



CHRISTMAS

in Redemption Ridge

Marrying

THE
RANCHER'S
DAUGHTER

TARA GRACE ERICSON

**MARRYING THE RANCHER'S
DAUGHTER**

CHRISTMAS IN REDEMPTION RIDGE

TARA GRACE ERICSON

Marrying the Rancher's Daughter

Christmas in Redemption Ridge Book 1

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Books by Tara Grace Ericson

Heroes of Freedom Ridge

To new adventures, and the people who take them with us.

“‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways, my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.’”

— ISAIAH 55:8-9

Tonight's bull seemed to stomp on Jason's chance at the rodeo finals as he crushed the black cowboy hat under a heavy hoof.

After the bull was distracted, Jason Keen lifted his cowboy hat and waved it at the cheering crowd before dusting it off and placing it back on his head. The crowd might be impressed, but he was disappointed in his performance. The crowd was always excited about a rider getting an eight-second ride, but Renegade had managed to get him off-balance enough to know his score wouldn't be exceptional.

The pressure was on, and he needed top billing if he had any hope of making it to Nationals. Or grabbing a sponsor for next season. Which he desperately needed, since the few he'd managed to get over the last five years had all slowly left for greener pastures. Or, in their words, "talent that was a better fit for their brand."

He still had WorkMade. The jeans company was his last remaining sponsor, but even they'd warned him that he needed to be more *approachable*.

Jason hopped off the fence as Renegade decided he wasn't quite ready to cool down and rammed it one more time before the bullfighters ushered the beast back into the bullpen.

"Nice ride, Jase." The congratulations was accompanied by a hearty slap on the back from his friend, Marcus.

He clicked his cheek. "Not good enough, I'm afraid." On cue, the announcer came over the speaker with his score.

Seventy-nine. He groaned and kicked the dirt in frustration.

“Come on, I’ll buy you dinner.”

“I probably won’t make good company,” he told his friend.

“Fine. You can buy me dinner,” Marcus quipped back, bringing a reluctant smile to Jason’s face. “And I promise to run interference on any adoring fans.”

Jason rolled his eyes and shoved the other cowboy forward. He knew as well as Marcus did that what he needed after a bad show was not to be left alone. If things were going well, it was tempting to take the celebrations too far. And if their draws were bad or they couldn’t hack it, cowboys lost themselves in the bottle far too often.

Jason was determined not to be that kind of competitor. He might not be charming and funny like Marcus, who made friends with everyone at every stop, but he was clean. While most people assumed he partied as rough as he rode, the truth was far simpler: He just preferred to keep to himself.

He’d never understand the people who turned every rodeo into a party. This was a sport. A job, even, if the sponsorships came through and the purse was good. Jason wasn’t here to make friends—the exception next to him notwithstanding.

They followed the smell of spicy smoke to a food stand serving barbecue and grabbed their plates before searching for a table. As his eyes roved the busy area, he heard an angry voice. “Cassie, you’ve got it all wrong, baby.”

Jason tried to ignore the conversation happening a few feet away. He knew Cassie Reynolds. Heck, everyone knew Cassie. She was practically Colorado ranching royalty, and Jason worked at Redemption Ridge, which was one of the Reynolds’ family’s premier properties. They had other ranches that were less touristy. But he had a soft spot for Redemption Ridge. It had been his first job after he moved away from Freedom shortly after high school.

“I don’t have time for this right now, Travis! I’ve got to get back to the press box.”

Cassie turned to walk away, but Travis grabbed her arm roughly. Jason's muscles tensed, his anger rising at how Cassie was being mistreated.

"I ain't done talking yet," Travis growled, his tone clearly intended to intimidate.

"Well, I am," Cassie said, wrenching her arm from his grip. Her other hand circled the place he'd been gripping.

That lowlife had hurt her. Jason started to move in that direction.

Cassie walked past him, her eyes briefly meeting his. The urge to pull her into his arms surprised him. He ignored it, and instead, he gave her a nod. Then he stepped in front of Travis, who trailed behind Cassie.

"I believe the lady said she couldn't talk right now," Jason said firmly.

Travis attempted to sidestep around him, his attention focused on Cassie. Jason blocked his path again.

"Get out of my way, blockhead."

Jason had ten years and about twenty pounds of muscle on the coward in front of him.

"Give it up, Travis. Even I know the two of you broke up, and I don't talk to anyone. She's done."

Travis spit at his feet, and Jason stepped even closer, forcing the man to look up at him. Jason glanced behind him to verify that Cassie was well on her way back to the booth. She was part of the rodeo circuit marketing team.

He stepped back from Travis. "We're done here. I better not see you harassing Cassie again. Because if I do, I'm going to show you what happens when you have to deal with someone your own size."

Cassie was barely five foot tall, and while Travis wasn't big, he had a healthy size advantage over her. But Jason was bigger.

Travis looked as though he wanted to argue, but Marcus stepped up next to Jason. Backup was always good, and Travis didn't have any. Eventually, he kicked the dirt at Jason's boots and then retreated. "You messed with the wrong cowboy, Keen."

"Ooh, are you scared?" Marcus asked with a laugh after Travis was out of earshot.

"Come on, let's eat," Jason said. He glanced back toward the press box, seeing a flash of Cassie's blond hair through the window. He prayed she'd watch her back. His boss—her father—would never forgive him if something happened to Cassie.

"You coming to Pueblo next week?" Marcus asked the questions between bites of pulled pork.

Jason nodded. "Yeah. I still need one more count to qualify. How about you?" Choosing which of the hundreds of rodeos to compete in was one of the hardest parts of the job. Couple the wear and tear on your body with the cost of entry fees, travel, and time off? It was no wonder the top guys needed sponsors.

"Oh my gosh! You're Jason Keen!"

Jason grimaced at the high-pitched squeal that assaulted him.

He turned his head to find two bleach-blond girls with too much makeup on. Behind them, a guy stood with his arms crossed, watching the exchange.

Jason nodded. "Hi." This was torture.

"I'm like, your biggest fan," one of them said. Her sidekick nodded exuberantly.

"Thanks for your support," he said, turning back to his sandwich after his default response. It felt awkward and uncomfortable to have fans. He hated being the center of attention.

"Can I have your autograph?"

Marcus nudged him with an elbow. Jason disguised his sigh by turning on the bench to face her.

His wannabe agent—aka Marcus—was always telling him he'd never get sponsored if he wasn't more friendly. "Sure," he said, hiding his irritation. He just wanted to eat his dinner and go back to his trailer.

"Great," she purred. She handed him a Sharpie and began to lift her shirt.

Jason stood up so fast, he knocked his pulled pork and drinks off the table. "What are you—Are you crazy? I'm not signing your... your skin!"

The sidekick stepped forward and started yelling. "She's not crazy, okay?"

Jason held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "Look, I don't know what you've heard..." He could see half a dozen cell phones pointed in their direction. "I'm happy to give you an autograph, just not there."

His cheeks were on fire.

"You got a problem with my girlfriend's body?" The tough guy from the second row had apparently decided this was a personal affront.

"I'm not saying anything." Oh good grief, could this get any worse? He glanced back at Marcus, but his friend was brushing ice cubes and pulled pork off his jeans.

"You think you're some kind of hotshot, just 'cause you can ride a bull?"

Jason clenched his fists, holding back the irritation that had been building since he got down from Renegade's back.

The three of them kept coming, speaking over each other and labeling him as selfish, stuck-up, and washed-out. Jason looked around for a way out, feeling the outburst bubble up inside him.

