana had left to take Ryder and Rhett home, but only

after Lincoln had practically begged them to do so. The same with Ryan and Morgan. Blakely was fussy, so it hadn't taken much to talk them into heading home.

Once Granddad had come out and said Grams was out of the woods, the fear covering the waiting room like a heavy blanket finally lifted.

Maverick hadn't left, and he was now sitting with Bradley, Nathan, and Josh after returning from a walk with my father, who'd been going stir-crazy. It was Maverick who'd suggested the walk, picking up on Dad's anxiety. Before that, he'd also gone out and gotten pizza, soda, and coffee for everyone.

The doctor finally entered the waiting room, and the entire family stood at once.

"Shaw family?" he asked.

"Yes. Is our mother okay?" Uncle Ty asked as he stepped forward.

"She's more than okay. After running some tests and checking her bloodwork three times, it appears she did *not* have a heart attack."

"What?" Uncle Brock said, stepping up next to Ty. "But she said her chest was hurting."

The doctor smiled. "A great many things can cause chest pains. All the tests are indicating it was an anxiety attack. We checked her blood for different markers, and we do them at different timeframes after the initial complaint since some show up a few hours later in the blood. Everything came back normal."

A collective sigh filled the room.

"I've already spoken to Mr. Shaw and asked him to make sure his wife doesn't take on any extra stress, or really any stress at all right now."

"That stupid fall festival," Lincoln said. "She was put in charge of it this year, and they've already started hounding her about every little detail. She's been so worried she won't be able to get everything done."

“Who is ‘they’?” Uncle Brock asked. I could see he was ready to tear someone apart.

“The vendors, the mayor...you name it,” my mother answered as Lincoln nodded her head.

“I’ll take over her position,” Aunt Kaylee offered. Uncle Ty grabbed her hand and kissed the back of it as he mouthed ‘I love you’.

“Thank you, Kaylee,” Dad said.

“Don’t thank me yet. I have a feeling people will be wishing they’d left Stella alone once they get a taste of me.”

A few chuckles filled the waiting room.

“Does anyone have any questions for me?” the doctor asked.

“You’re *sure* it wasn’t a heart attack?” I asked.

With a reassuring smile, the doctor replied, “I’m positive.”

I found myself sitting back down next to Kipton, my cousin Hunter’s wife. She reached for my hand and we both smiled in relief.

“That was scary.”

Nodding, I replied, “It was. I’m so glad she’s okay.”

Bradly walked over to us. “Hey, I’m getting a ride home with Hunter and Kipton. Are you going to ride with us or head back to the ranch with Maverick?”

“Since Maverick is going the same place I am, I’ll catch a ride with him, if he doesn’t mind.”

“You sure?” Kipton asked, standing as Hunter walked toward us.

Bradly chuckled. “You didn’t see how they were dancing in the parking lot of The Blue Moose right before I interrupted.”

Kipton raised a brow and smiled. “Oh really?”

“Thanks, Bradly.”

He bowed. “You’re more than welcome.”

Kipton giggled lightly, then sobered. “Do you think we’ll do family game night next week?”

Hunter had reached us, and he overheard. “I’m sure we will. Not sure if Grams and Granddad will be there, though.”

I looked across the waiting room and found Maverick standing at the back. I hated that he had separated himself from the rest of the family. Did he really have no idea how much he meant to my parents? To *everyone* in the family?

My father walked over and started talking to him. Maverick reached his hand out for my father to shake, but Dad drew him in for a quick hug instead. A feeling of warmth rushed through me as I watched the exchange.

“I’ll see you next week, then? I want all the details about this parking lot dance,” Kipton said.

Rolling my eyes, I sent a glare toward Bradly. “Yes, I’ll be there.”

I crossed the waiting room, stopping to tell my mother I was riding home with Maverick. When I finally reached him and my father, they were in what looked like a deep conversation.

Clearing my throat, I asked, “Am I interrupting?”

Maverick flashed me a grin. “Not at all.” Glancing back to my father, he said, “I’ll be sure to take care of that for you, Tanner.”

Dad gave him a good slap on the side of the arm. “Thank you, Maverick.” Turning to me, he asked, “You driving home with us?”

When Maverick looked my way, I realized I should have asked *him* first if it was okay that I caught a ride with him. What if he wanted to go back to The Blue Moose?

“Um...if it’s okay with Maverick, I’d like to catch a ride with him. I was schooling him on all things Taylor Swift since he’s never heard her songs before tonight.”

Dad raised a brow. “You’ve never listened to her music?”

Maverick shook his head. “Not until tonight.”

“Well, you’re looking at the number one Swiftie right here.”

“Swiftie?” he asked.

I felt my cheeks heat. “It’s what they call her fans.”

“I see. Then I’d say you’re for sure a Swiftie. And it’s totally fine if you ride back to the ranch with me.”

“It’s settled then,” Dad said, giving me a quick hug. “Be careful driving, Maverick. You’ve got precious cargo.”

“Will do. And again, I’m glad Stella is okay.”

Dad let out a breath, and you could see the relief on his face. “I’m glad she is as well.”

Once Dad walked back toward my mother, I turned to Maverick. “Sure you don’t mind me going with you?”

“I don’t mind at all.”

The ride back to the ranch started in comfortable silence, which I was grateful for. Between the dancing, Grams’s health scare, and how I was feeling about Maverick, it was a relief to settle my thoughts for a few minutes.

Maverick finally broke the silence. “What song are you going to play next for me?”

I’d been wondering if he was going to mention anything about that almost kiss in the parking lot, but it was clear he wasn’t, so I wouldn’t either—for now. But I hadn’t imagined the chemistry between us, or the way he looked at me. He wanted that kiss as much as I did.

“Mmm, let me see.”

Swiping across my list of Taylor songs, I stopped on a favorite. “This one is called ‘King of My Heart.’”

We drove in silence again as the song played.

Halfway through, Maverick reached over and turned the volume down. “Do you miss him?”

Turning to look at him, I asked, “Who?”

He glanced at me and raised a single brow in question.

“Ben?” I asked with a small laugh.

“Yes. You two were really good friends. I’m sure it has to be hard to lose someone who’s been in your life for as long as he has.”

Another song started, but I pushed the button and turned off the music altogether. “I thought I would be more upset and miss him a lot more. But if I’m being honest with myself...I haven’t thought about him at all.”

“Really?”

I smiled. “You sound like you don’t believe me.”

“If I’m being honest,” he said, intentionally repeating my words, “No. I don’t believe you.”

It was rather refreshing to have someone just speak from their heart and not in riddles. “I can understand why. But the crush—or whatever it was I had on Ben—was already fading before that day at my house. I think being out of school and the idea of starting my actual adult life was a bit scary, and I wasn’t ready to admit it or grow up. Ben was safe. Comfortable. In the back of my mind, I thought we might end up together, but then I realized it was only *because* he was safe and comfortable. I loved him...but not in the way I thought I did. Not in the way I *want* to love someone. Does that make sense?”

“It does.”

My mind went back to the almost kiss only a few hours ago. Then it flashed to seeing Maverick naked when he was sick. I cleared my throat and went on.

“I finally understood I was letting myself settle for someone I wouldn’t really be happy with, and he wouldn’t have been happy with me. I deserve someone who looks at me like...”

What I’d been *about* to say was that I deserved someone who looked at me the way Maverick had earlier that evening.



When I didn't finish my thought, he spoke.

"You do deserve that, Lily. If it means anything, I think he was simply angry that you were willing to walk away from your friendship, even if it was for the sake of his relationship. I don't doubt the guy cares about you."

I shrugged. Turning my body more in my seat to face him, I asked, "Why did you punch him?"

His head snapped to the right. "How did you know I hit him? Nathan?"

I smiled. "I saw it. Nathan had to keep you from hitting him *again*. But I know you, Maverick. You wouldn't have hit him unless he'd said something pretty bad."

"He said something disrespectful toward you. I wasn't having it."

My stomach dipped as if I'd just gone down a steep hill on a coaster. "Thank you for that. And thank you for being there for me."

"You're welcome, and I honestly didn't do anything."

"You may not think so, but you did more than you know."

He looked my way briefly before focusing back on the road. "Well, whatever I did, I'm glad it helped you realize that you deserve a hell of a lot more than someone who can't even see what's right in front of him."

I chewed on my lower lip and tried to think of a way to bring up that almost kiss, but instead, we rode in silence the rest of the way home. When Maverick pulled up to my house, he parked the truck, got out, and jogged around to the passenger side. The house was still dark, but I was pretty sure my parents and Nathan weren't far behind us.

Maverick opened the door and held his hand out for me to take.

"Thank you," I said as he helped me out. When we started toward the steps, I added, "You don't have to walk me to the door, Mav."

“I want to, Lil.”

His teasing tone caused my entire body to feel light.

We stopped on the porch. “Thank you for earlier this evening. I enjoyed it.”

Turning to face him, I leaned against the front door and smiled. “I had a lot of fun as well. I’m glad you liked Taylor, or at least the songs I played for you.”

He nodded. “I did.”

I chewed nervously on the inside of my cheek as I watched his gaze fall to my mouth. The light of the porch lit up the area enough that I could see his eyes turn a darker shade.

Then the spell was broken, and he took a few steps back while he rubbed at the nape of his neck. Holding up his other hand, he said, “Night. I’ll, um, see you around.”

“Good night.”

Maverick started down the steps, and I quickly pushed off the door. “Hey, Maverick?”

He stopped and turned to face me. “Yeah?”

“When we were in the parking lot, right before Bradley came out...was it my imagination, or were we about to kiss?”

He simply stared at me, and I couldn’t tell if he was nervous and couldn’t figure out what to say, or if maybe I *had* actually dreamed it all up and read the situation wrong.

“If it was only one-sided, I completely understand. It felt like we had a connection, and it wasn’t the first time I’ve felt that way when I was with you. But if I’m wrong...”

He drew in long, deep breath, then exhaled in one whoosh. “It wasn’t one-sided. I felt it too. I’ve *been* feeling it.”

I nearly sighed in relief. “I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming.”

Maverick chuckled. “You deserve someone who can offer you so much more than I can, Lily.”

Frowning, I started back down the steps. “What does that mean?”

He took a step back as if he was afraid to be too close to me. “I have nothing to offer you.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “That’s the most insane thing I think you’ve ever said. Why can’t we simply explore what we feel between us?”

When our eyes met, I nearly gasped. He looked...sad.

“Maverick,” I said as I walked closer. “I’m not sure what this is between us, but I know I can’t deny that there *is* something there. When I’m around you, I feel things I’ve never felt before with *any* man. I don’t even know how to put the feelings into words. I just know I don’t want to ignore them anymore or not admit those feelings to you.”

“I work for your father.”

“So?” I said with a confused chuckle. “Do you honestly think my dad would have an issue with us?”

“I’m sure he’d want more for you than some ranch hand who has no past and no future.”

My heart broke in two that he thought of himself that way. I took another step forward. We were inches apart now, and I could see his chest rise and fall with each heavy breath.

Reaching my hand up, I cupped the side of his face. When he leaned slightly into it, I was pretty sure I fell for him even more. He was so open with his vulnerability, and that surprised me. Was it only with me that he was this way? A part of me, deep down, hoped so.

“The only thing I care about is the present. The here and the now. And right now, I really want you to kiss me, Maverick. More than I have ever wanted anything.”

He closed his eyes, wearing such a conflicted expression.

“Do you not want to kiss *me*?”

Snapping his eyes open, I knew the answer without him even speaking. It was written on his face and in those eyes of

his that I adored so much.

“I’ve dreamed of kissing you, Lily Shaw. So many fucking times.”

Smiling, I wrapped my arms around his neck and laced my fingers through his hair. “To quote my girl, Taylor, I wish you would.”

The corners of his mouth twitched.

“Let me add, I wish you would kiss me. Please.”

He swallowed hard, leaned down, and whispered against my lips, “One kiss.”

Maverick pressed his lips to mine, and it was so gentle, I sighed into his mouth. Then he wrapped his arm around my waist and pressed our bodies closer, deepening the kiss. A jolt of pure pleasure rushed through my entire body as Maverick teased my mouth open with his tongue. He explored it as if he had all the time in the world...or maybe he just thought it would be the only time he had this chance. Whatever it was, I’d never in my life experienced such a powerful kiss.

When his hand went into my hair and gently tugged my head back, I melted into him.

“Maverick,” I gasped as his lips made their way down my neck, then back up to my jawline before he claimed my lips once more.

My phone beeped, and we both jumped, causing Maverick to pull away. His eyes searched my face in a way that felt even more intimate than his kiss. A million things flashed in his eyes, and I couldn’t read a single one of them. But I needed him to see how much I wanted him.

“Wow,” I whispered as a wide smile spread over his face.

“Wow is right. I...I don’t think I’ve ever experienced a kiss like that before.”

My heart fluttered in my chest. I knew for a fact that Maverick had most certainly kissed his fair share of women, so his words felt like a warm blanket around my body.

“Neither have I. That was... amazing.”

He leaned his forehead to mine, and we stood there for a few quiet moments.

“Where do we go from here?” I asked.

He drew back, lifted my chin, and said, “I know I said one kiss...but I’m feeling rather greedy this evening.”

I reached for his shirt and drew him to me. “Then it’s a good thing I am too.”

When his mouth took mine, Maverick was grinning. This kiss was far different from the one we’d shared a few moments ago. It was still intense, but the nervous excitement we’d both felt before was replaced with the thrill of tasting each other, learning what one person liked and the other giving it back in return.

If I’d thought the first kiss was the best I’d ever had, the second kiss blew it out of the water.

Maverick turned me around and slowly backed me up until I was pressed against his truck. I could feel his need pressing into my body, igniting my insides. My desire for him grew a thousand times stronger.

“Maverick,” I gasped as I hooked my leg around him, drawing him even closer. “I want you!”

A low growl from the back of his throat vibrated through my entire body. When his hand came up and cupped my breasts, I dropped my head back against his truck.

“Yes,” I hissed as his mouth moved down my neck.

The sound of tires on the gravel had Maverick instantly stepping back. Our chests heaved as we attempted to catch our breaths.

“Fuck,” Maverick whispered as he turned away from me.

I quickly pushed off the truck and composed myself. That would be my parents and Nathan.

“I better get inside,” I breathed out, still attempting to catch my breath.

Maverick grabbed my arm, pulled me to him, and kissed me once more before he abruptly let me go and made his way around the front of the truck, getting inside.

Without waiting another second, I rushed into the house and turned on lights as I heard Maverick's truck drive off. I pressed my hands to my hot cheeks and giggled. I felt like a teenager who'd almost gotten busted by her parents. I made a mad dash to my room. The last thing I wanted was for my mother and father to see me with kiss-swollen lips and a goofy-ass grin on my face.

After changing and crawling into bed, I lay there, staring up at the ceiling as I replayed the entire evening. One look at my clock said it was nearly four in the morning.

I was glad my grandmother was okay, and I sent up a quick prayer of thanks. Then all thoughts turned to Maverick. The dancing. The kissing. I wondered how far things would have gone had we not heard my parents coming. The thought of him taking me against his truck had me slipping my hand into my panties.

"Maverick," I gasped, quickly orgasming while letting the scene play out in my head.

When my body finally stopped trembling, I smiled, closing my eyes and drifting into dreams filled with more kisses from Maverick.

# Chapter Ten

## MAVERICK

The moment I opened my eyes, I thought of that kiss. Then of Lily's whispered words. "*Maverick, I want you.*"

I took myself in hand and closed my eyes as I thought about Lily's eyes turning dark when I cupped her breasts. The sound of her heavy breathing as she pushed herself into me.

"*Fuck.* Oh God, Lily," I gasped as I came faster and harder than I ever had before. My chest heaved as I drew in long breaths. "What in the hell are you doing to me?"

Glancing down at my hand covered in cum, I sat up and swung my legs over the edge of the bed and grabbed the shirt off my nightstand to clean up. Standing, I headed to the bathroom to take a cold shower since my cock felt like it was coming up again just thinking about Lily.

After tossing my shirt into the hamper, I washed my hands and reached in to turn on the shower. A knock at my door had me cursing under my breath. I'd switch days off with another one of Tanner's trainers after my late night at the hospital, and all I wanted to do was stay in bed and go over last night in my head. It had to be Hank, here to ask me for help on some other part of the ranch. I was going to tell him off, then slam the door in his face.

I shut off the shower, wrapped a towel around my waist, and made my way to the front door.

I threw it open as I started to say, "Hank, it's my day off, and I'm not..."

My voice trailed off when I saw Lily standing on the other side of the door. Her eyes widened as they took in my near-naked form. When they swept back up to my face, she smirked.

"And here I was thinking I'd have to seduce you out of your clothes."

I laughed and motioned for her to come in.

“You have today off?” she asked as she walked farther into my place.

“I do. I switched days with Lewis.”

Turning, she chewed on her lip, and fuck if it didn’t make my dick go rock hard again.

“I, um, was about to take a shower.”

Her eyes seemed to sparkle as the corners of her mouth drew up into a sexier-than-hell smile. “Want some company?”

I closed my eyes and let out a low moan, counting to ten in my head. When I opened them, Lily was gone.

“Lily?”

The sound of the shower turning on caused my heart to feel like it dropped to the floor.

*Was this really happening?* I closed my eyes again and shook my head. *I sure as hell better not be dreaming.*

The sound of Lily’s voice clearing had my eyes flying open again—and I nearly dropped to my knees. She was standing there naked.

“Jesus, Lily. You’re...you’re breathtaking.”

With a shy smile, I watched her cheeks turn bright red. “I’ve never done anything like this before, so I’m not sure how long I can stand here on display before I run back to get dressed again.”

It only took me a few steps to reach her. I scooped her up into my arms, and my heart nearly burst from my chest at the feel of all that silky skin...the sound of her happy laughter.

“I feel like I’m dreaming,” I said, as I slowly slid her down my body.

Reaching for my towel, she pulled it off and let it fall to the floor. When she took me in her hand and squeezed, I let out a hiss of pleasure.

Then she dropped to her knees.



“Holy shit! Lily!” I cried out as she drew me deep inside her warm, wet mouth. The woman surprised me at every turn.

My hands pushed into her hair, and I dropped my head back as she worked me with her mouth and hands.

“God, you’re so big,” she breathed as she pumped her hand over my shaft before taking me once again.

Reaching down after just a few minutes, I pulled her off me and helped her stand. “Enough, or this is going to end before I want it to.”

She giggled, and I loved how she could pull off sexy and sweet at the same damn time.

“It’s my turn to taste you.”

Her eyes widened, and for a moment, I saw a flash of uncertainty.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Remember when I told you I’ve had a very vanilla sex life?”

I nodded.

“I also told you no one has ever given me oral sex.” She nodded at my waist. “And that was my first attempt at it with anyone too.”

I closed my eyes and groaned yet again. I was her first. Something about that felt really good. “Get in the shower, Lil.”

Chewing on her lower lip, she walked into the shower and stood under the spray, the warm water hitting her beautifully curved body.

“Lean against the back wall.”

When she did, I smiled. Dropping to my knees, I lifted her leg and kissed the inside of her thigh.

“Oh... Oh, Maverick...”

“That’s only the beginning, baby. I want to hear you scream my name when you come on my tongue.”

Her head knocked back against the tile wall as she sighed in pleasure.

I kissed farther up, then hooked her leg over my shoulder and spread her open to me. “So fucking beautiful. I can’t wait to taste you, baby.”

“Maverick,” she whispered as I blew on her clit. “Please.”

Spreading her even more, I licked between her lips like I was lapping at an ice cream cone. Lily gasped and bucked her hips against my face.

“More?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Look at me, Lily. I want you to watch me making love to you with my mouth.”

Her head fell forward, and our eyes met. I didn’t break the contact when I buried my mouth in her pussy.

“Oh my God!” she cried, her hand slicing into my hair. “That feels...oh my God!”

I used my mouth and tongue to lick and suck as she bucked her hips and pulled my face closer to her body. She wanted more. I fucking *needed* more.

“Maverick. Oh God. Oh God!”

Smiling, I focused on her clit as I pushed a finger inside her, causing her to cry out her pleasure.

“Yes! I’m so close. It feels so good...”

Covering her clit once again, I flicked my tongue faster while she thrust against me. I instantly knew I wanted her to sit on my face next time while I lay in bed and watched her fall to pieces above me.

“Yes!” she cried. “Yes, oh God, yes!”

Slipping another finger inside her was all she needed to find her release. She screamed out my name as she came. It was the most glorious thing I’d ever heard, and having her come on my tongue was the best gift I’d ever imagined.

“Stop. I can’t...oh...Maverick...I *can’t!*”

She could, and I planned on pulling out every single ounce of this orgasm. When I felt her leg go weak, I held her up.

“It’s too much! Maverick. Please.”

Making sure she was stable, I finally stood. She had a satisfied look on her face, and I could tell she was still coming down from her climax.

“I’m clean, Lil. Are you on birth control?”

She stared at me blankly for a moment, as if clearing her thoughts. “Yes,” she finally said.

“Do you want me to get a condom?”

Reaching out for me, she shook her head. “No. I want to feel you. All of you.”

I positioned myself and lifted her leg to my hip. “I can’t wait a second longer. I have to be inside you.”

She nodded.

“I’m not sure I can go slow, baby.”

Smiling, she said, “Then don’t go slow.”

I pushed into her, just the tip, and she gasped.

“I’m going to fuck you hard, Lily. Then I want to spend the rest of the day exploring every single”—I pushed in more—“inch of your body.”

“Yes. Maverick, please. Don’t tease me!”

As I thrust in the rest of the way, Lily let out a small scream. She was so fucking tight.

“*Fuck.* Did I hurt you?”

She closed her eyes for a moment before she looked at me. “You’re so big, and it’s been a while. Give me one second to adjust to...oh...” I’d rolled my hips against her, and she wrapped her arms around my neck. “That feels so good. Don’t stop!”

“You ready?”

Her eyes rolled back as she whispered, “Yes. More.”

I slowly pulled almost all the way out before I pushed back in. I started off slow and quickly lost control. Lily met me thrust for thrust. Her nails dug into my shoulders, and the sound of our bodies slapping together made it even hotter.

“Fucking hell...you feel so damn good!”

Her mouth came down on mine as one hand clutched my neck. When she pulled back and gasped for air, I moved faster and harder.

“Do you like this, Lil? Do you like me fucking you?”

“Yes!”

“Fuck, I want to be deeper inside you.”

Her head fell back against the wall. “Harder, Maverick! Please.”

Lifting her, I held her ass and tilted her so I went even deeper. She braced her hands on the shower walls as I sped up.

“Oh my God. Maverick! I’m coming. *Yes!*”

The feel of her pussy tightening around my dick nearly had me passing out from how fucking amazing it felt.

“Lily...I’m coming!”

Her entire body shook as she cried out in pleasure, both of us coming at the same time. When my legs burned and our bodies no longer pulsed around one another, I pulled out and slowly set her down.

Lily fell against my body, and I wrapped my arms around her.

“Maverick,” she whispered as she drew in deep breaths. The water was still warm, so I turned us around and guided her under it. Throwing her head back, she let the water run over her body. She looked like a goddamn queen, standing in my shower.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Lily.”

She lifted her head and grinned. “So are you.”

Her hands landed softly on my chest, then she moved them slowly around my body. Grinning wider, she said, “I like how your body reacts to my touch.”

Laughing, I replied, “So does my body.”

She tilted her head in question. “Is it crazy for me to want you again so soon?”

I took her hand and pushed it farther down, so she could feel my dick hardening. “Only if it’s crazy that my cock is hard for you already.”

Lily licked her lips. “I like your dirty talk.”

Raising a brow, I replied, “Do you now? I’ll have to remember that and whisper dirty thoughts into your ear every chance I get.”

Her upper teeth dug into her lower lip. “Maverick.”