"Say something, you coward!"

Jason flinched.

“Do I need to teach you some manners?”

The boyfriend lifted his fist, but Jason was already moving. He grabbed the man’s arm and spun to pin it behind his back until he stilled. It was a bit like tying up a calf back at the ranch, but those smelled better than this guy.

After a moment, Jason let him go and shoved him away, into the waiting arms of the girls, still squealing their dismay. Jason walked backward away from them. His arms were open wide, but he lifted one to his hat. “Y’all have a nice night now, ya hear?”

Marcus scurried along the edge of the crowd that had gathered, and Jason turned around to walk the same way.

“What on earth just happened?” Marcus asked.

Jason groaned, thinking of all the phones he’d seen trained on the exchange. “Pretty sure I just blew my last sponsorship.”

Essie held back the tears of fear and frustration, taking a deep breath before pasting on a smile and entering the press box.

Everyone inside was focused on the activity below. The final bull ride was about to begin. Her eyes went to the rail and confirmed that her photographer was hard at work capturing moments from the event. She'd use them in social media and pass them along to the upcoming event organizers for them to use. Maybe they should consider a billboard to advertise the entire circuit and bring tourists to whatever events were on the calendar. The Mountain State Rodeo Circuit covered Colorado and Wyoming, and it kept her busy hopping from event to event.

With everyone's attention elsewhere, she sat at the desk and grabbed a pen. Her hands were shaking and she quickly dropped it.

Her encounter with Travis had really shaken her up. He was getting more intense. Bolder, too. She couldn't believe he'd grabbed her like that with so many people around.

While they'd been dating, he'd been so careful to keep his temper in check.

Until he didn't.

She'd forgiven him once, brushing it off as lack of sleep and stress. He was struggling. His family ranch had filed for bankruptcy last spring and sold off to the highest bidder, leaving him jobless and humiliated. Circumstances that

apparently forced him to lash out at her for a simple question about his day.

Then it happened again a week later.

And Cassie was done.

But Travis didn't seem to agree.

Thank goodness Jason had been there. He was the only reason Travis hadn't intercepted her on her way to the press box. He was one of the ranch hands at Redemption Ridge, an intimidating man that her brothers had warned her away from more than once.

That didn't mean her curiosity didn't flare every time she saw him around the circuit.

Jason caught most of the Colorado events, but he also entered rodeos in the Wilderness Circuit if they were on the eastern edge of Utah. Like most of the cowboys, he had a day job, and his job happened to be on her father's flagship ranch and resort.

Despite what her brothers said, she'd never seen Jason do anything terrible. The man was perpetually grumpy, though. There was a scowl on his face that never seemed to disappear—even when he got a high score for his ride.

Maybe that was why her brothers warned her away. People always referred to her as “bubbly,” which seemed ridiculous to her. She was friendly, sure. But she wasn't an airhead.

Still, even she could admit her friendliness had been misconstrued more than once as an invitation to far more than she was interested in.

That's actually how things had started with Travis. At first, she'd been flattered by the attention, and he was a fun guy to be around. He knew everyone, and being on his arm gave her an identity beyond “Barry Reynolds' Daughter.”

She loved her dad and her family, but sometimes being part of such a well-known ranching family was hard. She could never quite tell if her friends were genuine or if her opportunities were impacted by her last name.

It didn't matter how she'd gotten the Mountain State Marketing Coordinator job for the National Rodeo Cowboys Association. She was great at her job and determined to prove to everyone that she deserved it with or without her father's connections.

The writers for the NRCA website and newsletter were busy taking notes on the performance of the cowboys. The events below had wrapped up, since Bull Riding was usually the final event of the night. She knew it was because it kept the fans sticking around for the whole thing.

Cassie never understood that. There were other events that required as much if not more skill and were actually representative of life on a ranch. She'd even competed in her share of barrel race competitions in high school, but she wasn't competitive enough to push further.

But that love of the rodeo culture hadn't gone away, and as soon as she'd received her marketing degree, she'd accepted the job with the NRCA. She'd been working here for three years now. It was always exciting, and she loved that her job was to make new fans of the rodeo sport and engage with existing fans.

She didn't love that there were parties at every event and cowboys who hadn't learned to take no for an answer. Thankfully, for every bad apple, there was at least a couple who had manners and respect.

She'd thought Travis was the latter, but she'd been wrong. She didn't know what she was going to do about it.

Her phone flashed with a text message.

Travis: We're not done talking. You still belong to me, baby!

She shuddered at the thought. He probably thought that was romantic, but to her it was just possessive and dismissive. She didn't belong to anyone.

She'd like to belong *with* someone, though. Someday.

She stared at the message as another came through.

Travis: You're not getting rid of me that easily.

She pressed her fingers into her temples and exhaled a shaky breath.

“Everything okay, Cass?” That was Bethany, her work bestie and one of the writers for the circuit website. They usually tried to share a hotel room, because sometimes the rodeos made it hard to get rooms in town.

“Yeah, just Travis.”

Bethany rolled her eyes. “I thought you were done with that caveman.”

“I am. I'm trying to be. He's proving... persistent.”

“Persistent good or persistent bad?”

She and Bethany had this talk before. They both agreed a little persistence from a man who was interested in you wasn't a bad thing. Sure, they need to respect “No” as an answer if you flat-out told them you weren't interested, but sometimes it was nice to be pursued a little. That was persistent good.

“Ugh. Definitely persistent bad. Is there such a thing as persistent good after you've broken up?”

Bethany shrugged. “Beats me. You know I don't ever get to the dating part, let alone the breakup part.”

Another text from Travis.

Travis: Come on, baby. I love you! You're the only one for me.

She rolled her eyes. She hated being called baby. She dismissed his message and texted her mom. The rodeo continued tomorrow night, and then she'd be free. There were some midweek events, but they were up in northern Wyoming and she wouldn't make it anyway. She was just two-and-a-half hours from home.

Cassie: I'm due for a vacation. Can I stay at home this week?

When she came back to her phone a few moments later, her mom's reply was waiting.

Mom: Of course, sweetie. Your room is always open! I'll tell the boys to plan on dinner Sunday night?

Cassie: Perfect. See you Sunday!

Then, she texted her boss, who worked out of the National Office in Colorado Springs. Technically, that's where Cassie worked too, but mostly she was on the road. The season was in full swing from April to October, with a few events leading into the finals in Las Vegas in December.

Cassie: Alright if I work from Redemption Ridge this week? I'll be in Pueblo starting Thursday night.

Her boss simply responded with a thumbs up, which was typical. Roger was super laid back, and unlike most of the circuit marketing coordinators, Cassie saw him regularly being based in Colorado. He was a good boss but had one foot out the door to retirement.

So far, she'd managed to do everything he had asked of her, but she knew she hadn't wowed him. She needed something big to make her stand out if she was going to be on the short list for his replacement.

With those plans made, she tucked her phone away and got to work on the social media posts that needed to go out with results from tonight's events. She logged on to the circuit's social media pages from her laptop and reviewed the recent posts tagging them. Mostly people at tonight's rodeo posting their selfies and photos of the riders during events.

A couple recent videos caught her eye though. They weren't videos of the bull rides or any other event. Was that...? Her heart sank when she saw Jason engaged in a heated argument with a group of fans.

It was hard to tell from the video what had happened. It just looked like Jason was refusing an autograph and yelling at those poor girls. She sighed as the views and comments on the video increased by the second.

This was a very unenjoyable part of her work. Her job was to make the Mountain State Circuit of the NRCA attractive to

cowboy and cowgirl competitors and fans alike. She couldn't have Jason growling and snarling at fans during events, which meant she needed to talk to him.

At least it would give her a chance to thank him for the assist with Travis. If she could manage to get the words out. Her tongue always seemed to be tied when she tried to talk to him. She'd never forget the first time he showed up at Redemption Ranch. She'd been twelve years old, with frizzy hair and braces.

He'd barely seen her as her dad showed him around the ranch. When Dad had said "This is my daughter, Cassie," Jason simply nodded in greeting.

She, on the other hand, had squeaked out a sentence that immediately made her want to fall into a crack in the dry dirt and disappear.

"My dad calls me Princess," she blurted out before she blushed all the way to her ears. "Oh! I mean, not that you should call me that. I mean, you could, I guess." She'd pressed her lips together, begging the ground to swallow her whole. His cheek twitched, but he didn't laugh, thankfully. She took a deep breath. "Welcome to the ranch. Bye!"

Then she'd run away, reliving the moment in the middle of the night even years later.

Maybe Jason didn't remember. She was just a little girl and he was a grown man, even back then. She knew he must be at least seven or eight years older than her. It hadn't stopped her preteen heart from listing him as an option each time she and her friends had played MASH on the school bus.

Either way, she'd never had enough conversation with him to find out. She glanced at the clock. It was nearly eleven o'clock at night. Whatever talk she needed to have with Jason would have to wait until tomorrow.

Jason woke up to banging on the door of his trailer. He and Marcus had stayed up late talking over a campfire set up between their two campers. It was their normal routine on event nights. But usually, he had a chance to wake up before anyone tried to break down his door.

Desperate to make the noise stop, he scrambled across the small camper.

He pushed the door open, shielding his eyes from the morning sun by resting his hand on the doorframe. “What is wrong with you?” he growled. Then he recognized who stood at the bottom of the step.

Cassie was looking up at him, her mouth hanging open. A soft *oh* escaped, and he watched with amusement as her eyes trailed up from his sweats, over his chest, and finally to his face.

The crimson that filled her cheeks had him biting his cheek to keep from smiling. She was kind of adorable.

“Like what you see?” His throat was sandpaper, still dry from sleep.

Her mouth opened and closed, like a fish on a line. Yep, he for sure needed to stop looking at her mouth.

He let the door close between them with a sharp bang and grabbed his shirt from where he’d discarded it the night before.

When he came back outside, Cassie was a bit farther away from the door. She paced the length of his camper, clearly agitated. She also appeared to be talking to herself, if the incomprehensible muttering counted as talking.

He stepped down from the camper, his bare feet padding the dusty earth. “What do you want, Miss Reynolds?” He needed to remind himself who he was talking to. This was his boss’s daughter. Ranching royalty.

“It’s Cassie.”

He just raised his eyebrow. There was a long moment of silence as they both waited.

Jason knew enough from watching Cassie to know that the silence was likely to drive her crazy.

As he suspected, she caved. “Have you seen the video?”

He jerked a shoulder. “Lots of videos out there,” he replied stubbornly. He knew exactly what she was talking about. He’d finally turned off his phone around 11:30 last night when the notifications were making him angry.

Angrier.

Cassie cocked her leg and put a hand on her hip. Her worn blue jeans hugged every curve, but they weren’t like the ridiculous designer jeans he saw girls wearing to the rodeo with holes and jewels. Cassie’s were WorkMade jeans, rugged and no frills. They fit her like a glove.

“I need to know if you’re being obtuse or just completely unaware, so answer the question.”

His eyebrows lifted in surprise. “I’ve seen it,” he admitted. “It’s total crap.”

Cassie rolled her eyes. “Obviously. But, Jason, you can’t—”

Jason interrupted her. “Why ‘obviously’?”

Cassie just stared at him, a hint of a blush rising in her cheeks again. “You just said it was overblown...”

He raised an eyebrow. “Well, yeah. But everyone else on the internet seems willing to take the video at face value. I

figured you'd do the same."

She pulled back. "Really? Look, I know we're not exactly friends or anything, but you've worked on my dad's ranch since I was twelve years old. I've seen you enough there and here on the circuit to know that you'd never treat someone poorly for no reason."

Jason rubbed his palm across his two-day stubble. "She wanted me to sign her chest." He grimaced at the memory. "What was I supposed to do? WorkMade wants me to be family friendly. I can't be signing cleavage! But then, the whole thing blows up anyway. Can't catch a break."

Cassie clicked her tongue. "Yikes. That's... yeah. I can see why you refused. Good for you, by the way. Half the guys on this tour would have signed and taken their sweet time. Probably get her number, too." She rolled her eyes.

Jason couldn't argue with that. There were far too many girls like the one from last night chasing some thrill with a rodeo cowboy. And far too many competitors willing to stoop that low. "So what? Are you here to lecture me, too?"

Cassie collapsed into the folding camp chair still sitting near the empty fire pit. She sighed. "I was, but I guess that won't do any good. I figured I'd come down here and remind you of the NRCA Code of Conduct."

He smirked and sat in the remaining chair. "Gee, thanks. Don't worry. MadeWell already told me I was on thin ice. This is liable to put them over the edge. Without that sponsorship, I can't afford the travel and the entry for Nationals." He kicked his bare foot up on the edge of the cast iron fire ring and stared into the ashes.

"So what? You're just done, then?"

He shrugged, ignoring the disapproval he heard in her voice.

"Looks that way."

"Come on. There's got to be something we can do. Maybe Bethany can do an interview. Tell your side of the story."

Jason shook his head. “No thanks. I really don’t think anyone is going to listen to what I have to say.” It wasn’t an accident that he had the reputation he did. If he’d been a different person, then people wouldn’t be so ready to believe the worst about him at every turn. His brother was the fun one, easy to like, and friends with everyone. He’d ended up marrying his best friend, Alexis, earlier this spring.

Jason knew he hadn’t been very kind to her at Thanksgiving last year. He’d been angry and hurt from a nasty kick to his ribs from a bull named Tornado that had knocked him out of the running for the finals.

And seeing his brother’s idyllic little life back home in Freedom always put him in a nasty mood. The truth was, he’d been in a dark place for a long time. But God had met him at rock bottom and lifted him out.

Jason had apologized to Jared and Alexis later, and even been the best man at their wedding. His relationship with his brother was still strained but getting better.

Cassie shook her head and leaned forward in the chair. “They can’t listen if you don’t say anything. You’d really let your rodeo career end like this?”

Jason stared at the sun as it started to creep over the other trailers. Before long, this overnight parking area would be busy with cowboys rolling out of bed to care for their animals. One upside of being a bull rider was that his own horse didn’t have to make the trips.

“Maybe it’s time to be done, Cassie.” He’d been thinking that for a while, but saying it out loud made the heaviness sink lower in his gut.

“You’re so close, though. You’ve got a chance this year.”

He shrugged. She might be right, but technically it all came down to Pueblo. “Why do you care so much?”

“I don’t,” she said immediately, forcing him to hide a smile with his hand. “I just think the rodeo is better when we have the best competitors. That’s you.”

Jason warmed at her words. It shouldn't matter what Cassie thought of him. But apparently it did.

And she thought he was a good man and a good cowboy.