I nodded, sighing. “I know, baby. I feel it too.”

She stood on tiptoe until her mouth covered mine. I wasn’t sure how long we stood there, kissing as if the world might end if we pulled apart. It wasn’t until the hot water ran out that I turned off the shower. I wrapped Lily in a towel and carried her to my bedroom. Gently laying her on the bed, I dried off, then crawled in beside her.

“I want to touch every inch of your body. Make love to you until you’re exhausted.” Moving my lips to her neck, I added, “Every time your lips touch someone other than me, I want you to feel *me* from now on.”

Arching her back, she moaned, “Please,” as she reached out for me.

I pinned her arms down and kissed her stomach. Writhing beneath me, Lily sucked in a breath when my mouth covered her nipple.

“You’re driving me crazy!”

Grinning against her skin, I bit down gently, causing her to buck her hips.

“Do you want me inside you again?”

“God, yes!”

“Tell me what you want me to do.”

Her breathing got heavier and her hands were all over my body, now that they were no longer pinned. “Make love to me, Maverick. I want to feel you on top of me. Feel you inside me. Please.”

Moving over her, I took one hand and stretched it over her head, lacing our fingers. “You don’t ever have to beg me to make love to you.”

Covering her mouth with mine, I slowly pushed into her. Her legs wrapped around my body and I nearly came just from the intimacy of being with Lily. I’d never felt this way with any other woman, and I already knew I never would again. No other woman could—or would—ever compare.

None.

When her hand came up to cradle the side of my face, our eyes locked. She let out a breath as she softly spoke my name.

That was when it happened. That was the moment I did the one thing I swore I’d never do.

I gave my heart to Lily.

# Chapter Eleven

## LILY

Tears welled in my eyes as I watched Maverick's face while he made love to me. Something had changed, and I felt it in every portion of my body. He was looking at me the way my father looked at my mother. The way Granddad looked at Grams. My heart wanted to leap from my chest and collide with his as I reached up and pulled his face closer.

But his words about someone else's lips on me had planted themselves in the back of my mind, along with his insistence that he had nothing to offer me.

*How do I make him realize what he means to me and my family?*

If he thought this was going to be a one-time thing, he was sorely mistaken. I wanted more of him, needed more, and not just in a sexual way. Though he built my body up so high and tight with his sweet lovemaking, I knew the moment I came it was going to be mind-blowing.

Like the orgasm in the shower. Just the memory of it made me moan.

"Does it feel good?" he whispered against my ear as he slowly rotated his hips, driving me more and more crazy.

"So good. It feels heavenly."

Wrapping my arms around him, I drew him down. "Maverick, can you go faster?"

He grinned on another slow swivel of his hips. "You told me to make love to you. That's what I'm doing."

"I'm so close, but it keeps slipping away."

Biting my earlobe, he softly said, "Feeling frustrated, are we?"

I laughed. "Yes! And confused. It feels so good slow, so beautifully intimate, but God...I want more."

Maverick pushed himself up on his strong arms. “More, huh?”

Nodding, I placed a hand on my chest. My heart pounded with anticipation.

“Roll over onto your stomach, Lily.”

With a smile, I did as he asked.

“Put your hands on the headboard and don’t let go, no matter what.”

He crawled under me, and I looked down, confused. I thought he would take me from behind, but maybe he wanted me to be on top. Then he stopped sliding up under me.

When he spread my legs apart, I gasped. With his hands on my hips, he gently pulled me down. “Sit on my face.”

Choking out a nervous laugh, I looked down at him once again. “You want me to do what?”

“I want to make you come with my mouth again, then take you from behind.”

An instant flood of wetness hit between my legs. I slowly lowered until I felt his mouth. I moaned as he swept his tongue through my lips and flicked my clit.

“Jesus!” I cried out as I gripped the headboard harder.

“Ride my face, Lily. Make yourself come.”

I closed my eyes, unsure if I should feel embarrassed or empowered. In the end, I went with empowered.

Maverick held my hips tightly and drove me to a mind-shattering orgasm.

“Are you okay?” he asked when he’d shifted to kneel behind me, kissing my lower back.

“I’m never going to recover from today. I hope you know that.”

With one hand on my hip and the other on my lower back, he chuckled, then slid himself inside me. I wasn’t sure it was possible, but I could feel the buildup again already.



“Hard and fast?”

Gripping the headboard and ignoring my fatigued legs, I nodded.

A few minutes later, I was crying out Maverick’s name as I came again, with him falling right after.



“Are you awake?” Maverick asked as he held me close to his body. My head was on his chest, and his steady breathing and heartbeat had caused me to doze off a few times.

“Hmm, barely. You have succeeded in your quest to officially exhaust me, Mr. Prescott.”

He kissed the top of my head. “It’s never been like that for me. I just want you to know that.”

Turning and resting my chin on the back of my hand, I looked at him. “I feel the same way. It was...hot and beautiful at the same time. Did I mention I like the dirty talk?”

He laughed. “You did mention that.”

I sat up, moving slightly to face him, bringing the sheet with me to cover myself. I wasn’t sure why I was covering up now when I’d stripped naked and stood in his living room. The moment felt delicate, though.

“You said something that I want to talk to you about.”

He rested his head on his hands, and I couldn’t help but admire the muscles in his arms, along with his abs. The man was crazy fit.

“You said last night you had nothing to offer me...and then earlier today, you said when another man’s lips are on me, you want me to feel you.”

He only gave one nod.

“Are you only wanting a temporary thing between us?”

A serious expression crossed his face, and he sat up against the headboard. “What are *you* wanting?”

Smiling, I shook my finger and said, “Um, no. I asked you first, Maverick.”

“I don’t want it to be temporary, but I also don’t want you to settle for someone like me.”

I shook my head. “What is that supposed to mean?”

He made a face and looked away. “Lily, I come from nothing. I didn’t grow up in a family like you have. I never opened my heart to anyone except for Justin and Mindy, and all that did was lead me to heartbreak. You’re so amazing and so goddamn beautiful, both inside and out. I don’t deserve an angel like you.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

“I’ve been alone most of my entire life, and...I guess I just don’t expect for that to change.”

My heart dropped in my chest, and I reached for his hand. “You’re not alone now. You have me, my parents, Nathan. You’re part of this family, Maverick.”

He smiled and squeezed my hand. “I appreciate how your family has taken me in like they have. If I ever had a mother and father, I would have wanted them to be like Tanner and Timberlynn. But the truth is, I’m a nobody who has a way with horses. That’s all.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “That’s all? You’re a master when it comes to horses, Maverick. The way they respond to you leaves me in awe. My father told me he’s never seen anyone who can reach a horse like you can. Look at Tesoro and everything you’ve done for her.”

“She has a long way to go.”

“But she’s learning to trust you more and more every day. And yesterday, when I went out to the pasture to get Juniper, Tesoro walked right up with him. She even let me give her a scratch.”

His brows lifted. “She did?”

“Yes! You have this magic about you. The horses feel it, and now I’ve felt it. I don’t want this to be a one-day fling. I don’t want another man’s lips on me. I want *your* lips on me. I want to be in *your* arms, no one else’s.”

He swallowed hard. “Your parents—”

“Will be supportive. They adore you, Mav. Please, don’t shut me out when we’ve just discovered this amazing thing we have, and I’m not talking about the sex—although that *was* amazing.”

He waggled his brows. “Was it?”

“You know it was. I screamed out your name enough times.”

Laughing, he pulled me to him, and I straddled him. It only took a few moments for me to feel his hard length pressed against me.

“Are you sore?” he asked as he ran his finger along my chin.

I wiggled against him, and he let out a low growl. “Tell me what you want me to do.”

His gray eyes turned dark with desire. He placed his hands on my hips and squeezed. “I want you to ride me until you scream my name again.”

“Can I make you come this way? Me on top?”

Maverick’s head dropped against the headboard, and he moaned. “Christ, Lily. I have to think of other things the moment I slip inside you, or I can’t *not* come.”

I grinned and rolled my hips against him. “Touch me.”

He bit down on his lower lip, and I swore it nearly sent me over the edge. I lifted just a bit as he slipped his hand between our bodies.

“*Fuck*. You’re soaking wet for me.”

Nodding, I whispered, “For you, Mav. I’m wet only for you.”

His eyes met mine, and I could see his desire for me in his intense gaze.

A slow, wickedly sexy grin spread over his face as he pushed his fingers inside me and rubbed his thumb over my clit, causing me to moan.

“I want you to fuck me.”

He removed his fingers and guided himself to my opening. When I slid down easily over his length, we both moaned in pleasure. Maverick leaned forward and took one of my nipples into his mouth and sucked hard as I slowly rocked my body against his. He was so deep, and it felt deliciously good.

My hands threaded through his hair as I began to thrust a bit harder. He took my other nipple in his hand and pinched, causing me to gasp and pull him closer.

Letting go of my nipple, he leaned back and looked at me. “That’s it, baby. Take what you want. Make yourself come.”

Before long, I had a rhythm going. Placing my hands on his thighs, I moved faster. He was watching where our bodies were joined, and it was so damn sexy. I could spend days in bed with him and never get tired of the way he looked at me.

My orgasm was building, and I could feel my body tightening around him. Maverick lifted his eyes, and our gazes locked.

When his tongue swept over his lips, I lost control.

“Maverick, I’m coming!”

He leaned forward, wrapped his arms around me, and pressed his mouth to mine. We both cried into one another’s mouths as we came together. When I finally rocked to a stop, and he broke the kiss, our gazes met again, and my heart nearly leapt from my chest as he stared at me with nothing but love in his eyes.

At that moment, I knew without a doubt that I was falling in love with Maverick.

## Chapter Twelve

### MAVERICK

It was too soon. It was way too soon.

I watched as Lily slept peacefully in my arms while my head swam in a million different directions. Lily wanted more. She wanted more with *me*. I closed my eyes and let out a slow breath.

I was falling in love with her. How in the hell could that happen? Was it actually even love? Maybe it was simply lust because we were so good together. The sex was out of this world, no doubt about that. But could someone fall in love this quickly?

Lily mumbled something in her sleep, and I found myself holding my breath. I hadn't wanted her to wake for fear she'd decide it was way past time for her to head back to her house. We'd been in my bed nearly all damn day, except for when we managed to make a couple of sandwiches. Seeing Lily wearing nothing but one of my T-shirts made me rock hard, and it took everything I had not to push everything off the kitchen island and take her right there.

Glancing at the clock, I saw it was almost seven. Where did she tell her parents she was going? Would Tanner put two and two together and realize Lily had spent the day with me? In my bed? While I did all kinds of dirty things to her with my mouth and hands? Not to mention my dick.

The smile that spread over my face couldn't be helped. I ran my fingers lightly over her back and tried to think of how this could work between us. Before today, I'd thought if I could have her just once, I'd die a happy man. Now that I'd had her—and gotten a taste of her wicked side—I wanted more. So much more.

I closed my eyes. Could a woman like Lily truly be happy with a guy like me? She was so damn amazing and would do wonderful things in her life. Would a guy whose only talent

was working with damaged horses really have anything to offer her other than a good romp in bed?

Lily's phone buzzed, and I looked over to see it was Timberlynn texting.

Gently shaking her, I said, "Lil, your mom is texting you."

She stretched and rolled onto her back, allowing the sheet to fall away and expose her perfect breasts. I loved that her body was curvy and not stick thin.

When she reached across my body to grab a hair tie, I slapped her ass, making her let out a yelp.

"Ouch. That hurt!" She laughed as she pulled her hair up before reaching back for her phone.

"Need me to kiss it to make it better?"

Her cheeks flushed, and I couldn't help but pull her mouth to mine and kiss her. When she pulled back, she said, "Next time you hit my ass, you'd better be inside me."

I groaned and dropped my head back. "You naughty girl."

Giggling and sounding like the girl next door—and looking like it with her hair pulled up in a ponytail—she read the text and broke out in a huge grin.

"Good news?" I asked.

"You could say that. She's asking if we're going to make it for dinner."

"We?"

When she turned her phone, I read the text.

*Mommy: Will you and Maverick be joining us for dinner tonight?*

It was my turn for my cheeks to heat.

Looking at Lily, I asked, "How does she know we're together?"

She shrugged and gave me a quick kiss on the lips before she crawled off the bed and started to gather up her clothes.

I sat up on my elbows. “Did you tell them you were coming over here?”

“No. I just said I was heading out for the day.”

“So what made your mom think you were with me?” I asked again, sitting up and getting out of bed. I reached for the T-shirt on my nightstand and slipped it on, followed by a pair of sweats.

Lily stopped getting dressed and looked at me. “Are you upset about them finding out?”

“I’m not upset. It’s more fear than anything. Your dad will kill me.”

Laughing, she shook her head. “We’re both adults, Mav. And my father adores you. You *know* that. You’re worrying over nothing.”

I rubbed at the back of my neck. “Am I?”

She finished dressing, then turned to face me. A look of worry crossed her beautiful face. “Did you want to keep this a secret? Because I don’t.”

“You want people to know we’re together?”

Lily walked over to me, wrapped her arms around my neck, and lifted onto her toes. “If I could stand on top of the tallest mountain in Montana and shout out that we’re together, I would. I haven’t felt this...this...*cherished*, ever. The way you kiss me, touch me, make love to me. I couldn’t be in the same room and attempt to hide my growing feelings for you if I wanted to, Maverick. So yes, I want people to know. But it’s just dating. It’s not like you asked me to marry you.”

I sighed. “I just don’t want your parents to think we’re moving too fast.” When she frowned, I rubbed my thumb over the faint line between her eyes. “Why are you frowning?”

“You do want to be exclusive...right?”

I know what I told her earlier, but a rush of anger hit me at the idea of any other man even *near* her. “Hell yes, I do! If I actually saw another man touch you, I’m pretty sure I’d want to break his arms.”

A wide grin erupted on her face. “There you go, then. We’re dating, and I want my parents to be the first to find out.”

“Okay, well, if your dad asks to talk to me outside, it’s all on you what happens after that.”

She laughed again and kissed me. “I’m not worried. I saw you clock Ben, I think you can hold your own with my dad.”

After I got dressed and Lily fixed her hair in my bathroom mirror, we headed out to my truck.

“How did you get here?” I asked.

“Nathan dropped me off on his way to baseball practice.”

“You little scamp. *That’s* how your mother knew you were with me.”

She winked at me and climbed up into my truck. With a shake of my head, I mumbled, “Minx.”

Less than five minutes later, I was parking in the same place I parked any other time I had dinner at Tanner and Timberlynn’s house. The only difference was their daughter was climbing out of the truck, and I had a hand on her lower back, guiding her up the steps. I could only hope she didn’t look like I’d had her in bed with me all damn day.

When the door opened before we reached the top step, Timberlynn stood there, a wide grin on her face. She looked at Lily, then at me, then back to her daughter.

“Don’t you look...*happy*.”

Lily grinned. “I am...*happy*.”

And I wanted to turn and run. Die right there on the spot.

Timberlynn pinned me in place with a look and said, “I see you two have had a good day.”

My mouth opened to say something, but nothing would come out.

“We have,” Lily stated as she took my hand and dragged me into the house after Timberlynn stepped back inside, leading us toward the kitchen.



“You’re just in time. I pulled the meatloaf out of the oven right before I saw you drive up.”

“Please tell me you made mashed potatoes. I’m starving!” Lily said as her mother glanced back—but not at Lily, at *me*.

“Starving, huh?”

I was pretty sure my face was beet red. And I never uttered a word.

“You know what they say, when you have an amazing—”

“Timberlynn, did you happen to see Tesoro today at all?” I quickly asked because, Jesus, I had to change the subject.

Lily gave me a wicked smile before she walked on ahead and into the kitchen.

“I did. She walked up to me and let me give her a quick scratch. I tried to pet down her neck, but she stomped her foot and thrashed her head around, letting me know that was off-limits.”

“She’s come a long way, and I think being with Juniper has helped.”

“And her watching Juniper’s training has helped as well.”

All eyes swung around at the sound of Tanner. He walked into the kitchen with Nathan right behind him. The younger Shaw shot me a knowing smirk, then looked at his sister, who suddenly seemed very interested in the meatloaf cooling on the counter.

Oh sure. She was all brave at my house, and now she’d probably crawl into that meatloaf if she could.

“I believe it has,” I stated as Timberlynn handed me the plates, and I headed over to set the table. It was the normal routine, nothing different from any other night I’d come over for dinner. The little sexual innuendos suddenly gone between mother and daughter.

“What do you think about putting Romeo out with Juniper and Tesoro?” Tanner asked as he grabbed the basket of rolls and butter and made his way to the table.

If talking about horses kept the focus off me and Lily, I'd play along. Besides, it was another normal thing we did when I was over for dinner. We talked shop most of the time. Or about Nathan's baseball.

"We could try. I think Juniper might get a little jealous if we throw in another male, but she's doing well with him. So I think she'd do better with another male, rather than another mare."

"Unless it was an older mare," Lily said as she came to stand next to me. "I think having an older mare, one who isn't threatening in any way, might do her good. I mean, every girl wants a bestie."

We all laughed, and I felt the nervous jitters I'd had since we got Timberlynn's text slowly fade away. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all.

Timberlynn announced dinner. "Everyone sit down, time to eat."

Timberlynn had already set the meatloaf on the table, sliced and ready to serve, along with mashed potatoes and brown gravy. Steamed green beans sat on the other side of the table with the freshly made rolls.

I held out Lily's chair while Tanner held out Timberlynn's. He glanced at me and smiled before he took his seat. It wasn't anything new. If Nathan didn't grab his sister's chair, I usually did.

The dishes were passed around while Tanner asked Nathan about baseball practice. When their conversation ended, Tanner looked directly at me.

"So, you spent the day with my daughter doing what, exactly?"

The piece of meatloaf I'd just swallowed was attempting to come back up and kill me, so I started to cough. But maybe death by meatloaf was a better alternative. Now that I think about it, it might have been a better way to die than at the hands of Tanner Shaw.

Lily stared at me with a bemused expression on her face as I took a drink of water and offered a diplomatic answer. “We spent the day getting to know one another better.”

Nathan mumbled something under his breath, but everyone ignored him.

“Really?” Tanner asked. “And what did you *learn* about Lily?”

“Dad,” Lily warned. “Don’t do this.”

Timberlynn placed a hand over her husband’s arm and said, “Tanner, we talked about this.”

He waved her off. “I’m curious, that’s all.”

I drew in a deep breath, set my fork down, and looked directly at my boss. The father of the woman I’d had my mouth all over for the last few hours. I had to do a little shake of my head to whisk the memory away.

“I learned she hates chocolate ice cream and only eats it because she doesn’t want to hurt your feelings.” Tanner raised a brow and looked at Lily in surprise before bringing his gaze back to me. “I learned the first time she rode a horse, she was scared to death but also so excited it outweighed the fear. She’s afraid of roller coasters, her favorite season is fall, her favorite number is seven, and she’d like to build a house here on the ranch someday so she can be near her family like her cousins have done. She hates how long baseball games are, but loves watching Nathan play.” I peeked at her, then added, “And seeing the guys in their uniforms. And her dream is to see Taylor Swift in concert.”

Lily stared at me with a disbelieving look on her face. We hadn’t talked about any of that today.

No, that wasn’t quite true. She *did* tell me her dream about going to a Taylor Swift concert.

Timberlynn was doing everything she could to keep her smile from growing bigger while Tanner studied me quietly.

Nathan chuckled and said, “*Damn*, dude, that’s giving—”

“Language, Nathan,” Tanner warned. Then he pointed at him and said, “And don’t even think of using that term, ‘giving cunt.’”

I nearly choked again. “I’m sorry—*what?*”

Timberlynn sighed, and Lily laughed.

Focusing back on me, Tanner rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I’ll fill you in later.”

Okay, that had to be a good sign, if he was planning on talking to me later and not killing me.

Lily reached over and squeezed my hand. When I looked at her, she smiled. I returned the gesture before a throat cleared, and I pulled my hand from hers.

“The only reason I’m not taking you out back and shooting you right now—because I wasn’t born yesterday, and I know damn well you weren’t simply *talking* to my daughter. You forget I was your age once.”

Timberlynn’s cheeks turned bright red, and she cleared *her* throat.

“Like I was saying, the only reason I’m not taking you out back is because if Lily has to be with *anyone*, I’d prefer she be with you. You’re like a son to me, Maverick. I trust you with my daughter...and her heart.”

I was positive my eyes were as wide as saucers.

“Don’t look so damn surprised. Timberlynn and I think of you as part of this family, and we’ll keep reminding you of that fact until you believe it. I’ve seen the way my daughter’s been smiling more over the past few weeks. And today, she looks downright happy.”

“Oh, she *is* happy,” Timberlynn added, then covered her mouth to keep from laughing.

Tanner rolled his eyes. “Since she was with you last night and all of today, I’m going to assume you had something to do with that, and I’m sure your time spent together wasn’t playing twenty questions. The only thing I want from you right now, Maverick, is a promise that you won’t hurt her. Because if you

do, I have two brothers who will help me bury your body, no questions asked—and I have plenty of land to choose where your remains will disappear.”

“I’ll help bury you too,” Nathan added.

With a quick shake of my head, I answered, “I would never hurt her. At least, I wouldn’t ever do so intentionally, Tan— Um...sir.”

The corner of Tanner’s mouth twitched, and he looked at Timberlynn, who outright smiled. When he turned his attention back on me, the hint of a smile was gone. “I know you wouldn’t. I don’t have to tell you how much I love her and what she means to me and her mother.”

“And me,” Nathan added once again. When I looked at him, he made a motion with his fingers. Pointing to his eyes, then to me, as if saying he was watching me. I stared at him for a moment before looking back at Tanner.

“I trust you with her, Maverick. And I like you a hell of a lot better than that pussy, Ben.”

Nathan laughed hard at that. Timberlynn attempted to hide her laughter yet again, and Lily said, “Dad, really?”

“What? He *is* a pussy.”

“I’ll agree with that,” I replied as Lily looked at me, then back to her dad.

Picking up her fork, Lily said, “Great, now that we got that out of the way, can we move on?”

Tanner narrowed his eyes at me, leaned forward, and said, “Remember, I know how to hide a body, son, and have countless acres to do it on.”

“Oh my God!” Lily scowled at her mother and said, “Mom! Make him stop.”

“So do I,” Nathan added, causing everyone to swing their gaze to him.

He smiled. “What? I watch *a lot* of true-crime shows.”

I picked up my fork and looked at Lily. “I’m not sure if I should be worried more about your dad or your brother.”

She tried not to laugh and finally lost the battle.

# Chapter Thirteen

## LILY

I walked into Higherground Brewing and looked around for Rose and Kipton. Waving her hand like a madwoman, Rose called out my name.

“Why don’t you let the whole place know I’m here?” I laughed as I hugged Rose first, then Kipton.

Rose grabbed my hands and yanked me down into a chair, then sat herself. “Tell us everything!”

I frowned. “About?”

Kipton and Rose both rolled their eyes before Rose said, “Don’t even play that way. My mom was talking to *your* mom on speakerphone when I was with her. She said you and Maverick are together.”

My cheeks heated, but before I could say anything, the waitress appeared. “What can I get you to drink?”

“I’ll have the Hula Hopped IPA, please.”

Rose looked at the beer menu and said, “I think this time I’ll try the Base Camp Irish Red.”

The waitress smiled. “Good choice. It’s one of my favorites.”

“I’ll just have a water, please.”

Rose and I both swung our gazes to Kipton.

“Water? You’re drinking water? We just found out Lily is sleeping with the hot horse whisperer, and you’re drinking *water*?”

The waitress coughed to cover up her laugh.

I shot my cousin a dirty look. “Really, Rose?”

“Fine. I’ll take a water and a lemonade.”

Smiling, the waitress asked, “Do you need more time to look at the menu, or do you want the usual?”

Rose, Kipton, and I had been meeting at the brewery almost weekly for the last year and had always ordered the same thing. But when all three of us turned to look at Kipton, she laughed.

“Why are you looking at me?”

“Well, you’re switching things up on us, so maybe you don’t want the same-old, same-old,” Rose said.

“The Emerald Garden is perfect,” Kipton replied with a chuckle.

The waitress winked. “I’ll get the drinks out and the pizza going.”

“Thanks!” the three of us said at the same time.

Before the conversation could go back to me and Maverick, I looked at Kipton. It was then I noticed she had a glow about her, and her eyes sparkled with a happiness I hadn’t seen before. And since she was madly in love with my cousin Hunter, that was saying something.

I gasped, and Rose jumped. “What?”

“Kipton, are you pregnant?” I asked.

Her cheeks turned a bright pink.

Rose turned in her seat to face her. “Holy shit! You are!”

Kipton giggled. “Yes, I am. But you can’t tell anyone! Hunter and I haven’t told a soul yet. I just got to my second trimester, so we wanted to wait. After lunch with you guys, I’m meeting Hunter to go tell his parents.”

“What about your foster parents?” Rose asked.

“We’re going to FaceTime them tonight.”

Rose and I both clapped in our seats before I got out of mine and rushed around the table. I pulled Kipton up and hugged her. “Oh my gosh, Kipton! Congratulations!”

Rose engulfed us both in a hug, and we all laughed. When we broke apart, each of us wiped away tears.



“When are you due?” Rose asked as we took our seats once again.

“January tenth. Hunter is over the moon, and so am I.”

“Brock and Lincoln are going to freak!” I said with a laugh.

Rose sighed. “Great, as soon as my mother hears, she’s going to start asking me when *I’m* going to pop one out.”

“When are you?” I asked.

Smiling, Rose shrugged. “I don’t know. I think Bryson is ready, and I think I am too.”

Kipton reached for Rose’s hand. “Oh, please start trying, Rose. I would love for our little ones to grow up together.”

A strange ache twinged in my chest, and I didn’t want to admit it was jealousy. I wasn’t even twenty-three yet, so it wasn’t like I didn’t have lots of time. But seeing all my cousins getting married, and now having kids, made me feel like I was missing out on something. I knew that was silly but...maybe I wanted that life more than I’d realized.

Kipton reached across the table and took my hand in hers. “Enough about babies, I want to hear about you and Maverick.”

“Yes!” Rose added. “Is he good in bed? He looks like he’d be good in bed.”

I couldn’t have stopped the smile on my face if I tried.

“By the flushed cheeks, I’d say he’s more than good,” Kipton teased.

“Fine, if this is what you guys want to talk about, then I’ll tell you. Yes, Maverick and I are dating, and yes, he is *very* good in bed.” I looked around and lowered my voice as I added, “A little dirty too.”

They both grinned.

“I want details. Like how dirty? Does he just talk dirty, or does he like to do dirty things?” Rose asked.

Blowing out a breath, I said, “So...this is embarrassing,” I whispered. “The things he did with his mouth should be a sin. And the things he had *me* do...”

My voice trailed off as the three of us fell into a fit of laughter. When the waitress brought our drinks, we broke apart and attempted not to giggle like middle-school girls.

When she walked away, Rose leaned in closer. “What kinds of things does he have you do?”

I shook my head. “I’m not kissing and telling.”

“Oh, come on! You can’t do that to us.”

Chewing on my lower lip, I said, “The only thing I’m going to say is, I’ve discovered a new way of riding.”

Rose bounced in her seat, while Kipton fanned herself.

“You sat on his face, didn’t you?”

“Rose!” I whisper-shouted as I looked around.

“Oh my gosh, she did! Gah, that is the *best* way to orgasm. I think I’ll have me a little ride later today with my hot husband,” Rose said as she wiggled her brows.

Kipton nearly choked on her water as she laughed. She set down the glass and cleared her throat. “I can tell you one thing about pregnancy, it’s made my libido fly off the charts. I can’t get enough of Hunter, and he’s not complaining. I may have to take my own little ride this evening.”

Another round of giggles abounded.

Rose held out her hands in a gesture to calm down. “Seriously, though, Lil, he seems like a great guy. Can I ask about your feelings for Ben?”

“I wanted to ask, too, but I wasn’t sure how,” Kipton added.

I dropped back in my seat and sighed. “Maverick is so amazing, you guys. And you know about Ben and Abby getting married and expecting a baby, right?”

They both nodded.

“When Ben first told me, I was so surprised, I tripped and fell on my ass, knocking my head on the way down.”

“Dramatic much?” Rose teased.

I laughed. “I was more shocked than anything. But my feelings for Ben had already been changing, or maybe they were never what I thought they were to begin with.”

I quickly filled them in on what had happened that day. How I’d been having feelings for Maverick since taking care of him while he was sick—and everything that took place during those few days. Also, how those feelings were a thousand times stronger than anything I’d ever felt for Ben. I also told them Ben and I weren’t speaking any longer.

Both of them gasped.

“Wait—you saw Maverick naked before you slept with him?”

I grinned. “Yes. He was trying to get into the shower and nearly fell, so I helped him. I also stood in that same shower just before he used it, and...” One quick look around, and I focused back on them. “You know...relieved some of that desire as I thought about the naked man in question. While he was lying in the other room.”

“I love when relationships first start out,” Kipton said with a dreamy sound to her voice.

I laughed. “We worked together a lot the next couple of weeks, and then I saw him out with Bradly and a few of his friends. We had the most amazing night in the parking lot of The Blue Moose, dancing to Taylor Swift—whom, by the way, he’d never listened to before.” I smiled at the memory of that night. “We would have kissed in the parking lot, had it not been for Bradly rushing out to tell me about Grams.”

“What happened after that?” Rose asked.

Drawing in a breath, I slowly let it out. “Well, the thing with Grams happened, and you know he was at the hospital with us. Then I drove home with him.” I paused, thinking of our conversation that night, before he kissed me.

“Why are you frowning?” Kipton asked.

I looked down at my drink, then back up to my best friends. They may be family, but they were also friends I knew I could confide in.

“Maverick grew up being bounced around from foster house to foster house.”

Rose drew in a breath. “I didn’t know that.”

Nodding, I went on. “There was one family who was going to adopt him. He was so happy. The mom taught him how to dance—and he’s still an amazing dancer,” I added. “But they both died in a car accident, and he was tossed back into the system. He left when he was sixteen and started making his way around to different ranches to work.

“He’s made a few comments to me about how he has nothing to offer me, and that he comes from nothing. I also get the feeling he’s afraid to completely commit. Like, he has a wall up around his heart and is afraid to fully give it to anyone. The only two people he ever loved left him tragically. A part of me gets that, but the other part of me wants to shake him a little bit and tell him to trust in us. But even though he’s been here for years, everything is still so new for him. Heck, us being together is so new.”

They both nodded.

“He doesn’t want to give me his heart for fear it will get broken, but he *has* already made it clear that he wants to be exclusive. Which reminds me of another thing that sort of hurt—when we were together, he said the next time a man’s lips touched me, he wanted me to feel *him*. It’s like he’s already planning for us to be over before we’ve barely begun.”

Before Rose and Kipton could respond, the waitress brought over our pizza and plates. Once she was out of earshot, Rose spoke.

“That has to be hard for him. And what I mean by that is, his whole life, he’s essentially been on his own. Though I know since he’s been working for Tanner and Timberlynn, he’s been pulled in and treated like one of the family.”

I nodded as I held my plate up for Kipton to put a slice of pizza on it. “He has. He comes to dinner a lot, and my mom and dad adore him. So does Nathan. When he came to dinner the other night, my father even teased him about us being together, in a weird, threatening kind of way.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Those Shaw men. Poor Bryson is scared to death of my father, and I don’t know why. He’s a pussy cat, but all he has to say is one thing to Bryson about hurting me, and my husband is cowering in a corner with his knees to his chest, rocking.”

Kipton laughed. “My father was the same way with any guy I dated. I think it has to be hard on fathers to see their daughters fall in love with a man they know is going to steal her away from him.”

“I totally get that. But what do I do about Maverick preparing for the end before we’ve even begun? You can tell that he’s not convinced yet that he’s family...and I don’t know how to make him understand that.”

Rose and Kipton exchanged a glance, then focused on me.

“I’m not one to give advice on this. I pushed Bryson away for fear of being hurt myself, so I can’t offer much.”

Kipton set her slice of pizza down. “Where do you see things going? I know it’s in the early days still.”

I leaned back in the chair and thought for a moment. It felt like too important of a question to simply pop off an answer.

“When I’m with Maverick, I feel...content. I’m happy. I woke up this morning and thought to myself that I wished I could have rolled over and seen his smile first thing. Yes, the sex is off-the-charts amazing, but I truly enjoy just spending time with him. And maybe it’s too fast, and maybe I’m just thrown off by these heavy feelings I’m having for him, but I think...no, I *know*, I could fall so head over heels in love with him. And it’s not the same kind of love I thought I felt for Ben. It feels carnal. Deeper and more powerful. The idea of not looking into his eyes every day for the rest of my life makes me feel sad.”

Rose and Kipton exchanged a knowing look.

“I don’t know how to tell you this, Lil, but you’ve *already* fallen in love with him.”

Kipton nodded. “I agree with Rose. You’ve already jumped, my friend. So might as well enjoy the fall.”

Sighing, I whispered, “I think you’re both right.”

## Chapter Fourteen

### MAVERICK

“Maverick, we can’t sit in your truck all night, you know. We have to go in. My entire family is probably staring out the windows, wondering why we’ve been sitting here for so long. My father probably thinks we’re making out.”

I snapped my head to glance at Lily with what I was sure was a look of terror.

Lily laughed and shook her head as she took my hand in hers. “It’s just family game night. You’ve gotten out of going before because my parents let it slide that you declined every invitation, but there’s no turning back now that we’re together. It’s almost like a requirement that you must fulfill. And since we’ve started dating you’ve still somehow managed to get out of game night.”

“It was a busy July,” I said as I looked past her to Brock and Lincoln’s house. “This is big, Lil. It’s your entire family, and I’m just a horse trainer who works on the ranch.”

She squeezed my hand. “You are not, Maverick. You’re my boyfriend, and you mean more to us than that. Do you honestly think my family views all the people who work on the ranch that way?”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. But I told you, you could do so much better.”

“In whose eyes? Not in mine. Not in my parents’, and certainly not in Nathan’s. My brother looks up to you, Maverick, like an older brother. Please don’t cheapen how my family feels about you...or how *I* feel about you. Or your value and worth to any of us.”

I scrubbed my hand down my face. “I’m sorry, old habits and all.”

She leaned over and gently kissed me. “Just think, after this, we can go back to your place. You have tomorrow off, right?”

“I do,” I said with a small grin.

“How does a sleepover sound?”

Desire swept over me. “A sleepover sounds like an amazing idea.”

“I thought you’d like that. I was also thinking maybe you could take a few days off in August. We could go to Glacier National Park. Now that you have someone to go with you... no more alone time for you, babe.”

I cupped her face in my hands. “I would love to do that. With you. I’ll talk to Tanner about it.”

It was my turn to kiss her. It wasn’t a fast peck on the lips, but a deep kiss. The kind that said I wanted to drag her into the backseat and have my way with her. Lily moaned as our tongues danced.

The knock on the truck window had Lily letting out a squeal of surprise and me jerking away. When I looked up and saw Nathan standing there with a grossed-out look on his face, I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Ready to make your first official appearance as a couple?” he shouted through the glass and the sound of my truck engine.

I nodded and turned off the truck. “Wait right there, Lil. I’ll get the door for you.”

Before I was even out of the truck, Nathan had the door open for Lily already and had helped her climb out. I had to hand it to Tanner, he was raising a good one.

When I walked over to Lily, she held out her hand for me to take. We laced our fingers together and started toward the house.

“Don’t worry, dude. You’re family,” Nathan said as he gave me a hard slap on the back. A little too hard. I glanced over at him and raised a brow.

“I’ve been dying to do that. I see my dad do it to you all the time.”



I said to Lily, “Do you believe this kid?”

She grinned but kept her lips pressed tightly shut.

Before we even got to the top of the porch steps, the door flew open and Lincoln appeared. “Thank God. We need someone to break a vote.”

She reached for my hand and tugged me into the house. Lily giggled but trailed behind us.

“We have a tie breaker!” Lincoln announced as we walked into a large family room. I knew the Shaw clan was a big one, but seeing them all in one place was downright daunting. My eyes scanned the room, taking in everyone. I swallowed the lump in my throat when I noticed they were all staring at me.

“It’s about damn time you got here, you two.”

Tanner’s voice from my right caused me to glance at him. He winked, and a part of me relaxed. A small part. Since I began dating Lily, I’d already learned that it was best I keep my guard up. We’d gotten caught one too many times kissing when her dad seemed to suddenly appear out of thin air.

Timberlynn laughed and said, “Maverick, we need to have you be the tie breaker for the game for tonight.”

“Me?”

“Yep. You’re unbiased and have no clue how these cutthroats all play, so you can pick which game we are going to play without prejudice.

“Cutthroats?” I asked, not failing to notice how my voice quivered slightly.

Lily reached for my hand once again. “Did I fail to mention how some family members take game night pretty seriously?”

I looked down at her. “Yes, you *did* fail to mention that.”

Nathan laughed. “If you survive tonight, Mav, you’ll survive anything with this family.”

Exhaling, I sent up a prayer that I picked the right game.

Lincoln pointed to a stack of Monopoly games. “Okay, we have a few different versions of Monopoly.”

Lily squeezed my hand...tightly.

“Then we have Pictionary. Which will it be?”

I glanced around the room, and the first person I saw was Timberlynn mouthing *not Monopoly*. I nearly laughed.

Clearing my throat, I said, “How about Pictionary?”

Half the room erupted into cheers, the other let out groans of displeasure.

Lily leaned up and softly said, “Don’t pick Monopoly. Ever.”



After much debate, it was decided Pictionary would be played with two groups. The women against the men.

Three hours later, it was tied, and I somehow found myself being the tie breaker once again. It was a sudden-death round and whoever guessed first would win.

“Get on up there, Maverick,” Tanner stated as he gave me a light push. “Remember, everything’s riding on this.”

I looked at him. “And by *everything*, what do you mean?”

He glanced at Lily, then back to me. “Do you like dating my daughter?”

“Um...of course, I do.”

“And you like working on the ranch?”

I nodded.

“Like I said...*everything* is riding on this. Don’t let the men down.”

Making the mistake of thinking he was kidding, I laughed. When he lifted one single brow, I immediately stopped.

“Wait. Are you seriously saying if the men don’t win, I’m going to lose my job?”

“And the girl. Don’t forget he mentioned Lily,” Ty Jr. said as he appeared out of nowhere on the other side of me.

I opened my mouth and promptly shut it.

Tanner clapped me on the back. “Get those fingers warmed up, son.”

“You’re up, Maverick!” Brock called out as he stood next to the easel that held the large pad everyone was drawing on.

Walking over, I flipped it to a fresh page as Brock handed me the marker.

“Ready for your word?” Lincoln asked, holding the hat that had folded pieces of paper inside, each with a word.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I replied with a forced smile.

She held it out, so I reached in and pulled out a piece of paper. I stared down at it apparently too long, because someone from the men’s side shouted, “It won’t draw itself, cowboy!”

I drew in a deep breath and turned to the paper. How in the hell was I supposed to draw trick-or-treat?

Rubbing the back of my neck, I looked out at the large group. Lily smiled at me, and I couldn’t help but grin back at her.

“Stop making eyes with my kid and draw, man!” Tanner shouted.

I cleared my throat. “It’s an activity.”

Tanner and Ty Jr. both rubbed their hands together as Hunter moved down to the front.

Rose pushed Bryson out of the way and yelled, “Come on, girls! Let’s kick some ass!”

“Don’t let us down, Maverick,” Brock hollered as he folded his arms over his impressively wide chest.

“Right,” I mumbled.

Turning to the paper, I fought to keep my hands from shaking. How in the hell had I ended up being the person to

draw the tiebreaker? When I glanced over my shoulder at Tanner, I saw the smirk. I raised a brow, and he did the same.

That bastard. He set me up.

*You want to play, old man? Let's play.*

I focused back on the paper and started to draw. First, I drew a little girl dressed up like a princess.

“A princess!” someone shouted.

“It’s an activity, Kipton!” Rose stated.

“Oh, right.”

“That’s called pregnancy brain, sweetheart,” Lincoln said with a smile directed at her daughter-in-law.

Kipton and Hunter had shared with the entire family that they were expecting a baby not long after she had told Lily and Rose at one of their lunches. According to Lily, Brock and Lincoln were beyond happy. The entire family was.

I drew another kid and attempted to put a mask on them.

“Dressing up?” Tanner shouted. I pointed to him and nodded.

I added a house and then a sidewalk, but it wasn’t until I drew a jack-o-lantern that Hunter jumped up and started shouting.

“Trick-or-treat! It’s trick-or-treat!”

I turned and smiled as I pointed to him. “That’s right.”

Lily jumped up and threw herself into my arms. I barely had time to catch her. Laughing, she said, “You did it!”

Hugging her, I said, “You lost.”

When she looked at me, her eyes sparkled with delight. “Oh, on the contrary, Mr. Prescott. I’m the luckiest woman in the room.”

I wanted to kiss her, but knowing her father was watching, I decided against it and settled for another hug.

Tanner walked over and I put Lily down.

“Your job is safe.”

“What?” Lily asked. “What does *that* mean?”

Tanner laughed. “Nothing, sweetheart. I was kidding and told Maverick if we didn’t win, he’d lose his job *and* you.”

Lily folded her arms across her chest. “Dad, that isn’t funny. If you can’t be nice to Maverick, he won’t come to any more family game nights.”

Oh man. Could it be that easy? Could I just say no and avoid this craziness in the future?

Tanner glanced at me as if he knew where my thoughts had gone. “Oh no, once you’re in, you’re in. Family game night isn’t something you just walk away from. Think of it like the mafia, there’s only one way out.”

Lily laughed, as did I.

“I had fun tonight.”

Tanner reached out a hand. “You know it’s all in good fun, Maverick.”

I shook his hand, but wasn’t about to say I didn’t believe a damn word coming out of his mouth.

After saying goodnight to everyone and having Lincoln send us off with leftovers, Lily and I headed back to my place on the ranch.

The moment the door shut, I pulled Lily to me and kissed her. She dropped the bag of leftovers and pushed her hands in my hair, pulling me closer and deepening the kiss.

“Maverick,” she whispered as I cupped her breasts and rubbed her nipples.

I peppered kisses down her neck as I said, “All I could think about all evening was our sleepover.”

She moaned and smoothed her hand down my chest. “Me too. Do you have any idea how sexy you are with a marker in your hand, drawing a princess?”

I tossed my head back and laughed.

“By the way, you can draw really good.”

“You think?”

“Did you see the way Hunter tried to draw a frog? Everyone kept saying it was an angel.”

That caused me to crack up again.

“You survived the first of what I hope is many game nights.”

“I had no idea your family was so...”

“Competitive? Oh yes. The guys all played Monopoly one time for two weeks straight, during Christmas break. They wouldn’t leave Uncle Brock and Lincoln’s house. They played for hours at a time and slept in the family room so they could make sure no one touched the board.”

“Holy shit. No wonder your mom didn’t want to play.”

Lily picked up the leftovers and walked into the kitchen to put them away. She turned back to face me, and when she bit into her lower lip, I had to fight the urge to walk over and strip her free of her clothes.

“Bradly and Blayze are the worst when it comes to cleaning everyone out, though. They get fierce.”

“Bradly? Quiet Bradly?”

“Oh, don’t let the shyness fool you with that one. He’s ruthless. Have you ever seen him bull ride?”

I thought about it for a moment. “You know, I haven’t.”

She smiled. “I’ve heard my father say more than once that Bradly is a better bull rider than Brock, Ty, and Dirk combined. He’s tough as nails.”

“I’ve heard that about him.”

“One time he broke his arm, and he was so close to being in first place and winning half-a-million dollars that he had them wrap it up and he switched hands and rode with this left.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. When he wants something, he fights like hell for it.”

“And being the champion of Monopoly is no exception, huh?”

Lily giggled. “No exception.”

I framed her face in my hands, and when she looked up at me with those eyes of hers, I felt my heart trip over itself.

“What are you thinking about right this second?” I asked.

Closing her eyes for a moment, she opened them again and our gaze caught once. “I’m thinking about how wonderful it’s going to be to wake up tomorrow in your arms.”

I raised my brows in surprise. “Really?”

“Really-really. What are *you* thinking about?”

“Mmm, that’s easy. I’m thinking you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

Reaching up onto her toes, she kissed me softly on the lips. “Do you know what I want?”

“I hope it’s this,” I said, moving her hand down to feel the bulge in my pants.

She smirked. “Yes, I for sure want that. But I’d love to go for a ride in the morning before it gets too hot. If you’re in the mood for riding. It’s been a crazy-hot July, and August is starting just as bad.”

“I’d love to do that.”

Placing her hand over my bulge once again, she gave me a wickedly sexy grin. “Right now, I want *this*.”

I picked her up and tossed her over my shoulder and she let out a yelp of surprise. “That I can give you right now.”

Once we got to the bedroom, we slowly undressed one another, neither in a rush. Lily lay on the bed, and I took my time running my hands and lips over her body. Moving down toward heaven in a slow progression. When she couldn’t take

it any longer, she reached down and unsuccessfully tried to pull me up.

“Please, Maverick. I want you so badly.”

“I want you, too, baby. All the damn time. I can’t get enough of you.”

When I blew on her clit, she arched her back and moaned.

“Please!”

Giving her what she wanted, I watched her wind up, then fall over the edge. The sound of my name falling off her lips nearly had me coming. As I slowly kissed my way up her body, she spread her legs wider for me.

Lacing my fingers with hers, I pinned her hands over her head as I slowly pushed inside her.

“Oh...oh, Maverick!”

I nuzzled my face in her neck and circled my hips. The words were on the tip of my tongue, and I wanted desperately to say them, but I couldn’t make them come. So I showed her instead, making love to her slowly and passionately.

She wrapped her legs around me and dug her heels into my back. “Don’t stop, it feels so good.”

Kissing along her jaw, I moved my mouth to her ear and whispered, “Tesoro.”

Opening her eyes, she whispered, “Treasure.”

“That’s what you are to me, Lily. My treasure.”

Tears welled in her eyes, and I knew what she was about to say before she spoke the words.

“I’m falling in love with you, Maverick.”

I stilled, and she tugged her hands free and cupped my face. “You don’t have to say it back. But I need you to know that I’m falling. I might have *already* fallen.”

“Lily...” I whispered, before I crashed my mouth to hers.

She moved her hips faster as she dragged her mouth from mine and demanded, “Faster. Harder!”



The battle to go slow was lost at those two words. I closed my eyes and drowned myself in the one woman I knew with all my heart that I loved more than life itself.

# Chapter Fifteen

## LILY

I lay in the dark up against Maverick's body and listened to his deep, slow breathing. I'd dozed off to sleep after we made love, only to be woken up around four in the morning to Maverick moving his mouth over my body. It had been my turn to take charge, and I pushed him onto his back and climbed on top. It hadn't taken long for me to come, and for Maverick to fall right after me.

Now I was snuggled up next to him in a spooning position, his arm holding onto me as if I might flee in the night.

I sighed and thought about earlier, when I'd told him I was falling in love with him.

I'd seen it in his eyes. He loved me, too, but he couldn't say it. It broke my heart knowing that he was scared to trust me with his love. But I couldn't blame him. He'd been alone his entire life, abandoned by the one person who should have loved and protected him. My mind wondered what Maverick's mother was like. Had she been young and scared? Was she in an abusive relationship, or had she simply not wanted a child? I wanted answers, but it wasn't my place to look for them.