“What about you?” His eyes drifted to the faint bruise on her arm, and he felt himself scowl. “Can't you kick Travis off the tour?”

Her laugh was cynical and hard-edged, so unlike the cheerful Cassie he knew. “I wish. But he doesn't actually compete. He just comes to all the events as a spectator,” she scoffed. “Ridiculous, isn't it?”

Jason raised his eyebrows. “Seriously? I guess I just assumed...” He hesitated. “Do you need me to take care of him?”

She sighed. “I've tried. Others have tried. I'm pretty sure, unless there is a ring on my finger, he's not going to leave me alone.”

Guys like that disgusted him. As though the only reason to leave a woman alone was because she's with another man, ignoring her own wishes otherwise? “What did you see in him, anyway?”

She waved a hand. “I don't even know anymore. It was nice for a bit, having a friend on the tour. Someone to spend time with on the road. Besides Bethany, I mean,” she corrected, her mouth rounding into a surprised O. “You *can't* tell her I said that.”

He bit his cheek to keep from smiling. “Now, I don't know... What if she asks me?”

A wrinkle formed on Cassie's brow. “What?”

“I'm just messing with you, Princess. I don't even know Bethany.”

Cassie's look of confusion turned to a glare at his use of the nickname. “Here I thought you were a nice guy.”

He shrugged. “Good thing we cleared up that misconception.”

Cassie wished she didn't have to leave. For the first real conversation she'd had with Jason, it was easier than expected to talk to him. He might be a bit hard to read at times, but she liked that he was basically "What you see is what you get."

Too many guys acted like one thing when you first met them and then pulled a bait and switch. At least as far as she could tell, he was exactly who he seemed to be: a bit grumpy, mostly good, and more insecure than she would have guessed.

She wasn't entirely satisfied with how they'd left things. He shouldn't have to give up his rodeo career because of one misleading viral video. So what if he wasn't the most outgoing cowboy on the tour? He was a good bull rider, and he had a shot at the title this year.

She was going to talk to Bethany and see what she said. Maybe there was something Cassie could work on while she and Jason were both at Redemption Ranch this week.

She stopped mid-step, faltering. Of course.

They would both be at Redemption Ranch! She was the social media coordinator. It would be simple for her to show 'the other side of Jason Keen.' Working on the ranch, maybe dinner with her family. Anything to show the world that he wasn't a cruel, dismissive jerk like the video made it seem.

Maybe she could give him some interview training too. He never did very well with the press when they tried to interview him before or after his events.

He just needed some PR training. Cassie could do that.

Problem solved, she started walking again, headed back to the trailer she shared with Bethany. A long morning shadow appeared between two of the trailers, and then the body connected to it ambled out of the gap.

“Well, I didn’t think I’d have to stake out the campground to get a chance to talk to my girlfriend.”

Cassie tried moving to the other side of the narrow road to get around him. Travis sidestepped to intercept her again.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Her heart sank. “Travis, I don’t want to do this with you. We’re over. You need to move on.”

“Baby, you know I love you. You’re all I have. You mean everything to me.”

Cassie was becoming all too familiar with this rollercoaster of emotions from Travis. She shook her head. “No, I’m not. I’m not falling for this, okay? I need you to listen to me for once.”

Travis’s face morphed from apologetic and loving to furious in an instant. He stepped closer, and Cassie found herself with her back to the side of a trailer. His hand was on her collarbone, pinching so hard she might cry out. She tried to squirm away from it.

His face was close to her own, his hot breath assaulting her. “No, you listen! You know I’ve had a hard year. My family lost everything. I lost my job, my dignity. And there is no way you’re going to take the only thing I have left. You got that?” He leaned in close and tried to whisper in her ear. She flinched away from the smell of liquor and body odor that filled her nose. “With you by my side, I’ll be somebody again. Married into the Reynolds’ family? It might not get my family ranch back, but your daddy can just give us another one as a wedding gift, what do you say?”

She reared her head back and forth, trying to get away from his lips.

“Not. A. Chance.” She ground out every word, then shoved her knee up between his legs. Instantly, he moved away, falling to the ground.

“Cassie!”

She looked down the road and saw Jason a few steps away, his sweats upgraded to jeans and his bare feet now sporting well-worn cowboy boots. A flood of relief washed over her.

His eyes were on Travis, rolling on the ground behind her. “And here I thought I was going to get to play white knight, Princess.”

At his words, she looked back at Travis, before turning back to him. The adrenaline from the encounter abandoned her, her legs and hands beginning to shake. A sob tore from her throat.

In an instant, Jason’s strong arms came around her, rubbing circles on her back. She buried her face into his shoulder, wetting it with her tears. She felt his chin touch the top of her head.

“He... He won’t stop,” she said through her cries. “How do I get him to leave me alone?”

Jason led her over to the step of a nearby trailer and sat her down.

“You stay right here, okay? I’m going to go have a little talk with Travis over there.” His eyes flashed with something she couldn’t quite identify.

She nodded, trying to catch her breath through the tears. She watched Jason walk over to the groaning form of Travis, who was still in a heap in the middle of the makeshift road of the overnight parking area. Jason pulled Travis to his feet, then grabbed him by the collar. She couldn’t hear what he was saying, but she was mesmerized by the fierceness of his expression as he clearly let Travis have a piece of his mind.

She hadn’t realized quite how tall Jason was, but Travis had to look pretty far up when Jason was up close. Travis looked ticked, though. His fists were clenched, his eyes kept

darting toward Cassie, and she wanted to disappear. But also she didn't want to miss a thing.

Jason eventually shoved Travis away down the road, watching him leave before turning back to her and slowly walking over. Cassie had managed to control her fear and relief and her body no longer shook. But embarrassment was rapidly rushing in to take its place.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Jason scowled at her. "Don't you dare apologize for him," he said in a tone that made her eyes widen. "Let's go. We're going to the police station."

Cassie argued for a bit, but Jason was determined. He convinced her that it would be good to have the incident on record. He stood behind her, arms crossed, glaring at the officer while she explained what had happened.

"Are you sure you're okay, ma'am?"

Cassie's brow wrinkled. "I'm not sure what you mean. I'm fine right now."

The officer kept flicking her eyes up to Jason's intimidating form, and Cassie finally understood.

"Oh, him? He's fine. He's the one who saw my ex attack me, actually."

The officer wrote down a few more things. "Sir? Can you please come write down your version of the events that occurred?"

Jason scowled but stepped forward and took the pen from the officer's hand.

"Now, we'll file a report for the assault. Then it's up to the prosecutor whether they want to issue an arrest warrant for him."

Cassie's heart sank. "You mean, they might not?"

The officer shrugged. "I don't know, ma'am. That's above my paygrade. You're doing the right thing by reporting him, but what happens next isn't always what should."

She could have sworn she heard Jason growl next to her before he spoke. “What about a restraining order?”

The officer shook her head. “You can fill out the paperwork, but I can tell you that what your ex has done so far won’t be enough to convince the judge to grant one.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Jason said, pounding a fist on the counter. “He tried to force himself on her!”

“Sir, I’m going to need you to calm down.”

Cassie laid her hand on Jason’s arm, feeling his muscles relax under her fingers. “It’s okay, Jason. We’ll file the report, and we’ll see what happens. Maybe it’ll be enough to make Travis realize that I’m done with him.”