Maverick let out a soft moan, and I snuggled in closer. I could feel the weight of my tired eyes, and before they closed, I racked my brain to find a way to prove to Maverick that he could trust his heart to me. That I'd protect him and it with everything I had. That I'd never leave him, that my family was his family. So much I wanted to give him.

Thinking of our future together, I fell into a deep sleep—until I heard something that sounded like a little boy crying out.

I flew up in bed. For a moment, I was disoriented as I looked around the room. Then to Maverick thrashing next to me in the bed.

“No! No! No, don’t leave. Please don’t leave me!”  
Maverick called out in an almost childlike voice.

My hand flew up to my mouth to hold back the instant sob that wanted to slip free.

“No!” he yelled. “I don’t want to go! Please, don’t make me. Please!”

I crawled out of the bed and quickly searched for something to put on. Finding Maverick’s T-shirt, I slipped it on and rushed around to his side of the bed. His face was pulled into the saddest frown I’d ever seen, and I instantly started to cry.

“Oh God,” I whispered. I wasn’t sure if I should wake him or not.

“They left me. They left me. They left me!”

He repeated it over and over, and I wanted to cover my ears to keep from hearing the utter devastation in his voice.

By now, he was in the middle of the bed. He wasn’t thrashing around quite as much but was still whimpering like a small boy. I crawled into the bed and put my leg and arm over him.

He instantly stopped moving.

“I’m here, Maverick. Shhh, I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere. I swear to you.”

“Mommy...?”

I squeezed my eyes shut and forced myself not to cry harder. “I’m here, baby. I’m here.”

It was the only thing I knew to say. When I opened my eyes and looked at him, I placed my hand over his heart and found it beating like a hummingbird’s wings.

“I love you, Maverick. I’m here, and I love you.”

His body instantly relaxed, as did his face.

I kissed him gently and said again, “I love you, Maverick.”

A deep exhale came from his lips, and I could feel his heartbeat slowing to a more regular rhythm.

“I’ll never leave you. I swear to you, Maverick. I will never leave.”

“Lily,” he whispered.

He was still asleep, that much I could tell, but he knew it was me talking to him.

“I’m right here.”

“Lily...I love you.”

I stilled for what felt like a lifetime. Slowly lifting my head, I studied him. His breathing was deep and he was for sure asleep.

I fought the urge to shake him and demand he tell me that again while he was awake. Instead, I nestled myself against him and held him until I finally drifted back to sleep.



The smell of bacon and coffee had me opening my eyes and stretching. It only took me half a second to remember where I was.

Maverick’s bed.

The memory of earlier this morning came back in a whoosh of emotions. Tears welled up in my eyes, and I had to squeeze the lids shut to keep them from falling. I was still dressed in Maverick’s T-shirt that I’d put on last night.

Pushing the sheet off, I swung my legs around and slipped out of bed. Deciding to keep only the shirt on, I made my way out of the bedroom. I smiled when I heard Taylor Swift softly singing “Maroon” in the background.

When I walked into the kitchen area, I leaned against the island and watched as he cooked the bacon. Uncracked eggs sat off to the side, as well as a few pieces of bread stuck in the toaster, ready to be pushed down.

“That smells good.”

Maverick glanced over his shoulder, and when he saw me, he smiled that smile that made my heart tumble around in my chest. From where I stood, I could practically see the sparkle in his eyes.

“Thought we could get a good breakfast in before we went riding.”

I pushed off the island and made my way to him. “Scrambled eggs?”

“If that’s what you want.”

“Do you have any mushrooms?”

“I do.”

I turned to the fridge and opened it. I spied bell peppers and an onion as well. “Do you mind if I sauté up some stuff for the eggs?”

He looked at what I’d pulled out and said, “That sounds good. Olive oil is right there.”

I spun the lazy Susan filled with spices and stopped at the bottle of olive oil. “You must like to cook.”

“I do,” he repeated with a lazy smile. “Do you?”

Nodding, I said, “Yep. I used to watch my grandmother and my mom and aunts all in the kitchen together, when they were baking or cooking for a holiday or some special occasion. I loved watching how they all interacted with one another like a well-run machine. Each one having their own thing to make or do. They never ran into one another or spilled anything. Never burned anything, or at least I don’t think they did. The end result was always the most delicious food.

“When I was old enough to join in, they would take turns teaching Morgan, Rose, me, and then Avery all the secret family recipes. Rose always liked to sit off to the side and draw the food, though. She never was one for getting in and preparing it.” I smiled at the memories.

“It must have been great growing up with a big family like that. You all seem more like brothers and sisters than you do cousins.”

Turning to look at him, I nodded and softly said, “Yeah, we are.”

Maverick focused on flipping the bacon. “There’s another pan in that cabinet in front of you if you want to get the veggies going.”

Without a word, I got a pan out, moved to his other side, and turned on one of the burners. I set the pan on it and asked for a cutting board. As I worked on cutting veggies, I decided to ask Maverick some questions.

“Do you ever have nightmares?”

I could feel his eyes on me. “No. Do you?”

Shrugging, I said, “I’m not sure.”

“Since I’ve never really had anyone sleep with me before...I guess I’m not sure either.”

I clenched my jaw tightly, conflicted about whether I should mention his nightmare last night.

“Want me to turn the gas on so the pan can heat up?”

What I needed to do was talk to my mother and father. They’d have advice on the best way for me to handle what had happened last night.

Maverick’s hand waved in front of me. “Earth to Lily?”

I let out a nervous laugh. “Sorry, I was daydreaming.”

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me back against him. “About what?”

“You,” I said as I twisted my body some to look at him. It wasn’t a lie. I *had* been thinking about him.

“Good things?”

“The best kinds of things.”

“Was it maybe about me fucking you with my mouth while you lay on the island?”

An instant rush of wetness hit between my legs, and I had to squeeze them together.

“No, but now that’s *all* I’m going to be thinking about.”

He turned me to face him. With a wicked smile, he moved the cutting board and veggies to the side, then lifted me up. I let out a yelp as the cold stone countertop hit my bare skin.

Maverick lifted a brow. “No panties, huh?”

I felt my cheeks heat, along with my entire body.

He spread my legs and moaned as he took me in. “I can see how wet you are for me, Lil.”

“Always,” I gasped, my breathing suddenly coming faster and heavier.

He dropped down and lifted both legs over his shoulders. The moment his tongue slipped inside me, I cried out. My hands went to his hair, where I laced my fingers and dug in, pulling him closer. I shamelessly rocked against his mouth as my climax started to grow.

“Maverick. Oh...oh yes. Yes...that feels...so...I’m going to come!”

I wasn’t sure what he did. Maybe he added his fingers, or maybe he tilted my bottom up. Whatever it was, my orgasm slammed into me and I clutched him closer still as I came so hard, I swore I saw stars.

My entire body trembled. Right when I was coming down, he flicked my clit with his tongue, then covered it with his mouth.

“I can’t!” I screamed.

He looked up at me. “You can.”

Thrashing my hips, I dropped my hands to the island to hold on. He grabbed my thighs, keeping me still, and pulled out another orgasm. Hell, it might have been the same damn one, I wasn’t sure. All I knew was that I could hardly breathe when he finally removed his mouth.

“Jesus,” I gasped as I felt myself returning to my body.

He lifted me, and I went slack in his arms. Walking over to the wall in the living room, he pushed me against it, then

lowered me onto him. The way he filled me so completely had me sighing with pleasure and a feeling of utter bliss.

“Maverick,” I whispered, my mouth finding his in a searing kiss, my arms and legs wrapping around him. Then he started to move. Fast and hard as I met him thrust for thrust.

Beads of sweat appeared on both of us as we moved like we couldn't get enough of one another. It was raw and carnal and so damn hot.

I could feel my body begin to tighten around him. Grabbing his face with my hand, I cried out, “I'm coming!”

He groaned as he thrust in hard and fast, then buried his face in my neck and cried out, “Lily! Oh God, Lily...”

I wasn't sure how it kept getting better. One minute he was making love to me, the next he was fucking me like it was our last time. I loved every second of it.

He gently pulled me off him and helped me stand. My legs felt weak, and I started to slide down the wall, but Maverick caught me, sitting on the couch and pulling me onto his lap.

My head dropped against his chest as we fought to steady our breaths.

“Did you turn off the pans?” I asked.

He chuckled. “I did.”

I ran my finger lazily over his chest. “Every time we're together, I swear it gets better and better. And that was just plain hot as hell.”

He kissed along my jawline. “I thought so too.”

I lifted my head and looked into his eyes. “Maverick?”

Pushing a piece of hair behind my ear, he smiled and asked, “Lily?”

I let out a small laugh. “How about we just eat a couple of protein bars and go take a shower before we go riding?”

He raised his brows. “A shower together? What about my bacon I slaved over and the veggies you cut up?”



“I promise I’ll make up for them in the shower.”

“Is that so? And exactly *how* do you plan on making up for them?”

Crawling off his lap, I stood. Pulling his T-shirt over my head, I dropped it to the floor. “You still haven’t let me make you come with my mouth, and I really want to do that.”

His eyes turned dark gray as he stood. “What bacon?”

When he grabbed me and threw me over his shoulder, I let out a shriek of delight. With a slap on my ass, he headed to the shower, where I made good on my promise.

# Chapter Sixteen

## LILY

Maverick and I rode in comfortable silence as we took the trail that led to one of my favorite places on the property. It was a spot where you could look over the entire ranch, and a special place to so many of my family members.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this way, and I thought I’d ridden all these trails,” Maverick said from behind me.

We were closer to my grandparents’ house and Uncle Brock and Aunt Lincoln’s place. The trail led up into the foothills, and at the very top was the highest point on Shaw Ranch.

Slipping off my horse, I said, “We can get off here and walk the rest of the way up.”

Maverick and I let Juniper and Firefly graze as we walked the rest of the trail. Once we got to the top, I drew in a long, deep breath.

“Wow, this is beautiful,” Maverick said as he looked around. “You can see so much of the Bitterroot Mountain range up here.”

Smiling, I replied, “I know. It’s even more beautiful in the fall and at the beginning of winter. It’s one of my favorite places to come.”

“I see why.”

I looked out over the green pastures dotted with cattle. Off in the distance, I could see some of the ranch horses grazing.

“The lake that butts up against the mountains is beautiful. The reflection of the clouds and mountain is stunning.”

“Rose and Aunt Kaylee came up here once and painted it. We never have game night at Ty and Kaylee’s place because it’s the smallest. They live in the original ranch house, but someday, I’ll take you over there to see the painting Kaylee did. It’s beautiful.”

Maverick reached for my hand and held it while we took in the view. “There’s a copy of a painting that your parents have in their house. I was looking at it once, and Timberlynn told me it was a print of a painting Kaylee had done.”

“The four brothers?”

“Yeah. I recognized Brock, Ty Jr., and Tanner. Who’s the fourth son?”

“It’s Uncle Beck. He was in the Marine Corps, and he only had a few weeks left before he was due to get out and come back home. But then he was killed.”

“Damn, I’m so sorry.”

“I am too. Of course, I didn’t know him, none of us did except for Blayze, and I’m not even sure how much *he* remembers of him. Grams took it really hard. My mother told me the family never really talked about Beck until Aunt Lincoln moved here. Then Grams and my uncles started to talk about him more and more. I can still see the sadness on my grandparents’ faces when someone mentions his name, though.”

“He wasn’t married or had kids?”

Drawing in a breath, I let it out slowly. “No, never married and didn’t have kids. It’s sad because all that’s left of him is memories. It breaks my heart for my grams and gramps.”

Maverick looked out over the ranch, looking deep in thought.

“Do you ever wonder about your mom or dad?”

He shook his head. “Not at all. I figured if they didn’t care about me and gave me up, why would I want to care about who they were?”

“Have you ever thought about doing the Ancestry thing? Maybe you have siblings out there.”

Maverick turned and cupped my face in his hands. “Where is this coming from, Lil?”

Shrugging, I said, “I don’t know. I was curious if you ever wish you had...” My words trailed off.

“A family? I used to when I was younger. When I kept getting disappointed, I stopped wishing for it and realized it would only ever be me looking out for myself. I stopped letting myself believe in a family.”

“It’s not that way now, you know. You have me and my parents. Nathan and the entire Shaw family.”

He smiled and kissed me on the forehead. “We should probably get going. Looks like a storm is coming.”

Glancing west, I saw the clouds turning darker. We needed the rain. June and July had been dry months with hardly any precipitation.

“We should have enough time to get back and take care of the horses before it hits.”

We walked back down the trail in comfortable silence to find the horses where we’d left them. The ride back to my parents’ part of the ranch was filled with Maverick talking about ranch things and the horses we were training. By the time we’d gotten back, then cleaned up and fed the horses and let them out to pasture, the storm was bearing down on us.

As I was about to suggest heading back to his cabin, Blayze called out Maverick’s name. “Maverick, hey, I hate to do this, but we could use your help. Can we talk for a second?”

“Yeah, sure,” Maverick said as he made his way over to Blayze, who was standing at his truck with Decker and Hank, parked outside the barn. I could see someone else was in the truck, as well. The conversation looked intense, and Maverick glanced briefly at me before he refocused on Blayze. With a nod of his head, he jogged back over to me.

“Some cattle got out, and they need all the help they can get.”

Something wasn’t right. Maverick looked too uneasy over a few stray cattle. “Alright. Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. I promise.”

“Then why does it feel like you’re keeping something from me?”

Maverick smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Be careful with this storm coming in.” The winds had picked up and were blowing hard ahead of the storm.

“Always.”

Pulling me close, his hand went around my neck as he drew my mouth to his. The kiss was hot and passionate... almost desperate.

The kind of kiss you give someone when you aren’t planning on seeing them for a while. It made my chest tighten with worry.

When he broke the kiss, we were both panting. “Goodness, what was that for?”

He winked. “A little preview of when I get back. Will you be at my place, or are you heading home?”

“I think I’ll head home. Text me when you get back, and I’ll come over.”

Maverick nodded, then kissed me on the forehead before he turned and jogged over to where Blayze, Decker, and Hank waited. How many cattle had gotten out that they needed so many people?

I watched as Blayze drove off. Once they were out of sight, I turned on my heels and headed straight to the house to talk to Mom and Dad.

Halfway there, I smelled something acrid and stopped. I slowly turned around—and that was when I saw smoke.

It didn’t appear to be close by, but I’d seen enough wildfires to know that could change at any moment.



The smell of freshly baked bread hit me the moment I stepped through the front door. I made my way to the kitchen to find my mother and father both in there. Dad stared at something on his phone, a frown on his face.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

He looked up and forced a smile, but I could see something was wrong. It was the same smile Maverick had given me. Mom turned, then flashed me a bright smile.

“I was just making some bread for dinner tonight. Will you and Maverick be joining us?”

“What are you making?”

“Lasagna.”

I rubbed my stomach with my hand. “Then yes, we’ll for sure be joining you. Do you want me to make a salad so it’s ready for later?”

“Oh, that would be great, Lily. Thank you, honey.”

As I walked to the refrigerator, my father was still looking at his phone. He glanced up and saw me watching him. “How was the ride?”

“It was good. I took Maverick up to the point. He loved it, of course. We saw the storm coming and decided to head back. I’m surprised we didn’t see the smoke from up there.”

“Smoke?” Mom asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, I saw it right after Blayze showed up and asked Maverick to help with some cattle that got out or something?”

Dad nodded and slipped his phone into his back pocket. Turning to my mother, he said, “I need to go help with a situation over on the east side of the ranch.”

The east side of the ranch is where I’d seen the smoke.

Mom instantly turned and gave him a concerned look. “What’s going on?”

Dad looked at me, then back to her. “Cattle got out.”

Grabbing a towel, Mom quickly wiped her hands, then dropped it back on the counter and folded her arms over her chest. “Tanner Shaw, I’ve been married to you long enough to know that you don’t rush out to help with loose livestock. There are plenty of ranch hands for that. So what’s going on? Lily mentioned seeing smoke.”

He rubbed the back of his neck and exhaled. “There’s a fire making its way toward the ranch.”

“What?!” my mother and I said at the same time.

Dad held up his hands. “It’s heading toward the ranch on the east side and is on a direct path to Mom and Dad’s place.”

“Oh my God!” I said. “Are they out of the house?”

“Lincoln and Brock got them out, but they’re sending as many people as they can over there to keep the fire from spreading onto the ranch.”

“Where are *you* going?” Mom asked.

“I can’t sit here and do nothing, Timberlynn. I have to go and help. Ty is already there with Josh. Dirk is on his way with Bradley, who just got to town.”

“Nathan?” my mother whispered.

Right at that moment, my younger brother walked into the kitchen. “I’m ready to go help with the cattle, Dad.”

My father closed his eyes on a sigh.

“You’re taking *Nathan* to fight a fire? Did he even *know* there was a fire?”

“You told her?” Nathan asked, frowning.

I spun and looked at my brother. “You knew?”

“We didn’t want to worry Mom.”

It was then that I realized why Maverick had been acting so strange. My hand flew up to my mouth. “Oh my God, Maverick—”

“Will be fine,” Dad interrupted as he walked over to me and took hold of my arms. “Hopefully, this incoming rain will

help things out.”

“But the wind! Dad, it’s so windy outside right now, and that’ll make it spread faster.”

My mother turned off the oven. “I’m going to Brock and Lincoln’s to be with Stella.”

I nodded. “I’m going with you.”

“Okay,” Dad said. “If you hurry, you can ride with us. Nathan and I need to get going.”

“You go on ahead. Lily and I will go straight to Brock and Lincoln’s place.”

Walking over to my mother, Dad kissed her. “Be careful, and do me a favor?”

She rested her hand on his chest. “Of course.”

“Don’t let my dad try to go out and help.”

With a concerned look on her face, my mother nodded. “We won’t. Go. Lily and I will be fine.”

Once my father and brother were gone, I turned to my mother. She smiled at me and straightened, standing tall. “We might be there for a while, so pack a bag for overnight.”

“Overnight?” I asked.

“The last fire took them two days of fighting it to keep it off the ranch.”

My knees felt weak, and I reached for the counter to balance myself. Everyone I loved was out there fighting this thing.

“Maverick,” I whispered, fighting to hold back tears.

“Hey, hey—look at me.” Mom rushed over and tilted my chin to meet her gaze. “They’re all going to be okay.”

“What if he’s never done anything like this before? What if he doesn’t know what to do?”

She took hold of my shoulders. “Lily, take a deep breath. Maverick has worked on plenty of ranches, and I’m sure he’s had to deal with a wildfire before. The key is to stay calm and



be ready if we're needed. Right now, Lincoln needs us to help her with your grandparents. Go pack a bag with anything you might need in case we have to stay a night or two."

I nodded. "Okay. Right."

Without another word, I rushed up the steps and to my room. Once inside, I pulled out my phone and sent Maverick a quick text.

*Me: My father is on his way to help with the fire.*

I rushed and grabbed an overnight bag and filled it with clothes. Some of my bathroom necessities were at Maverick's place, but I dug through the drawers and found an extra toothbrush, some toothpaste, and deodorant. I tossed in a few hair ties and an extra phone charger. I was sure Lincoln had plenty, but I'd rather be safe than sorry.

As I zipped up the bag, my phone beeped with a text alert.

*Maverick: I figured your dad would tell you. Please don't be mad at me. I didn't want to scare you. I'll be fine. I've done this before on a ranch in Utah. Promise me you won't worry.*

I scoffed.

*Me: I can't make that promise. Be careful, Mav.*

I wanted to tell him I loved him, but didn't want to pressure him into returning the sentiment.

*Maverick: I will. Talk soon.*

The strangest sensation swept over me, and I had to rub at my chest to ease the sudden anxiety. Grabbing the bag, I quickly made my way back downstairs to meet up with Mom. The drive to Brock and Lincoln's house was quiet as we were both lost in our own thoughts.

Halfway there, I looked over at my mother. "I need to get your advice on something."

"Of course."

I looked down at my hands that I was twisting into knots. "Last night, Maverick had a nightmare. It was heartbreaking, Mom. He cried out and sounded like a little boy, begging someone not to leave him. Then, he cried out he didn't want to

go, like someone was making him leave someone or some place. And then..."

I had to fight to keep the tears at bay. The memory of last night still felt so raw.

"Then what?" she softly asked as she reached for my hand.

"He said 'they left me.' I think he was talking about this young couple, Mindy and Justin, whom he had lived with for a bit. They were going to adopt him. They died in a car accident the very day the adoption was supposed to go through."

She gasped. "That is so sad. Poor Maverick!"

"I know. It's really sad. But when I asked him if he had nightmares, he told me he didn't. Do you think it's possible he doesn't remember having them?"

Mom looked at me quickly. Her face wore a concerned expression. "I do think it's possible. Has he ever spoken to anyone about his childhood?"

"You mean like a therapist?"

"Yes."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I'm not sure he would talk to anyone now. And I don't want to push him. But, because of his past and the abandonment issues I think he has, I don't know if he'll ever fully allow himself to commit to me. I mean, he wants to be exclusive, of course, but I think he's afraid to admit there could be a future for us. I told him I loved him, and he kissed me. That kiss said he loved me, too, but he hasn't said it out loud."

Mom smiled at me. "I see by the way he looks at you that he loves you, Lily. And your father has seen it for months now."

"What?" I asked, completely shocked by her statement.

"Your dad said the moment Maverick first saw you, he was pretty sure he fell in love with you on the spot. And since you've moved back home, he's more sure than ever."

My hand came up to my mouth, and I choked back a sob. “Mom!”

“I know, sweetheart. But I can see where the fear for Maverick is coming from. Have you told him you want a future with him?”

I chewed nervously on my lower lip. “Yes. His eyes lit up, so I know he wants that too.”

“What if you suggested he go speak with a counselor at Brock’s community center?”

I wrung my hands together. “I’ve thought of that, but I don’t want to push him. Or make him think something’s wrong.”

“Why would he think that?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I only want him to be happy. I mentioned looking into ancestry sites to see if he has any siblings, and he has no desire to do that.”

“If he doesn’t want to look up family, Lily, then he has the right to refuse, and you have to respect that.”

“I know. I know. And I will.”

Mom got quiet and looked at me. “I’m going to ask a random question.”

Drawing my brows in, I replied, “Okay.”

“If Ben showed up on your doorstep and said he changed his mind, that he realized he loved you...what would you do?”

Before I could answer, my phone rang, causing me to let out a small shriek. Mom did as well. We both laughed—until I looked to see who was calling.

I gaped at my mother. “Holy shit. It’s Ben.”

## Chapter Seventeen

### MAVERICK

It was the heat that made it the worst possible thing to endure. Just when we thought we had the fire contained, the wind would pick up again. The rainstorm had kept it banked some, but with the lack of rain this past spring, everything was bone-dry, and the small amount of rain wasn't soaking the ground enough.

“Maverick!”

At the sound of my name, I looked up. It was Tanner. He made his way over to me and grabbed my arms, gave me a once-over, and asked, “Have you had any sleep or food?”

“A couple of hours, and I grabbed a sandwich earlier.”

“Water?”

I nodded. I could see the concern in his eyes. It was the same concern he'd shown for Nathan, who worked alongside me. Tanner had asked me to keep an eye on him, which I was happy to do. Nathan meant the world to me, and the last thing I wanted was for something to happen to any member of Lily's family.

When Tanner smiled at me and squeezed my arms, something in my chest tightened.

He leaned in closer. “I need you to stay safe, Maverick. Do you understand me?”

A lump formed in my throat, and I found I couldn't say anything, so I simply nodded.

He pulled me in for a quick hug, then went to check on Nathan, who stood with some volunteer firefighters helping us keep the fire away from Stella and Ty Sr.'s house.

Another hour passed, and the next time, it was Hank who called out my name.

“Can you and Nathan head over to the south side of the ranch? A line of fire is making its way toward Brock and Lincoln’s place.”

My heart dropped to the ground. Everyone not fighting the fire was at Brock and Lincoln’s house.

“Have you told them the fire is moving that way? Maybe they should go to Tanner and Timberlynn’s.”

Hank nodded. “Tanner’s on his way there now to have everyone leave.”

Nathan and I exchanged a worried look. Hitting him on the side of the arm, I said, “Come on. Let’s get ahead of this thing.”



“Maverick!” Nathan called over the roar of the wind and fire. “It’s getting closer to the barn!”

“All the animals are out, right?”

He nodded.

The next second, we both saw something run into the barn.

“Holy shit! Mav, it’s the foal!”

“Stay here, Nathan!”

He grabbed my arm. “Maverick, no! The fire is right behind the barn!”

“I’m not going to let that foal die.” I removed his hand from my arm. “Stay here, and no matter what happens, you do *not* go into that barn. Do you understand me?”

Shaking his head, he said, “Maverick, please, don’t go in there. Please! I’m begging you.”

“The longer we stand here and argue, the closer the fire’s getting. Move the hose around to the other side and start spraying the barn. We need to keep it as wet as possible.”

When he didn’t move, I yelled, “Nathan, go!”

Once he'd taken off toward the side of the barn, I made a mad dash. Smoke was already starting to fill the cavernous space, but I could still see. The foal was attempting to get into the stall where I'm guessing she and the mother must have been kept. I grabbed some reins and an empty seed bag and made my way toward her. Putting the reins on her, I tried to talk calmly.

"Shhh...it's okay, girl. I've got you, and I'm going to bring you back to your momma."

The foal was strangely calm, and I didn't even have to use the bag over her head to get her out of the barn. Once I got her to safety, Decker, one of the ranch hands who worked with Blayze, grabbed her.

"We were trying to load them up in the trailer, and she got loose," he yelled.

"Get her in there with her mother."

He took her reins and ran off with the foal. As I turned to go help Nathan, something else caught my eye—a cat was running back and forth in front of the tack room door. She jumped up and scratched at it, then looked back at me.

"Fuck," I mumbled, already suspecting why she wasn't leaving. When I opened the door, four small kittens appeared. The mother grabbed one in her mouth and took off out of the barn. I reached down and picked up the other three, then ran out of the barn, looking for the mother cat. I yelled for Decker before he took off in the horse trailer.

"Decker! Help me with these!"

He ran back over and scooped up the mother and the baby while I headed over to his truck with the other kittens. Once they were safely in the truck, I shut the door.

"She had five kittens," Decker said, as he glanced back at the barn.

"Go, you don't have much time. I'll make sure the other kitten is okay."

Despite the efforts of Nathan and the other firefighters, I could see the flames had finally reached the barn at the same time I heard a plane overhead. I had one last chance to run back into the barn to look for the other cat.

“Where are you going?” Nathan asked as I rushed past him.

“One last kitten in the tack room.”

The sound of wood cracking echoed from the barn.

“Maverick, the water isn’t helping, and the firefighters said the barn is old and the structure won’t hold. We have to let it go!”

“I’m getting the kitten. Just move away, Nathan, *now*.”

By the time I got back into the barn, the smoke had grown ten times worse. The back of the barn was now engulfed, and the flames spread quickly. Pulling my shirt up and over my mouth, I went back to the tack room in search of the kitten. I looked everywhere, and when the heat grew too intense, and I knew I had to leave, I turned—only to spot the kitten near the door.

“There you are, baby,” I wheezed as I scooped her up and put her under my shirt.

The sound of wood breaking caused me to sprint as fast as I could toward the other end of the barn. I could see Nathan standing off in the distance, a look of horror on his face.

“Run! Run faster, Maverick!”

The barn was starting to come down all around me, but I somehow managed to miss being hit by anything falling—until I was almost to the door, when a loud bang caused me to falter. Something crashed to the ground right in front of me, making me stumble. I dove forward, twisting my body to avoid falling on the cat, and felt something hit me from the side—hard.

I wasn’t even sure how, but we got out of the barn before the whole thing collapsed.

“Maverick!”

The sound of Nathan screaming caused me to look back at the barn, at the pile of burning timber. I rolled from my side to my back and stared up at the sky. The slightest bit of blue shone through, from where the smoke had cleared. Reaching under my shirt, I grabbed the kitten.

Nathan dropped to the ground in front of me, his eyes filled with panic.

“I’m okay, Nate. Take her. Help her.”

He reached out for the kitten and clutched it to his chest. I started to cough—and the most excruciating pain I’d ever felt hit my chest. I clutched at it, grimacing.

“Promise me you’ll protect her,” I said, still more concerned about the kitten.

Tears filled Nathan’s eyes. “I promise. I promise, Mav!”

He looked down at me, and his panic turned to fear. Whipping his head to the side, he screamed, “Help us! Someone help us! Help him! Please!”

I closed my eyes...and the pain finally stopped.

The next time I opened my eyes, I was in the back of what I thought was an ambulance. The two medics talked so fast that I couldn’t understand anything more than bits and pieces.

“Male. Twenty-six, possible broken ribs. Smoke inhalation.”

My eyes drifted shut again when an oxygen mask was placed over my mouth and nose.

“His name is Maverick.” The voice belonged to Tanner. “Please hurry. I can’t lose him! Please!”



People were talking all around me, but they sounded far away. I opened my eyes, frowning when a blonde woman smiled at me from above. “It’s okay, Mr. Prescott. You’re at the hospital. We need to do some X-rays, so stay still for me, okay?”

I tried to speak, but nothing came out.



She walked away, and I heard random mechanical noises. Several minutes later, she reappeared. “You have some broken ribs, and it looks like one of them punctured your lung. Are you in a lot of pain?”

“Y-yes. Chest.”

Nodding, she placed her hand over my arm and gave it a light squeeze.

I closed my eyes again, and the next time I opened them, more people stood over me.

“Hey, Maverick, I’m Dr. Hansen. Your broken rib punctured your lung. We need to put a chest tube through your ribs into the area surrounding your lung to help drain the air. I’m going to leave it there for a bit, so afterward, it can help re-inflate your lung. I know you’re in pain, and this isn’t going to feel good, so we’re going to put you under.”

I nodded.

“Do you know if you have any allergies to any medicines?”

“Don’t. Know,” I managed to get out.

He patted my shoulder. “Okay, don’t talk. I’m going to get you fixed right up.”

“Lil...Lily.”

The doctor looked up. “Wife?”

I couldn’t respond, but I heard the doctor talking to someone. “Let them know what’s going on and that, when I’m done, I’ll come out and talk to everyone. Make sure to ask if a Lily is there.”

Another person appeared. “Maverick, this is going to make you sleepy.”

Before I could even attempt to speak, I felt myself drift into a blissful, pain-free darkness.

# Chapter Eighteen

## LILY

My mother stood. “Lily, sweetheart, you need to stop pacing and come sit down.”

I’d hardly been able to breathe since getting my father’s call that they were taking Maverick to the hospital. He’d ridden over in the ambulance with him and had kept me and Mom informed. When I looked over my mother’s shoulder, I saw my poor brother Nathan curled up on the small loveseat, covered in soot, sleeping. He’d been so upset, and was blaming himself for letting Maverick go into the barn.

Dad had shown up at the house to tell us we needed to leave when Brock called him. They’d managed to pretty much stop the fire on the east side of the ranch, thanks to the winds dying down, but the old barn near Grams and Granddad’s house was on fire. We didn’t evacuate Brock’s place after all, since they were confident they could contain the barn fire. My first thought had been about the animals, but Dad said they’d all gotten out in time.

“I’m okay, Mom. I just can’t sit down.”

Mom exchanged a look with Grams, who had driven over here with us. “Would you at least like to go get some fresh air?”

“I’m good, Mom. I want to wait for the doctor.”

Nathan stretched and sat up, scrubbing his hands down his face.

Mom walked over to my brother and handed him a bottle of water. “Nathan, why don’t you head on home? You need a shower and a bed.”

He shook his head and got to his feet, eyes tired. “Not until I know Mav is okay.”

“He’s going to be fine,” I said, wrapping my arms around my waist. I felt sick to my stomach every time I thought of

Maverick not being okay. He *had* to be fine. My father *promised* he'd be fine.

Suddenly, Nathan leaned down and unzipped the backpack he'd brought with him.

"Does anyone have a cup I can pour some water into?" Nathan asked, as he surreptitiously looked around the room. My mother, father, Grams, Granddad, Rose, and Kipton were currently in the waiting room with us.

"Here, I have one," Kipton said, handing Nathan an empty Styrofoam cup.

He reached into the backpack and pulled out a kitten.

"Oh my God, Nathan!" my mother whisper-shouted. "Why do you have a kitten in a backpack?"

"And in the hospital waiting room?" Grams added.

Nathan sat, smiling when the little kitten started to drink the water. "I'm not letting her out of my sight. Maverick gave her to me to keep safe."

I stared at my brother in confusion. "What do you mean?"

He looked up from the cat and met my gaze. "He first ran in for a foal who'd escaped back to the barn. Then he ran back in and went to the tack room. A cat carrying a baby came running out of the barn, with Maverick behind her carrying three other kittens. The next thing I knew, he was running back toward the barn. Said there was one more kitten in the tack room." He shook his head. "I was so scared.

"I called Dad and told him the barn was on fire and Maverick was inside. After what felt like forever, he came out of the tack room and started running. Beams and other stuff inside the barn were starting to fall. I yelled for him to run faster. A large beam fell, and he somehow managed to jump over it, but then something hit him. I think that's how he broke his rib...or ribs. He got out of that barn seconds before the whole thing collapsed."

My hands were over my mouth to hold back a sob. I knew about Nathan's call, since Dad was with us at the time. Knew

Maverick had run into the barn. But no one had told me the whole story before now.

“When he was on the ground, he reached under his shirt and pulled her out.” He gestured to the kitten. “He told me to take care of kitten, Lil. Looked me right in the eye before he passed out and made me promise. I’m not letting it out of my sight. I promised him.”

I looked up and met my mother’s gaze. She wiped her tears away and sat down next to Nathan. I sat on his other side and wrapped my arm around my brother.

“She’s probably hungry. We need to go get her some food.”

He nodded. “Once I know Maverick is okay.”

I turned away and wiped my tears off my cheeks. He’d risked his life for a foal and a kitten? God, if that didn’t make me fall even more in love with him. But his actions made sense. He couldn’t abandon these young animals like he’d been abandoned. My heart broke even more for him just thinking about it.

“He ran back into a burning building to get a *kitten*?” Rose asked in a shocked voice, reading my thoughts.

Sighing, Kipton whispered, “How romantic.”

“When he recovers, I’m going to kill him,” I said, trying my best to keep my voice light.

A few chuckles went around the room, but immediately stopped when a doctor appeared.

“Is there a Lily here?” he asked, looking around the room.

Pushing to my feet, I rushed over to him. “I’m Lily.”

“Are you Mr. Prescott’s wife?”

A part of me wanted to lie. I shook my head. “I’m his girlfriend.”

He smiled. “He asked for you before we had to put him under.”

My hand went to my mouth. “Is he in surgery?”

The doctor held up his hands. “Everything’s okay. He’s going to be fine. He broke two ribs, and one of them punctured his lung. I inserted a tube to drain the air, and I’d like to leave it in to help inflate the lung again. I didn’t see any other issues, and his lung should recover just fine. He did inhale some smoke, so we have him on oxygen for that, and to help with that lung.”

“But he’ll be okay?” I asked.

A reassuring smile spread over his face. “He’s going to be just fine. We’ll keep him a few days, then release him. The recovery time for a punctured lung is six to eight weeks, and just about the same time for the broken ribs. He’ll need to do some breathing exercises and limit himself to mild activity, but moving around is important. We just need to make sure he doesn’t overdo it with the moving. The nurse will go over all the dos and don’ts before we let him leave. No driving is a pretty big one.”

I nodded and could see everyone else around me nodding too.

“But his lung will recover?” Mom asked.

“His lung should recover, and he shouldn’t experience any lasting issues.”

Reaching for his hand, I shook it. “Thank you so much. When can I see him?”

“You can go back and see him now. They just moved him into a room, but he’s still asleep. Might want to keep the visitors to only two at a time for right now.”

Dad stepped forward and also shook the doctor’s hand. “Thank you so much for taking such good care of our boy.”

“Are you his father?”

My heart squeezed in my chest.

Dad’s smile faded some as he said, “Sadly, no, but he’s like a son to me.”

The doctor nodded. “Well, it’s clear he has a lot of people who love and care about him.”

“Damn right, he does.”

All heads swung to Grams. She shrugged. “Well, he does.”



Dad and I went to Maverick’s room first. My mother talked Nathan into leaving with Rose and Kipton, with a stop on the way home to get some cat food and supplies for the kitten. He appeared to be ready to be separated from his mother. Mom and my grandparents remained in the waiting room.

After about thirty minutes of sitting quietly in the room, Maverick slowly opened his eyes. He wore an oxygen mask, but I still saw the small smile appear when he saw me. He winced, and it was probably from the cut to the side of his right eye, which required a few stitches. Whatever had hit him and broken a rib had also made a gash near his temple.

“Hey,” I said as I took his hand in mine and kissed it. “Don’t try to move. You broke your ribs, and one of them punctured your lung. You’ve got a tube inserted to help with it.”

He gave a short nod, then looked over to my dad. “Nathan?”

“He’s okay. He has the kitten you saved.”

Maverick closed his eyes and smiled slightly again before looking back at Dad. “I told him...to stay put.”

Dad smiled. “He did, and he’s just fine. The fire is contained, and nothing but the old barn was lost.”

A look of relief washed over Maverick’s face.

My father moved closer on the other side of the bed. “You scared the shit out of me, Maverick.”

His eyes snapped back open.

“Don’t ever do that again. I don’t know what we would have done if we’d lost you.” Dad wiped tears off his face, and I watched Maverick’s eyes widen with surprise.

“You’re like a son to me, and it doesn’t have anything to do with you dating Lily. Do you understand that? You are part of this family, and if we’d lost you, Maverick, I’d have never forgiven myself for letting you and Nathan near that fire...”

I quickly walked around the bed and hugged him. “He’s okay, Dad. They’re both okay.”

He nodded and forced a smile, swiping at his wet cheeks. When my eyes met Maverick’s, I could see they’d pooled up with his own tears.

Dad cleared his throat. “Right. Well, no one else got hurt, so that’s good. The doctor said you need to take it easy for a bit, and I don’t want you worrying about anything.”

“I’m sure he can still come to the barn since the doctor said he can’t sit around.”

Dad grinned. “That’s right. You can do your horse whispering shit sitting down.”

Maverick barked a laugh, then quickly stopped and let out a moan.

“Damn, sorry,” Dad whispered, as he mouthed another sorry to me. He put a hand on Maverick’s shoulder. “I’m going to go and let Timberlynn come in. Then Mom wants to see you. Rose and Kipton took Nathan to get some cat food for the kitten, then went home to get some sleep.”

Maverick frowned, but I wasn’t sure about what.

Looking at me, Dad said, “I’ll get your mother.”

“Okay.”

When he left, I sat down on the edge of the bed and took Maverick’s hand in mine again.

“Is the kitten alright?”

Taken aback for a moment, I smiled. “Yes.”

The frown slowly disappeared from his handsome face. My goodness, he was worried about the kitten. It’s official, I just fell in love with him even more.

Squeezing his hand, I said, “I was so scared when Nathan called Dad and said you were in the burning barn. The only thing I could think about was that I hadn’t told you I’m so crazy in love with you in that last text. And since learning about the fire...I’ve been thinking about our future, Maverick. And I know you don’t want to talk about that because you don’t think we can have one.”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “That’s not...”

“Don’t talk. Just lay there and listen. Over the past couple of months, I’ve never been so happy. I’ve never felt this way before, about anyone. And I don’t *want* to feel this way with anyone else but you, Mav. I want your smiles. I want your touch. Your laughter, your sorrow, your fears. I want it all. The good and the bad. I want you. But...I want your heart most of all.”

A single tear slipped free, and I lifted his oxygen mask to wipe it away. Gently replacing it, I drew his hand up to my mouth and kissed the back.

“I didn’t...mean to scare you.” His words were muffled under the mask.

I shook my head. “I was *terrified*. A kitten, Maverick?”

He smiled, and once again, I fell deeper in love with him.

“I meant what I said, Mav. I’m not going anywhere, and you don’t need to say anything to me right now. I just want you to know that...well...that you are so loved, by so many. Nathan was beside himself with worry. He even snuck that kitten into the hospital to take care of it like you told him to. My dad rode in the ambulance, and they almost had to arrest him to make him stay in the waiting room.”

His brows shot up, then he winced and reached to gingerly touch the stitched cut.

“Whatever hit you and broke your ribs also left a little parting gift on that handsome face of yours.”

“Hurts. Everywhere.”

“I’m sure it does. Do you want some pain medicine?”



He shook his head.

A light knock sounded, and my mother and Grams both walked in.

“The nurse said we could break the rules if we were good and didn’t cause the patient any stress.”

Grams walked around to the other side of the bed and reached over, gently brushing a piece of hair from Maverick’s forehead. “You scared us, young man. And all for a kitten.”

“Five kittens, a momma cat, and a baby horse,” Maverick said very slowly.

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t you talk back to me, young man.”

Maverick’s brows shot up, he winced again, and I had to cover my mouth to keep from laughing.

“Stella, remember the whole no-stress thing so you don’t end up back in the hospital. I don’t think they would appreciate you giving the patient a hard time.”

Grams nodded. “I’m going to make you my famous lemon cheesecake for when you’re home.”

That made Maverick’s eyes light up.

My own eyes nearly rolled to the back of my head as I let out a little moan of delight. “Oh man, Grams makes the *best* lemon cheesecake.”

“She does,” Mom agreed.

A light knock on the door had everyone turning to look as a nurse entered, flashing everyone a bright smile. She made her way over to Maverick. “How’s the patient doing?”

“Good,” he said through the mask.

Mom stepped forward and placed her hand on Maverick’s arm. “Maverick, we’re going to go. If you need anything, you tell Lily, okay?”

He lifted his hand for her and she took it. “I will. Thank you.”

She leaned down and kissed his forehead, then looked directly into his eyes. “Don’t ever scare me like that again, young man. I love you, Maverick, and our lives would never be the same without you in it.”

That time, he fully lost the battle to keep his tears at bay. Mom gently wiped them away, kissed him once more, then stood and smiled.

“We’ll be back tomorrow!” she announced, as she and Grams swept out the door. The nurse bustled around Maverick while I stayed out of the way. She checked the various monitors, then took his vitals.

“How’s your pain? Need anything?”

He shook his head.

“How about some Tylenol? Will you take that, since you won’t take the other?”

I tilted my head as I stared at the nurse and Maverick. What was that all about?

“I’ll take that.”

With a nod, she turned to me and saw my confused face. “Um, I’m going to go get the Tylenol. I’ll be right back.”

“Sure thing.”

When the door shut, I turned to Maverick. “Why won’t you take pain pills? Have you had a problem with them in the past?”

He pulled the mask away slightly. “Not at all. The only thing...” He paused for a moment, putting the mask back over his face for a few seconds before he started to talk again. “I ever knew about...my birth mother...was that she was... taking pain medicine. Mindy...told me...it was in...my blood when I was...a baby. Don’t wanna be anything like her.”

I moved over to the bed and grabbed his hand. “Oh, Mav, just because you take something for the pain doesn’t mean you’ll get addicted.”

“If I can take the pain without it, I want to. I told them if it...got too bad...I’ll take it.”

The fierce look in his eyes told me that he wasn’t about to budge on that subject, so I let it go. He had every right to feel the way he did.

“If the pain becomes too much, do you promise you’ll take something?”

He squeezed my hand. “Yeah.” He sounded rough. Like he’d been yelling and his voice went hoarse.

Once the nurse returned, I asked, “Do you have a rollaway bed I might be able to sleep in?”

Pointing to the chair, she said, “That reclines fully and turns into a little bed. I can make sure you have a pillow, a sheet, and a blanket, if you’d like.”

“Lil, you don’t—”

I held my hand up for Maverick to stop talking. “I’m not leaving your side. I didn’t leave it when you had the flu, and I sure as hell am not leaving when you are in the hospital and in pain.”

The nurse smiled. “You are one lucky man to have so many people who love and care about you. The waiting room was packed earlier, with everyone waiting to hear how you were.”

His eyes moved from the nurse to me.

I shrugged. “It was.”

He blinked a few times, then looked away.

“Is your throat still sore?” the nurse asked.

“A bit.”

The nurse set a pitcher and a cup with ice on the little table to the side of the bed. “Make sure he drinks plenty of water. We’re giving him fluids through the IV, but the ice water will feel good on his throat after breathing in that smoke.” She looked at Maverick. “If you need to get up to use the restroom, just push this button and a nurse will come to assist you.”

A low “thanks” came from Maverick as his eyes drifted shut.

Turning to the nurse, I whispered, “Thank you.”

She glanced back at Maverick. “He’ll tire out really easy at first with his punctured lung and broken ribs, at least until he gets his strength back, so don’t be alarmed by that, okay?”

“Okay, I appreciate you telling me that.”

With a single head nod, she made her way back out of the room.

Once Maverick fell asleep, I headed out to the nurses’ station to find the nurse who’d been helping Maverick.

She looked up and smiled. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, um, everything is as good as it can be, I guess.”

Her smile warmed. “Would you like that pillow and blanket?”

“That would be lovely. And I did want to ask if you knew how long he’d have to be here?”

“They’ll look at everything tomorrow and make sure the air is draining as it should be. If everything is okay, he could go home as soon as tomorrow. He didn’t inhale enough smoke to do any damage to his lungs, which is a good thing. It’s just getting that punctured lung taken care of before we send him home.”

I nodded and rubbed my hands together nervously.

The nurse stood and came around the desk. She took my hands in hers.

“He’s going to be okay. He’s young and healthy, and there’s no reason at all why his lung won’t heal up nicely. The biggest issue for him will be the ribs. It will either be me or another nurse who’ll give you all the instructions you need for his care tomorrow or the next day, before we send him home.”

“Thank you,” I replied, giving her hands a light squeeze. “He means the world to me.”

A wide grin spread across her face. “He was calling for you when he first got here, and I see the way he looks at you. That boy is head over heels in love.”

“I feel the same way about him,” I replied with a grin. I thanked her again for allowing me to sleep in the room. I still had the overnight bag that I’d taken to Uncle Brock’s, so that was a good thing.

I headed to the hospital’s little lounge and got myself a cup of hot tea and a bag of chips out of the vending machine. When I returned to Maverick’s room, the pillow, sheet, and blanket were sitting on the chair. I moved the blanket to the wide window ledge and sat down. Pulling up my text messages, I sent out a group text to the entire family, letting them know Maverick was sleeping comfortably and would most likely be in the hospital a day or two, depending on how things went with draining his lung.

When I started to doze off to sleep sitting up, I stood and made the makeshift bed. I had to admit, it was pretty darn comfortable. I had the leg rest out, but the back still elevated some, so I could watch Maverick sleep.

I wasn’t sure when I’d drifted off again before the sound of someone crying had me flying up and nearly breaking my leg when I attempted to get out of the chair.

“What’s going on?” I asked breathlessly.

Maverick looked confused, the nurse surprised, and I was sure I looked like a madwoman.

“What happened?” I asked as I held a hand to my chest.

“Mr. Prescott’s vitals started to rise, so I came in here to check on him. He was having a nightmare and moved around a bit too much, and his sore ribs woke him up.”

“A nightmare?” Maverick asked, his oxygen mask gone.

“Yes. Do you get them often?” the nurse asked.