Cassie finished filling out her paperwork, then went back to a private room so the officer could photograph the fresh red marks on her collarbone where he’d pinched her. The woman snapped a few photos. “Here’s a tip, woman to woman. In a day or two, grab your own photos of these bruises. They’ll be nice and dark by then and will look a lot better in court. Or worse,” she corrected. “You know what I mean.”

Cassie nodded, recognizing it was a morbid-but-helpful tip. “Thanks. I’ll remember that.”

Hopefully, it wouldn’t come to that. She was ready to spend a few days at home and try to forget Travis even existed.

Jason thought of Cassie while he finished his ride on Saturday night. The bull he'd drawn, Red Chaos, had a reputation for being a nasty one. When the gate opened, he refused to let Red Chaos get the best of him, his legs clenched around the middle of the bull. His core muscles flexed to compensate for the spins and kicks, while he used his extended hand for balance.

When the scores came through, it was his best ride of the season. Cheers erupted from the crowd as the judges announced his score: 91 points. Even his social media infamy couldn't dampen their excitement at seeing the battle between bull and rider.

Exactly what Jason needed.

When the show was over, Jason loaded up his trailer and joined the long line of cowboys leaving the lot. Some would stay tonight, but the drive back to Redemption Ranch was only a few hours, and he'd rather be home for the entire day tomorrow. Maybe even make it to church in the morning if he was ambitious and the Tylenol was strong enough to combat the stiffness and aches that came from three days of rides.

A mile or two out of town, he saw a familiar trailer pulled over on the side of the two-lane highway. Worry creased his eyebrow as he flipped on his blinker and pulled over ahead of it, then stepped into the chilly night air.

Cassie was there, the hood of the truck open and her hands on her hips.

“You’re the fifth cowboy to stop. I’m fine. Please just turn around and keep driving.” Cassie didn’t turn around, but he heard the crack in her voice that said she wasn’t as unaffected as she seemed.

“I don’t think I can do that,” he countered.

“You guys are—”

She whirled around, frustration morphing to relief when she saw his face. Her angry words cut off. Something clicked into place inside him. He didn’t know why, but he liked that she was glad to see him. “See, if my boss found out that I saw his daughter stranded on the side of the road and I didn’t stop to help? Well, I believe I’d be out of a job.”

Amusement flickered across her face. “I’m not stranded.”

That was a bald-faced lie if he’d ever heard one. He gave a sarcastic retort. “Call it a hypothetical situation, then.”

Her smile widened. “Hypothetically, if the boss’s daughter’s truck had a cracked head gasket and overheated, she could sleep in her trailer until the tow truck arrived.”

Yikes. A cracked gasket meant her truck was totally out of commission. He’d been hoping for an easy fix. He stepped closer as a car whizzed by on the road a few steps away.

“Or, she could catch a ride home with someone she’s known for fourteen years.”

“Hypothetically?” she said, her voice sweet and reticent.

He grunted, done with the charade. “Grab your stuff, Princess. It’s almost eleven. I don’t think my carriage will turn into a pumpkin, but I guess we’ll find out.”

“Are you going to turn into a frog?” she countered, pulling a duffel bag out of the passenger seat.

“That depends on whether you’re going to kiss me.” The words escaped before he realized what he was saying. All the blood drained from his face, and he spun back toward his truck, resisting the urge to pound his fist on the small trailer as he walked past it.

What was he thinking? He couldn't say things like that to Cassie. She was the boss's daughter. She was a Reynolds! And him? Well, he was Jason Keen, washout rodeo star with a short temper. Not to mention, he was far too old for Cassie.

He'd better get his head on straight or he was in for a world of trouble. He thought Barry would fire him, but that was nothing compared to what her brothers, Zeke and Gideon, would do to him if they heard him make a comment like that.

Cassie opened the truck door and tossed in her duffel bag, making him feel like a jerk for not offering to carry it. He'd been busy beating himself up for his comment.

"Let me go make sure I've got everything."

He nodded, picking up his phone to check the distance home after kicking up the heater a notch. Two hours left of the drive, and now he'd be making it with Cassie riding shotgun.

With a sigh, he dialed the non-emergency police number and let them know that Cassie's trailer would be towed tomorrow and that there was no one with the vehicle.

As he was finishing the call, Cassie pulled herself into the truck using the handle, her jeans sliding across the seat as though she'd climbed into his trusty Ford a hundred times. "All right," she said on a sigh, "take me home."

A brief vision of her saying those words in a white dress flashed in his mind.

Home.

Great, now he was hallucinating, too. Jason shifted the truck into drive. He took a swallow of the energy drink he'd pulled out of the fridge for the trip. He didn't feel tired, but it was the only explanation he could think of for his lack of control and crazy thoughts.

Cassie's sweet scent began to fill the truck, the warm air circulating the same fruity aroma that he'd inhaled while holding her in his arms this morning after Travis's assault. After making sure she was warm enough, he reduced the temperature.

“Thanks for giving me a lift,” she said.

“It’s nothing,” he replied. “A girl like you shouldn’t be out on the side of the road alone. Where’s Bethany anyway?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Her defenses were up, and Jason tried to backpedal.

“I’m just saying. With Travis or a dozen other guys like him, you might find yourself in deeper trouble than a cracked gasket.”

She sighed. “Bethany is staying in Durango and flying to catch the Monday rodeo in Salt Lake City. I drive on my own all the time. Usually, it’s no big deal.”

“Except when you break down.”

“Yeah. Except for that.” She stared out the window to her right, and he wished he could see her face. Maybe it would give him some clue as to what she was thinking. Eventually, she turned forward. “I should have said something before, but about this morning...”

He raised his eyebrows to show he was listening, though his eyes were on the road.

“Can you not mention it to my family?”

He exhaled slowly, the breath rumbling in his chest in aversion to the idea of not telling her family. “Why?” he managed to ask through gritted teeth.

“Dad already worries about me on the circuit. He tries to convince me to come home and work for him every time we talk. Plus, Zeke and Gideon are convinced I’m helpless and would lose their minds if they knew someone tried to attack me.”

“He *did* attack you, Cassie.” The words flew from Jason’s mouth in frustration. He took a breath. “Sorry, it’s just... I know you handled it, but it could have been so much worse.” Jason ran a hand over his face.

“I’m fine,” she countered.

He thought he might crack a tooth from the way he was clenching his jaw. “I think you should tell them, and if they ask me about it, I won’t lie.” He could live with that. Defend it if needed. One look at Cassie made him continue, trying to give her what she wanted. “But I won’t go out of my way to tell your story, okay?”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

This girl was tougher than nails, but she was vulnerable too. And he didn’t know how to handle it. How was he supposed to protect someone who didn’t want to need protection?

He’d never forgiven himself for not recognizing the danger that Mrs. Bennett was in. As the high school librarian, she’d been his favorite teacher. He’d asked about the bruises on her arms and face, revealed by the end of the day as her makeup wore off. But she’d always smiled and brushed it off, claiming her own clumsiness and directing him back to the work she assigned to him as her 9th period aide or helping him study for his finals.

Until one day, about a month before graduation, sirens raced through the idyllic mountain town of Freedom. And she hadn’t come to school the next day. Or the next. Her abusive husband had gone too far, and Jason would always blame himself for not helping her get out.

He wouldn’t let the same thing happen to Cassie. Even if she didn’t think she needed protecting, he wasn’t going to let Travis hurt her again.

Essie rode silently next to Jason as the road stretched out before them, disappearing into blackness just beyond the headlights. Occasionally, the narrow highway was lined with trees as they wound through the mountains toward Redemption Ranch, a stone's throw from Redemption Ridge and about a half hour past Telluride.

The day had stretched endlessly, and just when she thought she was almost to the end of it, her truck's temperature gauge shot through the roof and steam started pouring out of the hood. It was lucky that Jason had stopped by. Not luck, she corrected. God was once again providing her what she needed.

And just in time, too. Because she'd been ready to lose it on the next helpful cowboy who offered to warm her up in his truck. Of course, Jason had offered to drive her, too, but that was different. She knew him. Or at least, her family did. No one could fault her for accepting his offer, even if he did insist on calling her 'Princess.' It should bother her more than it did, but for some reason, she couldn't bring herself to ask him to stop.

Then, there was the other thing he'd said.

Her cheeks warmed at the memory. *That depends on whether you're going to kiss me.*

She'd certainly imagined it a fair bit as a lovestruck teenager, but it hadn't taken long to realize that Jason Keen wasn't the least bit concerned about the owner's twelve-year-old daughter. But she wasn't twelve anymore. And his

youthful face had only grown more handsome as the years added angles and creases—and a healthy shadow of stubble on the final days of any event.

His dark hair had mostly gone gray, though she knew he was only eight-or-so years older than her twenty-six. He'd always been gruff, though, like he was angry at the world. She knew that for some guys, that led them to alcohol or fights. Everything she'd ever seen from Jason was that he was determined to work out his frustration. At the ranch, he was the first one up in the mornings, hauling hay or mending fences. On the circuit? He was busy doing reaction drills with other riders or studying video of the bull he'd drawn.

All work and no play makes Jason a very dull boy.

No, not dull. The way her heart accelerated every time she crossed paths with him was evidence enough of that.

She glanced toward the driver's seat, her eyes on the way his forearms flexed as he deftly guided the steering wheel for another switchback curve. No, definitely not a boy. Jason was a man. A good one, by all accounts. Well, unless you counted the viral social media storm she needed to counteract.

She sighed and looked back into the darkness out her window.

“What's that sigh for, Princess?”

“Why do you call me that?” she asked.

He hummed but didn't answer.

She waited, but after a moment, she accepted that he probably wasn't going to. “I was just thinking about what I was going to do this week to show everyone the real Jason Keen.”

His eyebrows flew skyward. “What? No way.” He shook his head adamantly.

“It's your best option, Keen. You need some damage control, and who better to do it than me?” She smiled sweetly. “I'll get some footage of you on the ranch, maybe show you at dinner with my family, something like that.”

“I eat alone,” he said firmly.

She waved a hand. “Whatever. You’ve eaten with us before. I’m just saying, we need to show people that Jason Keen isn’t just some big, bad bull rider.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what I am. And I’ve got the buckles to prove it.”

Her heart stuttered at the intensity of his voice. “Well, you’re also more than that.”

He grunted again. Great, back to caveman noises.

“I’m doing this. And the thing is, I don’t really need your cooperation.”

His eyes slid to hers with a skeptical look.

“You just go about your normal life at the ranch, and I’ll do the rest.”

Jason looked back at the road but didn’t respond. He reached for the radio and turned up the volume. She supposed that was the end of their conversation. For now.

Cassie must have dozed off after a few songs, because she opened her eyes to see the large metal entry gate for Redemption Ranch in front of her as Jason pulled off the road onto the gravel drive. The sign had been handmade by a metal artist who lived in Redemption, and the gate featured trees and horses, with the mountain in the background. Jason typed in the access code on the panel next to the drive and the gate swung open.

It was always open during the daylight hours, but they kept it closed for security at night. There was even a guard on duty who would undoubtedly watch them rolling up the drive at one-thirty in the morning from his office in the main lodge.

Cassie supposed this wasn’t the least bit unusual for Jason. The man spent a lot of time on the road to keep his points and rank up. At least the circuit paid for her travel expenses. Jason probably really needed this sponsorship to help cover things. She knew her dad probably paid him well, but Jason was still a

wrangler. The head wrangler, Paul, had worked there for 25 years, and her dad trusted him without reservation.

Dad owned seven different ranches across western Colorado, but Redemption Ranch was his favorite. And the one he was determined to keep in the family, though she wasn't sure either Gideon or Zeke had any real desire to run it. And Dad would certainly never let her take over. He'd made that much obvious with the ridiculous marriage clause in the ownership trust. Her dad was great, but he was also stuck fifty years in the past and couldn't get past the idea of a woman rancher, even with Patience Lauer owning her own spread not five miles away.

Jason continued past the lodge and turned down the hidden lane that led to the main house where her mom and dad lived. His own place was another quarter mile down the road, a collection of small 1-2-bedroom houses for the wranglers and their families.

The porch light was on, illuminating the cozy front porch. Mom and Dad's house was beautiful, with stone and timber accents and gray trim, making the white house a classic mix of modern and rustic. It fit right into the rugged mountain landscape. The lodge had a similar look, though the white siding was replaced with a darker color.

It had been home since she was seven years old. It was the year that her parents had purchased Redemption Ranch and turned it into their dream: a working cattle ranch with a family resort and dude ranch.

Jason parked the truck and got out. Before Cassie realized what he was doing, he opened the passenger door, his hand extended toward her. She hesitated, then placed her hand in his and let him help her down, trying to ignore the way her heart stuttered as her body skimmed his.

Once she was out, he reached into the back seat and pulled her duffle bag out.

"Thank you," she said, almost afraid to break the eerie silence of the night. Her breath formed a cloud in the air and floated skyward. The evening was crystal clear, and the stars

laid out like a blanket in the black sky, the moon just a sliver. She tugged her zip-up sweatshirt closed to keep out the chill.

“Good night, Princess.” Jason whispered the words, giving her a gentle push toward the porch. Her footsteps crunched lightly on the white rock drive. She looked back over her shoulder to see Jason standing next to the passenger door, his eyes locked on her departing frame, his expression unreadable.

The front door was unlocked, and she hurried inside, shutting the door silently behind her. She leaned against the doorframe and exhaled deeply.

“What’s wrong, sis?”

Her eyes flew open at the unexpected voice. Her oldest brother, Zeke, was on the couch to her right, a cooking show on the television across the room.

“Long day,” she said. She couldn’t properly explain that she felt tangled up in knots from all the time with Jason. Zeke was relatively cool-headed, but he would march out there and confront Jason if he thought something was going on.

And there was nothing going on. So it didn’t matter anyway.

“What are you doing up so late?” she asked.

Zeke shrugged. “Just unwinding. Look at this guy, though. He’s trying to make risotto in twenty minutes. The judges are going to tear him apart. Has he never watched this show before?”

“You know what risotto is?” Her skepticism and teasing tone made Zeke toss a pillow at her. Cassie dropped her duffle bag on the floor to catch it with a laugh. She grabbed a spot next to her big brother and pulled a blanket from the back of the couch before snuggling in.

She thought maybe she’d forgotten about Jason for a moment, until his headlights illuminated the room as he pulled out of the drive. Nope. No doubt she’d be thinking about him for the rest of the night. And tomorrow, she’d make her plan for saving his reputation.

Jason went to church the next morning. It was hosted weekly by his boss, Paul, in the little chapel on the ranch for the staff and guests who wanted to attend. Sometimes, the Reynolds family attended the cowboy church service, but more often, they drove to town and went to the service at Redemption Bible Church.

He'd been there a time or two but preferred the laid-back service at the Triple R chapel. The chapel had huge windows on three sides, and sitting inside felt more like sitting in a clearing in the middle of the mountains.