Maverick looked unsure. He swung his gaze to me. “Have I had them before?”

I nodded. “Just one.”

“Well, don’t you worry about a thing,” the current nurse on duty stated with a pat to his arm. “No one is going to be leaving you anytime soon.”

Maverick frowned, looking confused.

“Now, the doctor wants this oxygen mask on at least until tomorrow morning, when he comes to see you.”

Without taking his gaze away from mine, Maverick sat still while the nurse put the mask back on and helped to adjust his pillow.

“Feeling okay? How’s the pain?”

“Hurts a bit.”

“I’ll go get you some Tylenol, it’s almost time for your next dose anyway.”

We were silent until she returned with his pills. Once the nurse left again, Maverick finally said, “That’s why you asked me about nightmares.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Yes.”

He pulled the mask off again. “I didn’t realize I had them.”

“It’s only been the one time, and I didn’t hear you tonight. If I had, I would have woken you up before you hurt yourself.”

Maverick looked down at the bed. “I don’t even remember having them. What do I say?”

I sat on the edge of his bed. “Um...the one I heard...you sounded like a younger boy talking. You cried out for someone not to leave, and then asked not to be taken away. Then you repeated a few times that they left you. I’m guessing it was a dream about when your foster parents passed away.”

His hand went to the back of his neck, and he seemed lost in thought. He remained silent for a few more minutes before he said, “I really loved them. They were the first people I ever said those words to. And I knew they loved me.” He smiled softly. “They told me every single day. Showed it too. I remember feeling utterly lost when they died. Guttled.”

“Is that why it’s so hard for you to let any of us in?”

He jerked his head up, and our gazes caught. “My family. Me. You have a wall built up around you, Maverick, and I’m trying my best to climb over it. But just when I get to the top...it feels like you pile on more bricks and mortar with your silence.”

He attempted to take in a deep breath and winced. “It’s hard to let people in when you’ve been alone your entire life, Lily. When you’ve had nobody to count on but yourself.”

I shook my head. “Is that what you want? To be alone? To never stand on the edge of a cliff and just fall? Because that’s what I’m doing with you, and I would really like to know you’re falling with me.”

He rubbed his lips together, as if trying to keep words in. He looked everywhere but at me.

“Maverick, look at me.”

When his gaze lifted, I could see the tears, and it just about broke my heart. Maybe tough love wasn’t the way to go. I really wished my parents were here. Just as I was about to tell him it was okay, he didn’t have to say anything, he spoke.

“I’m scared, Lily.”

I took his hand in both of mine and kissed it. “Of me?”

He shook his head. “No. Well...kind of. I was devastated when Mindy and Justin died. If you ever left me, I know I would be completely broken. And I...I don’t know if I can allow myself to take that chance.”

A tear slipped free, and he watched it trail down my cheek. I could see the pain in his eyes, and I would have given anything to take it away.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’re not hurting me, you’re being honest with me. I appreciate that. But I want you to know, I’m not giving up, Maverick. If I have to love enough for both of us, I will. I’ll admit, someday I want to hear you say you love me, but if you can’t, then I guess—” My voice cracked, and I tried to finish

without bursting into tears. “Then I guess seeing it in your eyes and feeling it in your touch will have to be enough.”

He frowned. “I’d never do that to you.”

“What will you do instead? Break up with me? Because I’m pretty sure that would destroy both of us. For a couple of hours today, I thought I might lose you, Maverick. So if you don’t like hearing me say that I love you, I’m sorry, but you’ll have to get used to it. Because I plan on telling you every single day for the rest of my life.”

He reached up and put his hand on the side of my face, and I leaned into it.

Then he said the words I’d longed to hear. “I love you, too, Lily.”



# Chapter Nineteen

## MAVERICK

Lily stared at me with a stunned expression on her face. I could tell she was processing those words, and a part of me was also processing the fact I'd said them.

But after everything that happened today, I needed to be honest with Lily and with myself.

Lily leaned into my hand, and I used the pad of my thumb to wipe away her tears. My throat felt raw, and my voice sounded like I'd been screaming at a concert.

“I have loved you since the first moment I saw you come bouncing out to the barn, back when you were home on college break. I can still remember what you were wearing. A blue long-sleeve shirt that said ‘be kind’ on it, jeans, and those bright-ass red riding boots. You had a Shaw Ranch baseball cap on your head with your ponytail pulled through the back. When you got closer, the first thing I noticed was the color of your eyes. They sparkled and reminded me of dark honey. The way the sun caught your eyes was mesmerizing. I heard your mother say once that they reminded her of a pot of melted gold that shimmered in the sunlight.”

“You remember what I was wearing the first time we met?”

Smiling, I nodded. “Every time you’ve ever looked at me and smiled, I cataloged that moment away in my mind.”

Her hand covered mine on her cheek. “Maverick...I’m so sorry it took me so long to see what you saw.”

I closed my eyes and slowly shook my head before focusing on her. “I won’t lie to you, Lil. I’m still scared. My entire life, I’ve never had anyone else to rely on. It’s always been me. So when you came into my life, and I started to develop these feelings, I wasn’t really sure what to do with them. My first instinct was to push them away. Then we got closer, and I tried to tell myself I’d be okay if things didn’t

work out. Now I know better...because I want a future with you too.”

Frowning, I dropped my hand away from her, and instantly missed the warmth of her skin. “There *is* something else, though. In our future, I see kids.”

“That’s a bad thing?” she softly asked.

“No, not at all. I want to be a father. But I’m not sure how to be a *good* father. I’ve never had that experience myself, so how do I know I can do it?”

She drew in a deep breath and slowly let it out. “I know without a doubt in my mind that you will be a wonderful father. And you *do* have a role model now. Hell, you have a number of them. My father, my uncles...Blayze and Ryan. Hunter.”

“That *is* a lot.”

I let out a soft laugh. “Mav, my father already told you he thinks of you as a son. He was so scared today. You didn’t see it, but I did. And you saw his tears in this room. He loves you, and my mother loves you. All you have to do is let down one wall at a time, and trust in that love. And trust that the people surrounding you will always be there if you give them that chance.”

“I want to knock down the walls, I do. I’m just...”

Her finger came up and pressed against my lips. “I get it, you don’t have to say anything else. Thank you for telling me you love me, and for being honest about your fears. I’m not going to say I understand, because I don’t. What I *will* say, though, is that I promise to cherish your heart for always, and I will never, ever leave you.”

“I don’t deserve you, Lily.”

“You do. Just like I deserve you.”

Lacing her fingers in my hand, she brought it up and gently kissed the back. “If I could crawl into this bed with you, I would, but I can’t, so I’m going to go back to my little makeshift bed because we both need to get some sleep.”

She stood, leaned over, and kissed me tenderly on the lips. When she would have straightened, I reached up and pulled her back down to my mouth, deepening the kiss. When she pulled back and smiled, I whispered, “I love you, Lily Hope Shaw. More than all the stars in the universe.”

Her eyes sparkled as she rested her forehead on mine. “Those are the sweetest words I’ve ever heard. I love you, too, Maverick. More than you’ll ever know.”



I stood in the middle of the corral while Tesoro got a few morning kicks out of the way before she settled down and made her way over to me. She nudged me with her head, bringing out a laugh from me and Lily, who was currently sitting on top of Juniper.

“I’d say she’s come a long way over the last few months.”

Smiling, I ran my hand down Tesoro’s neck. “She has.”

After about a week of rest, I’d been able to show up each day and work with Tesoro. The only other person she trusted fully was Lily. Every day, we’d make our way to the pasture and work with her and Juniper. I couldn’t do much for a few weeks, since I still had to take it easy with my broken ribs, but it was almost like the horses sensed my injuries.

I’d told Lily what steps to do while standing off to the side. Tesoro would often make her way over to stare at me. I was pretty sure it was her way of ensuring I was okay. I’d give her a loving touch and, satisfied, she’d turn and head back over to Lily.

I’d been cleared to start some easy riding, but Tanner had insisted I wait a couple more weeks and get another X-ray to make sure both my ribs and lung had healed. I did as asked, and now, today was the day.

“Be careful.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Tanner at the fence. Lily pressed her lips together tightly to keep from laughing.

The relationship between me and Tanner had changed since my accident. At first, despite his assurances, I still thought it was because of Lily. But I slowly began to believe that Tanner *did* think of me as more than just an employee or his daughter's boyfriend. Timberlynn, as well. Hell, the whole Shaw family. They'd somehow managed to draw me into their fold and welcome me into the family. I still had moments when I would freak out and second-guess everything, but those moments were happening less and less.

Running my hand along Tesoro's side, I placed the riding pad on her back. Lily had done this a dozen times. She'd stood on a step and had leaned over Tesoro's back, getting her used to the weight. The first time she'd jumped up and sat on her, I nearly cried. I'd wanted it to be me, but clearly that wasn't what was supposed to happen.

"Dad, I've ridden her four times now without incident."

"I know. It's just...he's only just getting back to riding. The last thing I want is for him to get thrown."

My heart squeezed in my chest as I looked over to Tanner. "I promise I won't get thrown."

"Stop being such a nag!" Timberlynn stated as she wrapped her arm around Tanner's waist.

"Any day now, Mav!" Nathan called out.

Giving her brother a dirty look, Lily cried out, "Nathan!"

He shrugged. "What? I have baseball practice, and I want to see if he gets thrown."

I was the only one who laughed at that. "Okay, girl. Shall we do this?"

Tesoro let out a little snort, and I chuckled again.

Lifting myself up and over, I settled onto the pad. Tesoro stayed perfectly still. Now, looking back at me as if to make sure I was okay, she gave a little head bob.

"Let's go for a walk with your boy, shall we?"

Tanner opened the gate as Lily and Juniper headed out first, followed by me and Tesoro.

Lily looked back at me. “We’ll lead the way. I want to show her our special place.”

“Have a good time!” Timberlynn called out.

I glanced back and saw that she and Tanner stood together, hand in hand. When Timberlynn wiped a tear away, I looked at Tanner. He smiled and waved.

It warmed my heart that they were just as moved at seeing the progress of Tesoro as I was.

As Lily headed down the trail, I knew exactly where we were going. To the rise that overlooked the ranch. Tesoro would love the walk there, and I had to admit, I looked forward to seeing the view. It was late September, so the colors would be beautiful.

Tesoro made her way up and walked next to Juniper, allowing for me and Lily to carry on an easy conversation. We talked about a new program we wanted to set up for horses who’d gone through difficult situations and needed a bit of extra care. Now that Nathan was taking more of an interest in training the horses to ride, and Lily had been concentrating on the mustang rescue and Tesoro, she’d discovered her love of helping horses that were a bit damaged.

Tanner and Timberlynn’s plan was to slowly start taking more and more time away, especially with Nathan showing such a strong interest in running the training program.

“Nathan still doesn’t want to go to college?” I asked.

Lily shook her head. “He said he doesn’t feel like there’s a need for it. I have no issue with taking over the business side of things when Mom and Dad eventually step down. I don’t see Mom wanting to give that up anytime *too* soon, though.”

“I don’t see that either. I *do* get why they want to start taking a step back. I heard Tanner and Brock talking about going on a cruise with Ty Jr. and Kaylee and your grandparents.”

Smiling, Lily said, “They’ve all worked so hard over the years, running the ranch. I think they’re wanting to spend more time with Grams and Granddad. Especially after Grams’s health scare last June.”

We walked a bit more in silence before Lily broke it. “Dad wants *you* to take on a bigger role, you know. And it has nothing to do with us being together. He was grooming you for it before we started dating.”

I let out a soft chuckle. “I know. I could tell when he started putting me in charge of more and more things. Now that Nathan’s taking an interest, though, I don’t want to step on his toes.”

“You won’t. You and I are going to be doing one side of the business, while Nathan does the training. We both know Dad won’t completely step aside, but I think once Nathan has graduated from high school, he’ll be taking on a bigger role.”

“I think it’s nice your parents aren’t forcing him to go to college.”

“Me too. Josh is the same way, he’s been working this summer for that construction company and loving it. He wants to go on full time after school and learn a trade.”

“Really? I knew he was doing that, but I hadn’t heard he enjoyed it so much.”

“Yep.”

“What about bull riding and training the bulls? I thought for sure he’d follow in his dad’s footsteps.”

With a shrug, she said, “We all did. But I think he sees how Bradley’s life is...always gone, on tour. Different place every weekend. He’s hardly ever home. Josh doesn’t want that. He enjoys riding the bulls, but I think he’s grown out of the phase where he wanted to do it for a living.”

“Does that bother your uncle Ty?”

“Not at all. He and Kaylee simply want him to be happy. I don’t see Uncle Ty retiring anytime soon, either. He has enough people working for him, though, that he can take time

away. He used to travel on the PBR circuit a lot more than he does now.”

“Why doesn’t he raise the bulls, train them, and then just sell them to other PBR contractors? That way, they take over the care and all the transport, and Ty doesn’t have to worry with that.”

Lily looked my way. “You should talk to him about that at family game night tomorrow.”

I groaned. I’d gotten out of going to the weekly game nights with my ribs and lung as an excuse. Now that I was just about fully healed, I was expected back. “Stella texted me earlier to say she was making me more lemon cheesecake, and it would be all mine.”

Lily’s head flew back as she let out a roar of laughter. “I’m not sure how Blayze and Hunter will feel about that. It’s their favorite as well.”

“They’re going to have to break a rib if they want their own cheesecake.”

We both laughed, then rode in a comfortable silence. Once we got to the spot where we needed to get off and walk the rest of the way, Lily flashed me a concerned look.

“I’m okay, Lil. I promise.”

She nodded as she chewed on her lower lip. I wasn’t sure why she was so nervous. Mindful of my ribs, I’d still increased my physical activity steadily since shortly after the hospital stay. I was more than fine enough to walk up a hill.

Slipping off Tesoro with ease, I flashed her a smile.

Her cheeks blushed slightly, and she jumped down off Juniper. She reached for a small bag and put it over her shoulder as we started the climb up to what was now my favorite spot on the ranch. Tanner and Timberlynn’s place was beautiful, with the lake out front of their log home and a fishing dock that belonged in a magazine. Then the beautiful pastures that went right up to the foothills of the mountains. But the lookout, as Nathan called it, offered the best view of everything.

When we finally reached the top, with me breathing a little harder than I should have, I took a moment to catch my breath.

“Note to self: I need to do way more cardio to build up my lung strength.”

Lily still seemed fidgety. I reached for her hand and drew her to me.

“Hey, what’s going on in that pretty head of yours?”

She exhaled and let out a nervous laugh. “I’ve been wanting to dance with you again, and I thought maybe we could do that up here.”

“Oh yeah? Did you have some Tayler Swift in mind?”

With a wide grin, she shook her head. “No Taylor this time. I have a special song instead.”

“Really?” I bent down and kissed along her neck. “When are you going to let me make love to you, Lil? I’m all healed, you know.”

She melted into my body and let out a low moan. We hadn’t made love since the accident but had done plenty of other things. It was crazy how creative a man could be when he wanted to make love to his girl with his mouth while not hurting his side. As for Lily, she’d made me promise that if it was too much, I had to ask her to stop when she gave me pleasure with her mouth. It had hurt like a motherfucker the first time, but the pleasure outweighed the pain, so I’d kept my mouth shut.

“Well...I brought a little something with us.”

I took a step back. “Up here?” With a quick look around, I frowned. “You want to have sex up here? I mean, I’m healed, but I was hoping for a nice soft bed the first time back in the saddle.”

“No!” she said, laughing. “I brought up a speaker. And if you’d like, I think we could work something out for a little bit of fun up here.”

“Ahh,” I replied, grinning like a fool. My dick was already rock hard, almost painfully so. “So you brought me up here



not to see the beautiful fall colors, but to have your wicked way with me out in the open.”

Lily looked around. “I wouldn’t say this was out in the open.”

“It’s not our bedroom.”

Wrapping her arms around my neck, she stretched up and kissed me. “I’ve been aching for you, Maverick.”

A low growl came from the back of my throat.

Then she stepped away and I instantly missed her touch.

“You tease.”

Laughing, she grabbed her bag and took out a small Bose speaker, set it up on a rock, then pulled her phone from her pocket.

“I wanted to dance to a specific song.”

My heart picked up its rhythm as I was suddenly overcome with an emotion I had yet to experience with Lily. I felt nervous, excited, and anxious, all rolled up into one overwhelming feeling. I’d begun to realize...that’s what love was. A mix of emotions that left me feeling higher than ever before and still slightly nervous.

She held her hand out for mine. I took it and drew her body flush against me. Wrapping her arms around my neck, she looked up at me. “If I could have written a song for the way I feel about you, this song would be it. It says exactly what I feel, Maverick.”

Tapping her phone, she pushed it into her back pocket and then wrapped her arms back around my neck as the beginning of a song played.

“It’s called ‘I Choose You’ by Amanda Jordan.”

Lily rested her head on my chest, and we slowly danced on the hilltop overlooking the ranch while I listened to the words of the song.

The chorus played, and my eyes filled with tears as the words that were sung were about being loved and cherished. I

pressed my mouth to the top of her head and kissed her while pulling her even closer.

The second verse sent me over the ledge, heartfelt lyrics about no longer being alone, and I let my tears flow freely as we slowly danced. When the bridge came, and the words were about changing her last name, I cried harder and cupped her face in my hands. She was crying, too, and I leaned down and kissed the tears away, then drew her in and wrapped my arms around her once more.

She sang the last chorus as she held me tightly.

“I love you so much, Lily.”

Drawing back and looking into my eyes, she softly said, “I’ll always choose you. I’ll always love you. I’ll always be yours, Maverick.”

I claimed her mouth with mine and kissed her slow and sweet, while she returned the kiss the same way. When we broke apart to take in a breath, I could feel my heart hammering in my chest.

Lily looked up at me with the sweetest smile I’d ever seen, and let out a bubble of laughter. “My heart is pounding like never before,” she said, reading my mind.

“Mine is too. And I think I can take care of that thing the song mentioned...the only thing that needs changing.”

Her brows drew down in the cutest way as her mind went through the song to discover what I was talking about.

With a deep breath, I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out a jewelry box I’d been carrying around with me for weeks—and sank down to one knee. Lily stared at me in shock.

“When I turned eighteen, this lawyer tracked me down. Don’t ask me how he found me, but he did. He gave me a box of things that Mindy and Justin had left for me. He was instructed not to give it to me until then. They’d even left a trust fund for me. There isn’t a whole lot of money in it, but I haven’t touched a dime, so...it’s enough if you wanted to build

a house. Also in the box were Mindy and Justin's wedding rings."

I looked down at the small blue box in my shaking hand. "I tucked them away, thinking I'd never give Mindy's ring to anyone. But since I got home from the hospital, I've been carrying it around with me, waiting for the right time."

Lily covered her mouth with a hand as she started to cry once again.

"I think this is the perfect time to ask you, Lily Hope Shaw, to be my forever. My partner, my lover, the mother to our kids, and my best friend."

Reaching for my hands, she pulled me up and wrapped her arms around me. "Yes! Yes! Yes! I love you so much!"

I picked her up and spun her around, laughing.

"Your ribs!" Lily cried out.

"Are fine. And as much as I love the idea of making love to you up here, I really want our comfortable bed so that I can spend all night giving my future bride the attention she deserves."

Beaming up at me, she nodded. "I think that sounds like an amazing idea."

I glanced at the ring box. "Did you, um...want to put it on?"

"Yes! Oh my gosh, yes!"

Taking out the emerald-cut diamond ring, I slipped it onto her finger.

"Wow. It fits me perfectly! Did you have it sized?"

Shaking my head, I whispered, "No. It's like it was made for you. Like Mindy and Justin knew you were my future."

I held her hand, and we both stared at the diamond ring. Two rows of smaller round diamonds encircled the center gem and trailed down the band on both sides.

“It’s eighteen-karat white gold, I do know that. The jeweler in Hamilton said it looked vintage, so it might have belonged to Mindy or Justin’s mother or grandmother. I’m sorry I don’t know for sure.”

She held her hand to her chest. “I don’t care about that. The only thing I care about is that it’s special to *you*, and that you gave it to me.”

Brushing a piece of her hair away, I smiled down at her. “I love you.”

Lily wrapped her arms around my neck once more and lifted up to kiss me. “I love you more. Now, take me home and make love to me.”

# Chapter Twenty

## LILY

Thanksgiving at the Shaw Ranch was always a day of happiness and utter chaos. Not only in the kitchen, but in the living room as well. Since Brock had the largest house on the ranch, holidays were spent there. When I was younger, it was always at Grams and Granddad's house, but with them getting older, no one wanted them to have to host.

"I think a fight's about to break out," Maverick whispered against my ear. "Blayze and Ryan are arguing over a call that was made during one of the football games."

"That's nothing new. They always bicker about football. Wait until Hunter jumps in, then you'll really see some action."

His eyes went wide. "They actually fight?"

"No," I replied with a laugh. "Uncle Brock or Uncle Ty will tire of hearing them argue, so they'll make them settle it with an arm wrestle. Best out of three."

Maverick leaned against the kitchen counter and gave me a grin. "Are you serious?"

"Mom, how many years in a row have Blayze and Hunter had to settle an argument with arm wrestling?"

My mother pulled a large casserole dish of dressing out of the oven. She set it on the stove, turned to face us, and looked up in thought. "Let's see, there was that one year with the Cowboys game..." She continued to recall arguments and count them off on her fingers and looked back at me. "I think if they do it this year, it'll be eight in a row."

"Eight!" Maverick said with a surprised laugh. "Who usually wins?"

Mom winked at Maverick. "Well, at first it was always Blayze because he was older and stronger. Now it really depends on how much they've had to drink."

Maverick tossed his head back and laughed.

Lincoln set another casserole of dressing down on the island and asked, "Have you kids decided on a wedding date yet?"

Maverick and I exchanged grins. He winked, and I answered, "We were kind of thinking New Year's Eve."

Everyone in the kitchen stopped what they were doing and looked at us. Complete silence stared at us. Maverick wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to him. His chin rested on the top of my head, and we simply smiled at everyone. My mind drifted back to the morning in the barn when our lives changed for the absolute better.

*The light knock on the door caused me to let out a groan before I said, "I'm fine, Nathan."*

*When the door opened and I saw Maverick standing there, a look of concern on his handsome face, I smiled.*

*"Nathan came and got me. He said you've been throwing up. Are you okay? Is it something you ate?" His hand went to my forehead. "Are you sick?"*

*Laughing, I took his hand in mine. "I'm not sick and no fever."*

*After helping me up, we made our way out of the small bathroom that was inside the barn and back to the office we both now shared. Maverick handed me a water, and I rinsed my mouth out, then took a long drink. When I looked back at him, I couldn't help but feel the tears building.*

*"Hey, what's wrong?" he asked as he cupped my face in his hands. "Why are you upset?"*

*Sniffling, I shook my head. "I'm not upset."*

*Frowning, he stared down at me. "Then why are you crying?"*

*I knew Maverick wanted kids. What I wasn't sure of was if he wanted them so soon.*

*With a deep breath, I slowly exhaled, met his gaze and said, "I'm pregnant. We're going to have a baby."*

*His eyes went wide with shock. Then a million different emotions played across his face—disbelief, shock, then a look of terrified fright quickly replaced by pure happiness.*

*"A baby? We're going to have a baby?"*

*I nodded. "We are. Are you happy?"*

*Tears instantly streamed down his face. "I've never been so happy in my entire life, Lily. My own family. I'm going to have my own little family."*

*With a laugh that sounded more like a sob, I nodded.*

*Maverick pulled me into his arms and let out a shout of pleasure as my brother Nathan burst into the office yelling, "I'm going to be an uncle!"*

Grams's voice pulled me out of the memory.

"New Year's Eve? Well, I guess it matches with how fast your relationship has gone, but don't you want a spring wedding?" Grams asked.