After the service, he stopped by the stables and checked on his favorite horses. He missed them when he was away, but Honeysuckle and Goldenrod didn't seem to hold it against him. Probably because he always brought them treats when he came home. Peppermints or carrots or apples were a surefire way to keep a horse on your good side.

He usually worked on Sundays, since he missed so many Thursdays and Fridays for rodeo events. He checked the board and saw his weekly assignments listed in neat block letters by Paul. He groaned when he saw the note about his Tuesday assignment.

Pony Patrol Assistant, seriously?

He wasn't a warm and cuddly wrangler, and thankfully, he worked away from the guests as much as possible. Training horses, tending cattle, mending fences, or clearing paths for guided rides, four-wheeling, or mountain biking. He'd take all

the solo work any day. So why did Paul have him scheduled for Pony Patrol? Maverick and Gideon usually handled it.

He glanced at the rest of his list, looking for something he could tackle this afternoon. The training corral gate had a broken hinge, and the spectator seats there needed to be sealed before the winter. He could manage that.

He grabbed the supplies he would need and the keys to one of the side-by-side vehicles they used around the ranch.

“Just the man I was looking for.”

Jason finished setting things in the bed of the side-by-side and looked up to see Barry Reynolds across the parking lot. He was wearing his customary button-down shirt and jeans, and a tan cowboy hat covered most of his light-brown hair. Hair that actually had less gray in it than Jason’s own, despite the twenty-five years Barry had on him.

“I hear I have you to thank for getting my girl home safely last night,” he said with a grin. Jason had always liked the man who owned Redemption Ranch. Barry had taken a chance on a scrawny nineteen-year-old kid who didn’t know a saddle from a snaffle bit.

Jason shook his head. “It was nothing. Just glad I happened by at the right time.”

“You should come to dinner tonight—our way of saying thanks.”

“There’s really no—”

“Now, come on. Connie’s making chili and cornbread, and I know you don’t want to say no to that.”

Jason’s stomach rumbled at the mention of a homemade meal. Rodeo food trucks and gas station pizza didn’t hold a candle to Connie’s cooking. He should say no. More time with Cassie was exactly what he didn’t need.

But he found himself agreeing, despite his best intentions. Barry was a hard man to say no to. It had certainly served him well over the decades of ranch management. The man had

built a ranching conglomerate that was one of the largest in the state.

“Perfect! We’ll see you around seven o’clock.”

Jason spent the afternoon working. He installed the new hinge on the gate and applied a sealer to the wooden benches parents used while watching their kids in the training corral. He worked mostly without interruptions, which he didn’t mind at all. He lost himself in the methodical work of brushing the sealer on the benches, enjoying the fresh air and the quiet.

When he was done, he taped off the benches with a wet paint sign, just in case any of the guests wandered down here and decided to sit. He’d made that mistake once when he’d been new to the ranch, and the uptight housewife had a meltdown since it ruined her outfit.

After he packed up his tools and delivered everything back to the wrangler shed, he checked his watch. It was almost six, which meant he had just enough time to run home for a quick shower. Connie and Barry weren’t fussy by any means, but he also didn’t want to come to dinner covered in grease and sweat.

Before he left the shed, he snapped a photo of the assignment board and sent it to Paul.

Jason: Am I being punished for something?

Paul: Gideon has a mountain biking tour.

Paul: You’ll be fine. The kids don’t bite... Usually.

Jason scowled at the phone and slid it back in his pocket. He had to leave again at noon on Thursday to make it to Pueblo. This would be his last rodeo before the finals in Vegas in mid-December. Hopefully. The top fifteen in every event made it to the National Finals Rodeo, and he was sitting at number seventeen. If he did win Pueblo, then he would add a big count to his total, and it just might be enough to push him into the last qualifying spot.

He’d teach some kids how to not fall off a horse, finish the rest of his assignments, and then hit the road. Was Cassie

headed to Pueblo, too? Quickly, he dismissed the thought. It didn't matter.

After a quick shower, he walked the long stretch to the main house. Along the way, he waved at a family of guests coming back from a hike on the south trails. He knocked on the door, feeling like he should have brought something. Flowers. He should have brought flowers, right?

It only took about ten seconds for the door to swing open and Cassie's cheerful face to greet him.

"Hey! You made it." She reached in and wrapped him in a hug, while he stood awkwardly, unsure what to do with his hands and looking around to see if anyone was watching. Why was she hugging him? The fruity shampoo was back, amplified by the way her hair swung around her shoulders instead of being pulled back like it was last night.

He didn't know what to say, so he remained silent. That was his usual, anyway.

"Jason, it's so good to see you!" Connie Reynolds, family matriarch and hostess extraordinaire, scurried toward them, crossing the living room, an oven mitt still in one hand. She opened her arms and hugged him. "Come in, come in. Tell us all about how things are going. I know you still work here, but you're gone so much I never see you."

He removed his hat, tucking it under one arm. "Thanks for having me, ma'am."

Connie waved her hand. "Of course, Jason. I don't know why we didn't do it sooner. We keep saying we need to have all the wranglers over here more often. I'm glad Barry insisted tonight."

While his attention was focused on Connie, he was vaguely aware of his hat being pulled from under his arm. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cassie hang it on one of the hooks beside the door, clearly installed for just that purpose.

He said hello to Zeke and Gideon, then Barry offered him a drink. Seeing how the brothers interacted with each other and with Cassie made him miss his own brother. He made a

mental note to call Jared on his way to Pueblo. All that car time would be good for catching up.

“So what’s this about a late-night rescue of Little Miss Independent over here?” Zeke asked, obviously teasing his sister.

Jason shook his head, his expression neutral. “She had it handled.” He thought back to the episode with Travis. She had that handled, too. “It was probably more convenient to catch a ride with me, though I’m not much of a conversationalist.” He frowned into his drink.

“Cassie has never had much of a problem filling the silence,” Barry said, nudging his daughter with his shoulder. “We really appreciate you looking out. You know, I worry about you out there on the circuit, sweetheart.”

“I know, Dad. But I’m not a little girl anymore.”

“I know, I know. I was a little surprised to hear you were coming home. Isn’t the season almost done?”

Cassie looked toward the door. “I just needed a bit of a break from the road and thought I’d spend a few days at home.”

“And we’re so glad you are,” Connie chimed in. “The resort’s a bit slow right now, until Thanksgiving, so it’s the perfect time for a visit. Jason, what are your plans for Thanksgiving?”

Jason hadn’t even gotten that far yet. The holiday was three weeks away. “I suppose that depends on if I qualify for the Finals.”

Last year, he missed out on qualifying. The concussion he’d gotten in August had set him too far back, and despite his best efforts—and a lot of overnight drives to hit an extra rodeo or two—he hadn’t had the counts. He’d ended up in Freedom for Thanksgiving, feeling sorry for himself and making everyone else’s Thanksgiving miserable.

He wouldn’t do that again, even if Pueblo was the end of the line for him. It was nearly time to retire. He knew that. Bull riding was a young man’s sport. How many times had he

and Marcus said that when they were trading ibuprofen and ice packs? He was almost thirty-four, and recovery between rodeos was getting harder and harder.

Maybe he'd give it one more year—if he had the sponsors.

“We'll be cheering for you,” Cassie said.

Everyone around the kitchen murmured their agreement. All the attention and support made Jason uncomfortable, and he ran his thumb back and forth over the rim of his glass. “Thanks,” he said finally.