"We don't want to wait that long," Maverick replied as he held me a bit tighter.

Aunt Kaylee sighed. "Young love. Oh, don't you miss those days?"

Every woman in the room sighed.

Rose and Kipton walked in, with Avery pulling up the rear. It was so good to have her home from France, and Bradly home from the circuit.

"We can't take the fighting any longer," Rose declared. "I take back what I said last year about not wanting to be in the kitchen helping with the food."

Kaylee laughed.

"Kipton, sweetheart, how are you feeling?"

Resting her hands on her stomach, Kipton beamed. "Wonderful! I love being pregnant."

Stella huffed. “Wait another month until your ankles swell and you can’t sleep. You’ll be counting down the days until that little one comes out.”

The older women in the room laughed as Kipton suddenly looked nervous. “I was just talking to Morgan, and she said it was blissful the entire time.”

Right at that moment, Georgiana walked into the kitchen and stopped dead in her tracks. “The *hell* it was. She complained nonstop! I told her she should try it with *two* babies.”

“Speaking of, where are Blakley, Ryder, and Rhett?” Lincoln asked.

Rhett and Ryder were Blayze and Georgiana’s one-and-a-half-year-old babies, and Blakely was Morgan and Ryan’s one-and-a-half-year-old little girl.

“Brock has all three of them in the playroom with Ryan, and now Blayze. Granddad threatened to make them all go to the barn and muck out stalls if they didn’t stop arguing.”

“No arm wrestling this year?” Mom asked.

Georgiana shook her head. “Apparently not.”

Aunt Merit smiled at her daughter and said, “Avery, sweetheart, go let everyone know we’re about ten minutes away from dinner.”

Avery nodded and left the kitchen for the task of rounding up the Shaw clan.

“What can I do to help?”

All the women in the room turned to look at Maverick, and grinned. I had to chuckle. He was that handsome and that charming.

“Why don’t you and Lily set the table,” Aunt Lincoln said. “This year, we went with paper plates and cups to make the cleanup easier.”

“Wait,” Grams called out. “You never did answer why you wanted to get married on New Year’s Eve.”



Rose and Kipton both turned to look at me, equally surprised expressions on their faces. Then they both said in unison, “What?”

I felt my cheeks flush and stole a glance at Maverick. He simply smiled and waited for me to drop the news.

“Well...we figured we should probably get married before I started to show.”

“Show what?” Rose asked.

Then, as if the lightbulb went off for everyone at the same time, they all started to scream.

Minutes later, the kitchen was soon filled with every Shaw who could fit.

“What is going on?” Brock asked as he walked in with Ryder in one arm and Rhett in the other. Blayze held Blakley on his shoulders, and Ryan brought up the rear with Mr. Rabbit, the large stuffed animal Bradley had bought for her. It was her favorite, and she took it everywhere she went.

When my father pushed his way into the crowd, with my brother somewhere in the mix, I held up my hands to try to stop everyone from talking all at once. Maverick put his fingers to his mouth and whistled, getting everyone to instantly shut up. Well, everyone but Blakley, who was singing some little tune.

“Shh, baby girl. Lily has something to say,” Ryan said as he took her off Blayze’s shoulders. She snuggled into his neck and butterflies danced in my stomach at the thought of a little girl doing that to Maverick.

“Tell everyone!” Rose shouted.

“Tell everyone what?” my father asked.

Maverick took my hand in his, and I leaned against him. “We were going to wait, but with everyone here and all...”

My mother walked up to my father and took his hand, tears in her eyes. He looked at her, then back to me. It only took him a few seconds, and he knew. I could see him rapid-fire blinking to keep from crying himself.

“Maverick and I are going to be parents somewhere around June twenty-first.”

The entire room and beyond erupted into cheers. I saw Kipton jolt, then put her hands on her stomach and laugh. Apparently, all the cheering must’ve made the baby move. Hunter leaned down and kissed her belly.

I felt my own eyes pool up, and it wasn’t until Maverick pressed a kiss to my forehead and whispered, “I love you both,” that I let them fall.

A line soon formed, and everyone took turns congratulating us. A few asked questions, like was I feeling sick, how many weeks were we, and if we were going to find out if we were having a boy or a girl.

Nathan was the only person who already knew, and it was because he’d caught me throwing up in a bucket in the barn four times. It hadn’t taken him long to put two and two together. I’d sworn him to secrecy, and was honestly surprised he’d kept it.

The last two people to approach were my mother and father. Mom embraced me, while Dad pulled Maverick in for a bear hug.

“Was it planned?” Mom asked.

I shook my head. “No, it wasn’t. It was a mistake on my part.”

“But a wonderful and blessed mistake,” Maverick added.

Mom grinned. “So you’re happy?”

“We’re over the moon,” he replied. “I’ll be honest, I kind of freaked when we found out. I really want to be a good dad.”

My father put his hand on Maverick’s shoulder. “You’re going to be an amazing father, Mav. I couldn’t be more happy or prouder than I am right now.”

“You know, you don’t have to rush and get married. Plenty of people have kids without being married,” Mom stated.

I placed both of my hands over my still-flat stomach. There might have been a little bit of a bump, but not much. “We talked about it, and we really would like to be married before we have this little one.”

Turning to Dad, Mom said, “They were thinking New Year’s Eve.”

“Just family, no one else,” I quickly added. “We want it to be simple and something we share with only those we love.”

Dad and Mom both smiled, and Dad said, “I think the best wedding is the wedding you want. You tell us what you want, and I’ll make it happen.”

“Well, I know it will be dead of winter, but I was hoping maybe we could do it in our barn.”

Both of their eyes went wide.

“Wait,” my mother said, holding up her hands. “You want to get married outside, in the barn? In December? In Montana?”

Maverick and I both chuckled.

“Maybe we should save this conversation for later, Stella is frantically motioning for me to go set the table,” Maverick said.

We all chuckled. “You’ll quickly learn that keeping a bunch of hungry Shaws waiting will do you no favors,” Mom said.

Maverick rushed over to help get everything set while Dad grabbed a few platters of food.

Mom held me back by my arm, pulling me into the butler’s pantry.

When I couldn’t decipher the look on her face, it suddenly felt as if a lead weight had been dropped on my chest. “Are you disappointed, Mom?”

She gaped. “No! Not at all, Lily. I just want to know...how was it a mistake on your part?”

I felt my cheeks flush. “Well, with the fire, and then me moving in with Maverick to make sure he took it easy, all while still working and just...the craziness of it all, I missed my birth control pills more than once. I know better, but I honestly just forgot about them and then...well...you know.”

She covered my heated cheeks with her hands. “I’m so beyond excited to be a Grammy, I can’t even tell you.”

I felt my eyes fill with tears, but I blinked them away. “I’m excited, too, Mom. I love him so much, I don’t even know how I didn’t see it years ago. Maverick said he fell the moment he met me in the barn.”

Her eyes lit up. “Ahhh, that’s why you want to get married in the barn?”

I nodded.

“I think it’s romantic. And sometimes we don’t always see the things that are right in front of us. That doesn’t mean they don’t mean just as much.”

“If you two are going to keep hiding away, could you at least grab the gravy boat while you’re in there?” Grams asked when she poked her head into the room.

“Come on,” Mom said, as she laced my arm with hers and I snagged the gravy boat. “Let’s go feed that baby!”



The sound of a vehicle crunching through the freshly fallen snow had me glancing up to see who was headed toward the barn. When I saw who it was, I pulled the horse I’d been exercising to a stop.

Ben parked, climbed out of the truck, and headed my way.

I’d answered his call while driving with Mom, that day the fire broke out. Ben had wanted to make sure we were all okay, since he’d heard about the fire as well. The conversation was short. I’d told him we were all fine, and that I needed to go. The whole conversation lasted maybe a minute.

“This should be interesting,” I softly said.

I walked the horse over to the fence, waiting for him to reach me.

“Beautiful mare,” he said, leaning his arms over the snow-covered wood fence.

“She’s a client’s. What are you doing here, Ben?”

His smile faded some, and he looked around. “I always thought this place was beautiful right after it snowed. The horses in the pastures are like a painting.”

I exhaled softly, not wanting to seem rude, but it wasn’t exactly warm outside, and I’d been leading the mare into the heated barn.

“We were about to head into the barn. What can I help you with?” I asked.

His expression fell further as he nodded and moved to open the gate, so we could walk through it. “I’ll walk over with you.”

That was the last thing I wanted. Maverick was there with my father, working on a rescue horse that had been brought in yesterday. The poor thing had been neglected and left outside in the freezing cold with hardly any food or water. After a neighbor had discovered the horse, they’d given the sheriff a call, who’d in turn called my mother to come get it after getting a warrant to enter the property and seize the animal.

“That’s okay. Whatever you need to say, you can tell me here.”

He frowned. “It’s cold out, Lily.”

“Which is why I’d rather you tell me why you’re here instead of stalling.”

Taking a step away from the gate, he cleared his throat. “Things with Abby didn’t work out.”

I raised my brows. “The baby?”

He shook his head. “Turns out the baby wasn’t mine. She’d been cheating on me. Guess that’s why she was worried

about you. Since *she* was cheating, she assumed I'd do the same."

My heart dropped a little at his news. "I'm so sorry, Ben."

Letting out a humorless laugh, he shook his head. "I guess that's how it was meant to be. She told me right before Thanksgiving. Apparently, the guy she'd been cheating on me with threatened to tell me everything if she didn't admit the truth."

"How do you know it's not yours?"

A look of embarrassment appeared on his face, and he kicked at the snow. "She lied about her due date. She was a bit farther along, and she panicked because it happened when I was out of town those three weeks back in the spring."

Ben had gone on a once-in-lifetime trip with his parents to Europe.

"Guess they didn't use protection, so she had a pretty good idea it was this guy's baby."

My heart broke for him. He truly seemed upset to find out he wasn't going to be a father. "I'm sorry to hear things didn't work out for you and Abby, Ben. I really am. But I have to ask again, why are you here?"

He looked taken aback. "To tell you I wasn't getting married. I'm not having a baby."

"And why did you feel the need to rush over and tell me?"

Ben rubbed at the back of his neck. "We used to be best friends, Lily. I told you *everything*. I miss our friendship. Don't you?"

I opened my mouth, then quickly shut it as I gathered my thoughts. It would be better if I got off the horse and spoke to him like an adult, but he'd said some pretty mean things to me before.

"Things didn't work out with Abby, so you thought you'd swing on by and see if you could have your friend back because...what? You don't have anyone else to hang out with?"

He smiled nervously. “I wouldn’t put it exactly like that. I just want my best friend back.”

“I’m sorry for you, Ben. But you don’t get to come riding in, thinking you’re going to pick up our friendship where we left off. And honestly, I feel like we’d been drifting apart even before Abby got pregnant.”

He jerked back like I’d slapped him.

“I’m not saying that to be cruel. I’m only being truthful. I wish you the best of luck, Ben, but I don’t want the type of friend you’d started to become. Your feelings toward Maverick, the things you said to him about me, and a host of other things made me realize I was better off without you in my life.”

Ben frowned. “So you’re just going to cut me out of your life completely?”

“You made it easy to do, Ben.”

He folded his arms over his chest. “Is this because you’re fucking that ranch hand?”

And before I even saw it coming, my brother rushed up behind him, grabbed Ben by the shoulder, and spun him around. Then he punched him so hard, Ben stumbled back onto his ass.

I gasped, even as I tried to calm the horse I was on.

Nathan pointed to Ben, who was still on the ground. “He has more to offer her than you could ever *dream* of offering. Now get the fuck off our property before I call for backup.”

Ben slowly shook his head as he stood. He turned to me. “What the hell does he have to offer you?”

“The most important thing there is—love.”

Ben scoffed, and Nathan took a step toward him. He held up his arms and started toward his truck, not even bothering to look back.

Once he pulled away, Nathan said, “What a fucking asshole.”

“Mom would wash your mouth out if she heard you,” I said as I jumped off the horse.

Shutting the gate to the pasture, I walked with the mare and headed back to the barn with my brother by my side. The mare bobbed her head in excitement and let out a few nickers.

“See? Even she knows he’s a dick.”

“You want some hay, don’t you, girl?” I asked with a laugh.

As I approached the barn, my father stepped out. “Hey.”

Smiling, I replied, “Hey. How’s the rescue horse doing?”

Dad looked past me, then to Nathan, then back to me. “Doing good. Are *you* okay?”

Nathan winked at me and headed off in the other direction.

“I’m better than okay, Dad. If you saw Ben leaving, everything is fine. Well...Nathan did punch him, but all is good.”

His brows shot up. “What?”

“Yep,” I said with a pop of my p. “Turns out things didn’t work out between him and Abby, and he assumed he could simply show up and we’d be besties again.”

“I hope you told him to go fuck himself.”

I laughed. “Not in those words, but your son did.”

“Good. I’m glad to see I’m raising that boy right.”

He walked over and took me into his arms and held me for the longest time, before stepping back. “The moment Maverick showed up on this ranch, I knew there was something special about him. Not just his way with the horses, but about Mav himself. It didn’t take me long to see the way he looked at you.”

“Mom said you told her the same thing.”

Dad wrapped his arm around my shoulders and took the reins as we headed into the barn. “The first time he saw you, his eyes lit up. And when he used to see you with Ben...well,



let's just say if looks could kill, Ben would have been dead a long time ago."

I giggled and leaned my head against him. "I wish I'd seen it."

"Well, it takes some of us longer to see things. Your mother was the same way with me, if you can believe it."

I gasped as if in total surprise. "You mean she didn't fall head over heels in love with you at first sight?"

"Oh, she did," Dad stated. "It just took me some time *convincing* her that she did."

Laughing, I stopped walking and looked at him. "Thank you for being such amazing parents to me and Nathan, Dad. And thank you for loving Maverick like you do."

"He was already like a son to me, you know that. Having it made official just makes it even better."

"I want him to have the family he never had growing up."

"He'll get it for sure with this family."

I nodded as we started to walk again.

"Are you going to tell him Ben stopped by?"

"Yes. I think it's important for us to be honest about everything. It wouldn't do either of us any good to keep it from him. Besides, I have nothing to hide. I felt nothing but sorry for him."

"You go join Maverick and I'll take care of the mare."

Reaching up, I kissed my father. "Thank you. I love you, Daddy."

His eyes sparkled, and I was pretty sure I saw some tears forming. "I love you too."

Turning, I practically skipped to the indoor arena to see Maverick.

## Chapter Twenty-One

### MAVERICK

I felt her before I even saw her. Every hair on my body felt like it stood up, and my heart began to race a little bit faster.

That was what Lily did to me. What she would always do to me.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw her approaching. She took her coat off and hung it over a chair. The indoor arena was huge, and if you yelled, it would echo. The last thing I wanted to do was spook the new gelding we'd brought in yesterday, so I lifted my hand and waved as Lily climbed over the railing. I held my breath until she was safely on the other side. It was going to be a long pregnancy of worrying on my side.

"You know," I said as I walked toward her, the gelding following. "You're not going to be able to do that when you're farther along."

"What?" she asked with a pretend confused look. "Climb over things?"

"Or ride."

She held up her hand to stop me. When I did, the gelding bumped into my back.

"Excuse you," I said, glancing back at him.

"My mother rode horses nearly up until I was born. Same with Nathan."

She stopped right in front of me, and I grinned down at her. "How about we make a deal? After a certain point, you only ride horses we know and trust."

Her hands smoothed over my chest and slid up and around my neck. "I can get on board with that."

I lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around me.

"I missed you," she whispered against my lips.

Smiling, I replied, “It’s only been a couple of hours since you saw me.”

Kissing along my jaw, she softly said, “That is entirely too long. I keep thinking about this morning.”

My dick instantly went hard. “You mean when I woke you up by kissing you?”

She giggled. “That, but I was thinking about what happened right after you woke me up. When you slid inside me and made love to me.”

“Mmm, that *was* nice.”

“Do you think it would be safe to fool around right now?”

Laughing, I pulled my head back to look at her. “Here? Your dad is around somewhere.”

“He’s taking care of Luna after her training session. He’ll be tied up for at least another thirty minutes. Nathan is heading to town with my mom. Come on, let’s be daring.”

“You want to have sex with your father only feet away?”

She raised a brow. “Are you scared?”

“Hell yes, I’m scared!”

Laughing, she kissed me. When the gelding bumped us and caused me to stumble, we both laughed.

“See, even he wants us to have a bit of playtime.”

I glanced around and spied a door. On the other side was a supply closet. “What about him?” I asked, motioning to the stage-five clinger at my back. “He won’t leave my side. Follows me everywhere I go.”

Lily removed her legs, and I slowly slid her down my body.

“Well, I don’t think he’ll fit in that small room.”

I laughed and the horse nickered, causing Lily to laugh again.

“Hey, kids?” Tanner called out as we both turned to see him approaching us. “Want to grab some lunch in town?” He

pointed to the horse that was practically on top of me, then grinned.

With a chuckle, I said, “Yeah, he’s for sure a lover.”

Tanner smiled. “Good to have one that isn’t scared to death. What do you say? Lunch?”

Lily and I exchanged a resigned look before she faced her father. “We’d love to, Dad.”

A wide grin appeared on Tanner’s face. “Great! I’ll call your mother and see if she and Nathan can join us.”

“Sounds good,” Lily stated. “I’ll help Maverick get this guy settled in.”

“Put him next to Tesoro. I think the two of them would get along great. I’ll meet you up at the house.”

“Will do,” I replied as I took Lily’s hand in mine, and we walked toward the gate.

The gelding followed us the entire way, and into the area of the barn where the stalls were located. Some horses were out to pasture, the ones that loved the cold. But our newer residents, and those who were spoiled rotten, like Tesoro, were more than happy in the barn when they weren’t feeling the desire to be out to pasture.

“He is the sweetest horse. I’ve never seen a horse follow someone quite like this,” Lily noted as I opened the stall and motioned for him to go in. When he did, then turned to look at me, Lily and I both smiled.

“I’ll grab him some grain while you get his water.”

After filling up his water and putting a bucket of food in the stall, I gave him a good rubdown, then headed out and locked the stall door. “He’s going to be special; I can feel it.”

Lily walked up next to me and admired the gelding. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Know these horses like you do? It’s like you communicate with them in a way none of us can.”

“I guess you can say we *do* communicate, in our own way. I can relate to the ones who have been tossed aside or neglected. I understand how they feel, and I’m guessing maybe they can sense that. All they need to realize is that there’s someone out there who will love them enough.”

I could feel her gaze on me, and I turned toward her. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

She lifted a hand and cupped the side of my face, causing me to lean into her touch. “I love that. What you just said.”

Kissing her on the forehead, I whispered, “I love *you*. And you also have a gift with these horses, Lil. I hope you know that. They do things you ask them to do that I’m not sure they’d do for me, your dad, or Nathan. Although, Nathan has his own way with these horses, as well.”

She nodded. “He reminds me a lot of you when it comes to the horses. I love how he watches you with them. He’s like a sponge, absorbing it all.”

“He’s a good kid, and one hell of a rider. Don’t tell your dad this, but I think he’s going to be better at training them than Tanner.”

Lily made a motion to lock her lips, then tossed the pretend key over her shoulder. “Before I forget to tell you, Ben stopped by.”

I raised a brow. “What did that asshole want?”

Scrunching up her nose, Lily replied, “To be besties again. It appears he and Abby didn’t work out. She cheated, baby wasn’t his, that kind of thing.”

“Oh wow. What did you say?”

“Do you want the short version?”

Laughing, I said, “Sure.”

“I told him no. Then Nathan punched him, and basically told him to get off the ranch and never come back.”

I stared at Lily for a good thirty seconds, then started to laugh. “I love that kid.”

She giggled. “It was something else to see.”

Leaning down, I kissed her. “We better get going so your dad’s not waiting on us.” I turned to the gelding. “You need me to take the reins?”

He bobbed his head and Lily laughed as I took them, then we walked hand in hand out of the barn.

I couldn’t help but send a little prayer to the man upstairs. I never in my life, ever, thought I could be so damn happy.



Christmas at the Shaw Ranch.

It turned out that Thanksgiving was simply a steppingstone to the Big Holiday.

This year, it was at Dirk and Merit’s house. They weren’t technically Shaws, but they were family nonetheless. The moment Lily and I stepped into the family room, I did a quick sweep of the crowd.

Bradly and Avery, Dirk and Merit’s kids, were arguing in the corner about what music should be played.

Next to them sat Kipton and Hunter, the two of them wearing dreamy looks, and Hunter’s hand on her stomach. I couldn’t wait for that to be me and Lily. She must have noticed as well, because she slipped her hand in mine.

“Look at Blakley trying to get Bradly to pick her up,” Lily said with a laugh.

Bradly reached down, picked her up, and gracefully swung her onto his shoulders while still arguing with his sister.

“Ryan’s already holding a few shot glasses in his hands. Is he going to drink... Wait. Is he giving those to Morgan and Georgiana?”

Lily grinned. “Oh, wow. Morgan and Georgiana knocked those back fast.”

Blayze attempted to keep Ryder and Rhett from tearing open all the presents, while Josh and Nathan argued with Merit

and Timberlynn about going up to Bradley's room and playing video games.

"Where's everyone else?" I asked, as I searched for the older Shaws.

"My guess is Uncle Brock, Uncle Ty, and my father are all in Uncle Dirk's office, knocking back a few beers. Gramps is probably in there with them."

A loud scream caused everyone to look at Rose, who was jumping into Bryson's arms.

"Wonder what that's all about."

Lily rolled her eyes. "Who knows? I honestly don't know why we don't do Christmas at each of our own families' houses. I mean, we do in the morning, but this let's-get-everyone-together thing is already getting a bit out of hand. Can you imagine when Kipton has her baby, and we have ours? Then Rose will most likely be popping out a baby soon. It's going to be chaos."

I smiled. "I kind of like the chaos."

"Oh," Lily said with a dark laugh, "you say that now. Wait until the games start later, after we eat. If you think family game night is intense, you haven't seen the Christmas version."

My body actually shuddered. "Do you think we can come up with an excuse to leave early?"

Lily's eyes lit up. "We can say I'm not feeling well. They can't make us stay if I'm feeling sick."

"Okay, that's the plan then."

"What's the plan?"

We both jumped, and Lily let out a little scream before she turned and saw Bradley.

"How did you get over here so fast? You just had Blakley on your shoulders five seconds ago while you argued with Avery."

He smirked. “Please. All I had to say was Avery had dolls in her room and Blakley went nuts. Now, what’s the plan? Tell me you’re cooking up something to get us out of here before hell night starts.”

I grinned. “Hell night?”

He nodded. “Listen, I can endure family game night, but only because I’m on the road so much that I don’t have to do it every week.”

“They dropped it to once a month,” Lily added.

“What? Why?”

“For someone who doesn’t like it, you sound upset by that.”

He laughed. “I’m just wondering why it had to happen when I’m never home and don’t get to enjoy that perk.”

“With all the little ones, it’s getting too hard for everyone to slice out a night a week, so they voted and it’s once a month now. But I did hear Merit saying she’d try to get your schedule so we could do it when you’re home.”

A small smile played at the corner of Bradley’s mouth, and he sighed. “I love my mom.”

When a loud bell rang, I jumped again. “What in the hell?”

Bradley slapped me on the back. “Welcome to Christmas dinner, where they use a cowbell to announce when the food is ready.”

I looked at Lily, who winked.

Two large tables were set up in a massive dining room. Avery and Rose, along with Bryson, volunteered to man the kids’ table, which I thought was brave of them. Dinner was full of different conversations, laughter, a bit of arguing, more laughter, delicious food, and one of the best evenings I’d ever experienced.

The Shaw clan, along with Dirk and Merit, had always made me feel welcome, even when I was just another hand working on the ranch. But being a part of this family was



unlike anything I could ever imagine. I could feel the love coming off of every single person in the room. I may not have had a family growing up, but I had one now, and my son or daughter—and, God willing, more kids in the future—would have it. That thought nearly brought me to tears.

Lily squeezed my hand. “Hey, are you okay? Are you overwhelmed?”

I shook my head. “Not at all. This is...it’s wonderful. I was just thinking about how our kids are going to have this. All this love and happiness. You can feel it in the room. It just reminds me of what I missed out on but am so damn grateful that I have it now.”

Glancing around at her family, Lily smiled. “You *can* feel it. And they’ll be lucky indeed to have so many people who love them.”

A short time later, Kaylee stood. “Okay. This year, it’s the men’s turn to clean up.”

A few groans filled the room, but Brock stood willingly enough, as did Dirk, who yelled out, “No bitching.”

“Dirk!” Merit admonished. “The babies?”

He winced. “Shit, I forgot.”

“Oh my God, Dirk!” Kaylee sighed, hitting him on the back of the head. “Organize the men, will you?”

Lily stood and went to grab her plate, but I stopped her. “Nope. You go enjoy your time with the ladies.”

“You sure you’re okay alone with all of these cowboys?”

Taking a quick look around the room, I brushed my lips across hers. “I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll watch his back,” Bradley said with a wicked grin.

Lily narrowed her eyes. “I don’t like that smug smile on your face, Bradley Littlewood.”

Now he gave her a puppy dog look. “Whatever do you mean, sweet cousin?”

“Oh, please,” Lily laughed, giving Bradley a friendly push. “You are so full of shit, you stink!”

“Go have fun,” I told her. “I’ll help here and catch up with you in a bit.”

Lily frowned, biting down on her lower lip. “Are you *sure?*”

“Yes! Go. What’s the worst that can happen?”

Her brows lifted, as Bradley let out a bark of laughter.

“Prescott! Get your butt in here and put the purple gloves on,” Tanner shouted. “You’re on wash-up duty!”

Leaning in so only Lily and Bradley could hear, I asked, “Is it too soon to be sick?”

Lily giggled as Bradley grabbed my arm, dragging me toward the kitchen as he threw his head back and let out an evil laugh. “Say goodbye to your sweetheart and join me in the kitchen, horse whisperer!”

With one last look at Lily, I caught her covering her mouth to keep from laughing. I gave her a resigned smile before I was dragged into the belly of the beast.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### LILY

After watching my poor future husband get dragged into the kitchen by Bradly, I made my way to the family room. I was stuffed full and feeling a bit tired. It was crazy how the first few months of a pregnancy could wear you out. Guess that's what happens when you grow a little person inside you.

I made my way over to where Rose, Kipton, Morgan, Avery, and Georgiana were seated. They were taking turns feeling Kipton's stomach. I dropped down onto the floor in front of her. "Is she moving?"

With a wide grin, Kipton nodded. "She's been really active."

"Are you and Maverick going to find out if it's a boy or a girl?" Avery asked. "Please say yes! I got some adorable outfits for Kipton and Hunter in Paris."

I shrugged. "We keep going back and forth. One minute I want to know, and the next, I don't."

"Will you be living in Maverick's cabin?"

"We will be," I answered with a smile. "Dad and Maverick were talking about possibly adding on to the house. Maybe a second floor, or just onto the back."

"Before the baby gets here?" Georgiana asked.

"I don't think so. We'll see how it goes after we have her."

"Her," Rose said with a poke in my arm. "Are you wanting a girl?"

My cheeks heated. "Honestly, I could totally see Maverick as a girl dad, but what I really want is a healthy baby. Boy or girl."

"Amen to that."

Morgan looked at Rose. "When are you and Bryson going to try for a baby?"

Rose's wine glass paused at her lips. "Who says we're not?"

We all gasped.

Holding up her hands, she laughed. "Hold on there, ladies. We're not officially trying. We're still in practice mode. We kind of wanted to wait a bit, like Kipton and Hunter did." She winked at me. "No offense, Lily."

My hands went up as I said, "None taken. Maverick and I weren't planning at all. It was my mistake with my birth control pills."

"I didn't know that," Morgan replied. "But you're both happy, right?"

My hands went to my stomach as I nodded. "So very happy. I mean, I would have liked to spend more time with just Maverick, but I feel like everything happens for a reason. Plus, I really think this will be good for him. To have his own little family. I can't wait to give him that."

Each of them made *ooh* and *aah* sounds while clutching their hearts or making some other dramatic gesture.

Georgiana said, "That's sweet. He is such a nice guy."

"And hot as hell. I mean, Bryson is hot, Rose, but Maverick has that rugged-cowboy, piercing-eyes thing. And a body to die for."

We all stared at Avery as *she* stared into space as if lost in a fantasy.

"Are you finished daydreaming about my fiancé?" I asked, as I reached over and gently pushed her, while she fell into a fit of giggles and the rest of us laughed.

"Not gonna lie, Lil, he *is* hot."

"Rose! You're married," I chastised.

"A girl can still look, you know."

Another round of laughter erupted.

“I’m siding with Rose and Lily on this one,” Morgan said. “He has that ruggedly handsome cowboy thing that’s so sexy. And the two of you are adorable together.”

“Yes! You are,” Georgiana added as she reached for my hand. “Unbelievably adorable together.”

I blushed and waved at them all. “Okay, stop it. Let’s move on from how hot Maverick is to something more important right now. Do we know what games they have planned?”

The smiles all faded and everyone looked around, grimacing at one another.

“I heard Grams say something about dominoes.”

We all groaned.

“Not the dominoes,” Avery whined.

Rose scoffed. “I heard my mother talking to Lincoln and she suggested we all play...” She shook herself, as if trying to ward off a bad feeling. “*Bingo*. Apparently, Granddad wants to play that—and with money!”

I started to laugh.

“Neither of them sounds good,” Avery stated.

When I saw the men start to trickle in from cleaning up, I knew game night was about to start. Then I spied Aunt Merit and Grams carrying boxes of dominoes.

I stood, put my hand to my mouth, and rushed out of the room.

The sound of my mother and Maverick both calling my name had me faltering for a hot second, but I kept going until I made it to the guest bathroom.

A light knock on the door minutes later had me flushing the toilet. “Yes?”

“Lily?”

“Oh, Mom...hold on. I’m not feeling well. Is Maverick out there?”

“I’m right here, baby.”

Smiling, I asked in my best sick voice. “Can you please come in?”

“You don’t want *me* to come in?” Mom asked in a hurt voice.

Cursing under my breath, I replied, “No...no, you go back to the family, Mom. I’ll be fine.”

Maverick opened the door and slipped inside, softly shutting it behind him.

I leaned in and whispered, “They’re going to play dominoes!”

He scrunched up his face. “The old person game?”

Nodding, I replied, “We have to make our escape now before Kipton tries to use the same excuse!”

“Right. Okay. Let’s get you out of here so you can go lie down.”

A wicked smile spread over my face. “And what are you going to do to make me feel better?”

An equally wicked, yet seductive smile appeared on his handsome face. “I think I can come up with something.”

I giggled, and Maverick covered my mouth, then put his finger to his lips. “Hush!”

He pulled me to him and pressed his mouth over mine in a hot and searing kiss. When we broke apart, I was breathing heavy.

“Yeah, we need to leave. Now.”

Maverick turned and opened the door, only to let out a girlish cry.

“Mom!” I said as I placed my hand over my chest. “You scared us!”

She lifted a single brow. “Sick, huh?”

Attempting to look sick, I nodded. “Morning sickness hits at all hours.” It wasn’t a lie, and my mother had seen me get sick at the oddest times of day.

She pushed off the wall and pointed to us. “You’re just trying to get out of playing dominoes!”

I stomped my feet like a five-year-old. “Mom! It’s *dominoes*. No one wants to play that.”

“Some of us do.”

Rolling my eyes, I replied, “Yeah, the old people.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, she tilted her head and slowly asked, “I beg your pardon?”

Maverick cleared his throat. “I better go see if Bradly can give us a ride back to the ranch.”

Mom turned to Maverick. “He’s in on this too?”

“Yes, and if you don’t let us go now, Mom, Kipton is going to use my excuse.”

It was her turn to stomp her foot. “Damn it. I want to go too!”

I started to laugh. “Well, after we leave, say you want to go check on me.”

Her eyes lit up. “Good idea.”

“Maverick, wait! I’m coming.”

Mom reached for my arm. “Hey, you’ll miss opening the presents.”

I leaned in and kissed her. “Not to be a Debbie Downer, Mom, but I’d rather miss presents than play that game.”

She rolled her eyes and chuckled before giving me a kiss. “Go. Get out of here while you can.”

When Maverick announced I wasn’t feeling good, while I leaned against him and tried to look sick, we got dirty looks from every single one of my cousins, and a few of the adults as well. They saw through the bullshit clear as day.

“Bradly, could you give us a ride back to my place?”

“I can!” my father said, as he jumped up.

“Nonsense,” Grams retorted. “You’ll get home and say you’re tired and not come back. Go on and take them home, Bradley—and come straight back.”

Bradley smiled at Grams. “Will do.”

We walked into the hall, and Maverick found my coat and slipped it on before donning his own. Bradley grabbed his jacket as we walked to the door.

“Thanks for taking us back,” Maverick said, clapping Bradley on the back.

“No worries at all. The last thing I wanted to do was play dominoes.”

I giggled as Maverick helped me up into the front passenger side of Bradley’s truck.

Bradley pointed out the front window. “Look, it’s starting to snow.”

“Oh, I love that it’s snowing!”

Maverick laughed. “It’s been snowing for weeks, Lil.”

“I know, but there’s something so romantic about snow falling on Christmas.”

Bradley started up his truck. “If you say so.”

On the way back to the cabin, Bradley and Maverick talked about the PBR, and I couldn’t help but notice that Bradley both looked and sounded tired. He was on a break from touring and wasn’t doing any riding at smaller rodeos. He’d nearly won the championship this past November, and was giving his body a rest from riding before the next year started up.

Listening to them talk, by the time we got to our place, I couldn’t help but wonder if Bradley’s love of the sport was starting to fade. Maverick got out first and held open my door to help me climb down. The snow had started to pick up and was falling heavier.

“Do you want to come in for a bit?” I asked.

Giving me that dimpled, innocent-boy smile, he shook his head. “No. You two enjoy the rest of the evening. I’m going to



head on back. By the time I get there, I'm hoping the game is over and they've opened presents."

"Bradly...is everything okay? You don't seem like yourself today."

He nodded and took my hand in his. "Everything is great, Lily. I'm just tired and still feeling a bit bruised from this past season."

"Okay. But if there *was* something wrong, you know you can talk to us, right?"

He squeezed my hand. "I know. Love you."

I leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I love you too."

Maverick reached up and helped me out of the truck and held me as he said, "Thanks again, Bradly. Be careful driving back to your place."

"I will. Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas!" Maverick and I said together, before Maverick shut the door.

We watched as Bradly turned around and drove back down the driveway. His parents' ranch was about a thirty-minute drive from our cabin, and I hoped he was safe in the heavy snow.

Wrapping his arm around my waist, Maverick guided me toward the front door. Once inside, we took off our coats and shoes, and I practically fell onto the sofa. "I'm exhausted."

Smokey, the kitten Maverick had rescued, and Nathan had taken care of for him, jumped up onto my lap and promptly started to purr. She was nearly all white with a few little patches of orange that seemed fitting since she was saved from a fire. She adored Maverick and slept under his chin every night.

"Hey, sweet girl," I softly said as I scratched her behind her ears. She meowed, then made her way to the other side to clean herself.

Maverick headed into the kitchen and poured us both a glass of water before joining me and Smokey in the living room.

“How did you know I was so thirsty?”

He laughed. “Because *I* am, so I figured you were.”

I downed the water and set it on the coffee table.

Maverick put his down and sat back as Smokey curled up onto his lap. He stroked her softly down her back and my heart tripped over itself with how tender and sweet he was to her.

He glanced up and said, “How about we change into our PJs, bring pillows and blankets out here, and watch a movie. I’ll massage your feet.”

I wanted to launch myself at him. As much as I wanted him, that sounded heavenly. My family was a lot, so I really was feeling tired.

“That sounds like the perfect way to finish out Christmas.” Turning to look out the window, I frowned. “Look at that snow coming down. Maybe I should text everyone and let them know it looks like we might be getting a storm.”

Maverick followed my gaze. “I already sent your dad a message and a screenshot of the radar. He said everyone was heading back to the ranch early. No one wants to be stuck if the weather turns.”

I chewed on my lower lip. “I hope everyone will be okay.”

He stood and pulled me to my feet. “Everyone will be fine. Come on, let’s go change and then pick a movie.”

Smiling, I let him lead us to the bedroom. “Any movie?”

He glanced back at me. “Any movie.”

After changing, brushing my teeth and getting comfortable on the sofa, Maverick handed me the remote.

I shook my head. “You can put it on.”

“Put what on?”

With a wide grin, I said, “*Pride and Prejudice.*”

“Again?” he asked with a laugh. “We watched that on Thanksgiving night.”

“I know. I want to start a new tradition.”

“By watching it Thanksgiving *and* Christmas?”

I nodded. “It’s either that or *The Sound of Music*.”

Maverick faced the TV, hit a few buttons, then turned off all the lights as the beginning of my favorite movie started.

Sitting down, he pulled my feet into his lap and started to massage. “I’m going to have this whole movie memorized word for word, you know.”

I snuggled into the pillow and felt my body relax. When Maverick spoke again, I jumped awake, only to find him still massaging my feet, albeit very poorly, since he was engrossed in the movie.

“I cannot believe he said that about Elizabeth. What a douchebag!”

Grinning like a woman totally in love, I let out a soft sigh and fell back to sleep.

# Epilogue

## BRADLY

The snow had started to come down faster and harder, and on the way home, I passed a bunch of familiar cars heading back to Shaw Ranch. By the time I pulled into my family's ranch, everyone had left. I put the truck in park, and was about to turn it off before I noticed a light on in the barn across the pasture. On that side of the ranch was the grow-and-pick farm that was in my mother's family. It was now run by my mother and uncle.

"Who in the hell would be in the barn on Christmas night?" I asked myself, putting the truck back into gear and heading that way. I pulled my phone out and called my father.

"Hey, are you back yet? Brock said it was really coming down out there, and now they're calling for blizzard-like conditions."

"Yeah, I'm back. Dad, someone's in the barn on the farm side of the ranch."

"Really? That's strange. I guess it might be Mackenzie."

"Who?"

"Mackenzie Reeves. Have you not met her yet?" Dad asked, sounding confused.

"I don't really go to the farm much, or at least I haven't since I've been home. I figured it was staffed lightly during the winter months."

"It is, but they have the greenhouse now."

Frowning, I asked, "What greenhouse?"

"Jesus, Brad, do you not *ever* go to the farm? Your uncle and mom had the greenhouse built last spring."

Guilt slammed against my chest. I'd just never been interested in that part of our ranch. Growing up, I'd spent most of my spare time at Uncle Ty's, learning everything I could

about bulls and bull riding. I had chores to do on the Littlewood Ranch, but Avery had always helped on the farm side, and I helped on the cattle side. I knew it bothered my mother that I'd never shown any interest in farming, and now I was regretting that.

"I *didn't* know about it. I'm sorry, Dad."

He sighed, but didn't reply.

"I'm going to drive over and make sure everything is okay."

"Your uncle should be there at the house. Maybe it's him."

"He went on a cruise with Lori, the new girlfriend. Remember?"

Dad was silent for a moment, then said, "That's right. Well, in that case, I'm sure it's just Mackenzie, but if you want to check it out, go ahead."

"I'll text you on my way back."

"Sounds good."

Hitting End, I drove slowly on the snow-covered road and parked in front of the barn. I got out and jogged over to the door, entering quietly. The sounds of Christmas music filled the space, and I couldn't help but smile. A few horses popped their heads up to see who the newcomer to the party was.

I could hear someone singing along with Mariah Carey's "All I Want For Christmas Is You," so I made my way toward the sound. As I rounded a corner, I came to a stop.

A woman with light brown hair, or maybe it was dark blonde, was holding a broom and singing into the handle as she bent down toward a black and white cat who was sitting on a hay bale, seemingly enjoying the impromptu show.

Leaning against the nearest stall, I reached up and gave a beautiful paint horse a rub on the neck while he or she also watched. The woman's voice was actually pretty damn good, and when she spun around, her ponytail did a little swish.

I had to bite down on my cheek to keep from laughing when a goat suddenly jumped up and stood next to the cat.

“What in the hell?” I whispered, as I noticed the goat was wearing Christmas pajamas that matched the ones she was wearing. He joined in on the song and dance, while the cat, totally not impressed, started to clean himself.

Turning to the horse, I asked, “Does this happen every night?”

He bobbed his head, and I let out a laugh.

A small shriek came from the direction of the dancing woman, and I whipped my head around to see her now standing there, with the broom pointed at me like a weapon.

“Who are you?” she shouted.

I held up my hands and slowly walked over to the small blue Bose speaker that was sitting on a stall door. I hit pause and looked back at her.

My breath caught in my throat as I took in the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen—and trust me, I’d seen plenty.

She was standing too far away for me to see the color of her eyes, but what I could see made my body take notice. A voluptuous body, a round doll face with the cutest button nose I’d ever seen, and from what I could tell, light eyes that demanded I got a closer look at them.

“Mackenzie Reeves?”

Frowning, she put the broom down and gave me a once-over. “And who are you, pretty boy?”

My brows shot up. “Pretty boy?”

With a hand on her hip and the other still gripping the broom, she said, “If you think you can try anything, let me give you a fair warning.”

“A warning...?”

“Yes. I will stick this broom into parts of your body that will prohibit you from walking correctly for the rest of your life.”

I was pretty sure my mouth had dropped damn near to the barn floor.

She flashed me a smug grin. “That’s right. So if you value that pretty face of yours, and the tool between your legs, you’ll walk away right now.”

A bark of laughter slipped free. “The tool between my legs?”

She let out a small growl. “Do you have to keep repeating everything I say? If you don’t leave in the next thirty seconds, I’ll call the police to report someone trespassing on private property.”

“And until they get here, you’ll use the broom to injure me?” I asked, trying not to sound smug, but knowing I was being a complete ass.

“Yes! I will. Now get out of this barn and off this farm. You’re trespassing.”

I walked closer and she held up the broom again. The cat had taken interest once more. The goat had somehow fallen asleep, understandable since he was wearing his pajamas. “I’m not leaving.”

A look of fear swept over her face, but it was gone as fast as it came. She took out her phone and said, “All I have to do is call one person, and a dozen ranch hands will show up and kick your ass.”

Stopping before I got too close to her, and still out of range of the broom, I motioned toward her phone. “Go ahead. Call. But I think you’ll find no one will be kicking my ass or asking me to leave.”

She lifted her chin. “And why is that?”

I folded my arms over my chest, and I watched as her gaze swept over my body, then met my own directly.

“Green,” I said softly.

“Green? What does that mean? Is it your last name?”

I grinned. “Your eyes. They’re green.”

She frowned, but only for half a second. “And yours are...” She took a step back.

“Some people say they’re black. My mother calls them onyx.”

Mackenzie dropped the broom and took a few more steps back until she ran into the haybale. The goat woke up, the cat let out a plaintive meow and jumped down, and the beautiful woman dropped to her ass on the bale and let out an *oof*.

“You okay?”

She quickly stood. “Who are you?”

Reaching my hand to shake hers, I said, “Bradly Littlewood.”

She closed her eyes and appeared to curse under her breath. I was pretty sure she mumbled *motherfucker*.

“And you *are* Mackenzie, correct?”

The fierce look was back when she opened her eyes, and she stared at my outstretched hand without taking it. “Mackenzie Reeves.”

I dropped my hand and let out a soft laugh. “What brings you out here to the barn on Christmas night, during a snowstorm, to sing to the animals?”

She glanced around the barn. “I didn’t want them to feel alone tonight.”

“You didn’t want *them* to feel alone?”

Rolling her eyes, she said, “For goodness’ sake, stop repeating me! What are *you* doing here?”

“I saw the lights on in the barn from across the pasture and wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “Really? I didn’t think you cared much about the farm side of the ranch.”

My smile faded. “I’m not home much.”

She nodded. “That’s right. The cowboy who rides bulls.”



“Do you have something against cowboys? Or those who ride bulls?”

She exhaled in frustration. “I don’t know you, Bradley, so I have little reason to have anything against you. Besides the fact that I think it hurts your mom’s feelings that you don’t take an interest in the farm.”

I raised my brows in surprise.

Closing her eyes again, she opened them and said, “I’m sorry. I have no right to pass judgment against you. Nor do I have a right to argue with you in your own barn.” She swallowed hard and looked around before focusing back on me. “I’ll get everything put up and head on out.”

She started to walk away, and I took a step forward. “Wait. Don’t leave.”

Mackenzie gave me a cautious look.

“First, it’s not my barn. It’s my parents’ barn.”

The corner of her mouth twitched.

“Second, you have every right to be here. Maybe not to come after me like you hate me...”

Her eyes widened. “I don’t hate you. I don’t even know you.”

“You certainly don’t like cowboys, so I’m guessing one of them either hurt you or did something bad to you.”

Her arms came around her body in a protective manner, and for some reason, I wished I could take those words back. Holding up my hands in surrender, I said, “I’m going to go. Please, keep serenading the animals. They all seemed to enjoy it.”

The goat took that moment to bounce up to Mackenzie and nuzzle against her.

“When did we get goats?”

Mackenzie looked down and grinned. It was the first true smile I’d seen from her since she’d turned around and seen me in the barn.

“Oh, she’s mine. Her name is Pickles.”

One brow rose. “You have a goat named Pickles?”

She shrugged.

“Right,” I replied with a chuckle. “I, um...I’ll let you get back to whatever it was you were doing. By the way, it’s really coming down out there, so you might want to think about leaving soon to head home, if you have a good drive from here.”

“I live in the apartment above the barn here.”

Jesus, what else didn’t I know? “Then you’re fine. Good thing. It’s snowing pretty hard.”

She glanced over to one of the barn windows and smiled again. “It’s my first white Christmas.”

“Really?”

As if deciding she’d said too much, she pressed her lips tightly together, and the wall was back up.

“Well, I’ll let you be. Merry Christmas, Mackenzie.”

She looked unsure of whether to respond or not.

“This is where you wish me a Merry Christmas as well.”

“Merry Christmas. Please tell your mother and father that I wish them a Merry Christmas too.”

I started to take a few steps backward, and I could see her body visibly relax. “Will do. Good night.”

“Night.”

Turning, I started out of the barn. Right before I shut the door, I took one last look and found Mackenzie sitting on the barn floor with the goat and the cat, both half in her lap. I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my face.

As I headed back to my truck, I laughed. How my body reacted to her surprised and thrilled me all at once. No woman had ever surprised me so much. Or made me feel the way I felt at the moment.

“I can’t wait to get to know you, Mackenzie Reeves.”

Preorder the next book in the series, [\*Forever Enough.\*](#)

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## About the Author

Kelly Elliott is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling contemporary romance author. Since finishing her bestselling Wanted series, Kelly has continued to spread her wings while remaining true to her roots with stories of hot men, strong women, and beautiful surroundings. Her bestselling works included *Wanted*, *Broken*, *Without You*, and *Lost Love*. Elliott has been passionate about writing since she was fifteen. After years of filling journals with stories, she finally followed her dream and published her first novel, *Wanted*, in November 2012.

Elliott lives in Central Texas with her husband, daughter, and two pups. When she's not writing, she enjoys reading and spending time with her family. She is down to earth and very in touch with her readers, both on social media and at signings. To learn more about Kelly and her books, you can find her through her website, [www.kellyelliottauthor.com](http://www.kellyelliottauthor.com).