Connie clapped her hands together. “Dinner's ready, everyone. Barry, would you say grace before we get our plates?”

Jason bowed his head. The prayer was short but genuine, and a moment later, a small line formed in front of the stove. After insisting Connie and Cassie go first, Jason dished himself a big bowl of chili and two generous pieces of cornbread and a scoop of coleslaw.

“This looks delicious, Connie. Thank you.”

“So, sis, whatever happened to that guy you were dating?” Zeke's question nearly made Jason drop his plate.

His eyes met Cassie's over the dining room table as he sat down. She shook her head in a tiny movement.

“We broke up,” she said with a shrug.

“Good riddance,” Gideon echoed. “I didn't like that guy.”

“You guys never even met him,” she said with a laugh.

“Didn't have to,” Gideon said, sitting down. “I could tell.”

Cassie rolled her eyes.

“Did you know him, Jason? Was he a competitor?” Connie's curiosity was evident.

Jason cleared his throat. “He didn't compete. Just sort of... hangs around the circuit, I guess. But no, I don't really know him.” He looked at Cassie across the table, wishing she would tell her family the truth about Travis.

Cassie was desperate to change the subject to anything other than Travis.

“I’m doing a special feature on Jason for the website,” she blurted out. “I think I’ll call it *Behind the Hat*.”

Jason started coughing. “Are we still on that? I don’t need a special feature.”

Cassie ignored his protests. “Jason got some bad publicity this week. Undeserved, I might add. I’m not going to let it derail his career. So, I’m going to do a little campaign to put a different perspective out there.”

“Like a video? You should show him doing Pony Patrol on Tuesday,” Gideon said with a grin.

Her smile grew wider. “That’s perfect!”

Jason looked like he was going to be sick.

She rolled her eyes at his reaction. “Oh come on. That’s exactly the kind of stuff people need to see you doing.”

“Don’t, Cassie.” His voice held a hard edge that had her hesitating.

Why was he so stubborn? The man needed some good press, and she was in the perfect position to help him. Plus, this *Behind the Hat* series on social media was exactly the kind of thing she could use to stand out from the rest of the marketing team when it came time for promotions.

The conversation moved on around her, and Cassie decided she would have this discussion later with Jason. Maybe after she'd quietly observed Pony Patrol—with her camera in hand. After dinner, Jason left while she was distracted by her dad's endless questions about her truck. It had been towed earlier in the day, but the shop wouldn't be open until the next morning.

On Monday, she caught up on all the weekend events across her region, scheduling posts and asking for permission for pictures that amateur photographers had captured. Tuesday, she took a mid-morning walk to the training corral where a small group of children stood with rapt attention to Maverick Knight.

Mav had been a wrangler at Redemption Ranch for about as long as Jason had. Mav had a family as long as he'd been here. His son, Jesse, was a good kid and pretty mature for a twelve-year-old. Mav had been distracted lately, but Jason wasn't really the type to start asking questions, and Mav wasn't the type to want people in his business.

There were a handful of parents waiting on the bleachers outside the corral, their phones in hand, snapping photos. She scanned the area for Jason and found him tightening the saddle on a Palomino horse. Another horse waited nearby, sniffing at the grass in the corral and finding it lacking. She pulled her phone out and started taking photos of Jason, smiling to herself when she caught him feeding one of the horses a few peppermints and patting her neck.

She swiped to view the photos she'd taken, her breath catching at the expression on Jason's face as he spoke to the horse. Something was different about his eyes, his eyebrows less furrowed, perhaps. It made him seem less harsh, gentle even.

Mav was great with the kids, and Cassie took a few photos of him surrounded by the group, their hands stretched high as they all volunteered to ride first. Mav took a little girl of probably eight years old and walked her toward Jason.

Cassie's heart melted as he gave the girl a carrot to feed to the horse. If she hadn't been watching him so closely, she wouldn't recognize the careful way he moved and the way he schooled his features, careful not to speak harshly to the little girl.

She stood from her place on the bleachers and found a closer spot, snapping photos of him helping the girl up into the saddle and slowly leading her around the corral. Mav was doing the same with a boy on the other horse, but Cassie's eyes were glued to Jason. The horse was completely relaxed, obviously used to being part of the Pony Patrol.

When they turned near the far side of the corral and Jason saw Cassie, his eyes narrowed. He shook his head and pointed back to the lodge.

They slowly walked back toward her. Cassie smiled and held up her phone. "Say Pony Patrol!"

The little girl looked up and grinned so big. Cassie snapped the photo just as the girl wobbled in the saddle and her face transformed into fear. Jason's glare got more glari-er, somehow. Cassie winced. Okay, no more distracting the riders.

Instead, she switched to video and recorded Jason helping the girl get down and selecting the next rider. It was a little boy of about six who was clearly apprehensive about the giant animal Jason was leading him toward.

Cassie couldn't hear, but the little boy stepped back and shook his head. Her heart melted when Jason knelt down in front of him and looked him in the eye. The little boy's attention was entirely focused on the undoubtedly hero-status cowboy in front of him. Jason held his hand out for a fist bump, and the little boy smiled as he pounded his knuckles against Jason's. Then he bravely approached the horse and fed her a carrot with a huge grin on his face.

She watched for a few more minutes, impressed with how good Jason did with the kids, despite his discomfort and reluctance. She talked to the parents of the kids and sent them photo releases to sign. Then, she walked back toward the main lodge, hoping to catch her mom and show her the pictures and

suggest they post them on the social media accounts for the ranch. Cassie set them up years ago, but with her away most of the time, there was no one on staff really dedicated to keeping up with them.

As she walked down the gravel drive toward the lodge, she debated if hiring someone for marketing and office administration would make sense. Or if her dad would even go for it. There was just so much beauty and value here. The mountain fell away to her left, where their beef cattle grazed under wispy clouds. She inhaled deeply, loving the clear mountain air. The ranch did solid business, but it would be nice to remind people online about why they wanted to come to Redemption Ranch again and again.

Her quiet walk was interrupted by the sight of a familiar truck rambling down the drive from the main gate. She froze, trying to decide whether to make a beeline for the lodge, turn back to the training corral, or flee into the trees off the side of the road and hide.

In the end, she simply stood in the middle of the drive and watched in horror from a distance as Travis unloaded a duffel bag from the back of his truck. He had parked in the guest lot for the lodge, and Cassie immediately pulled out her phone to check the reservation system.

There it was in black and white. Travis Stewart was a registered guest at Redemption Ranch. She looked up at the sky, her hands on her hips. What was he doing here? This was her home, and there was no way she was going to let him invade it.

By the time she made it to the entrance of the lodge, Cassie was fired up and ready to kick Travis onto his sorry butt. The scene waiting for her in the lobby made her stop short. Her dad was with Travis, a smile on his face.

“Hey, sweetie. I was just getting to know Travis here. His grandpa was a good friend to me, and when he called to ask for an interview, I told him I’d be happy to help out.”

“Cassie, it’s nice to see you again.”

She narrowed her eyes at his nonchalant, sweet tone.

“Oh, you two know each other?” her dad asked.

Did he even pay attention? Her entire family had been talking about Travis on Sunday night. And not favorably.

“Yeah, Dad. We dated, remember?” Travis beamed. “It didn’t end well,” she added coldly.

Her dad looked awkwardly between the two of them. “Well, I guess that’s all water under the bridge then, isn’t it?”

Cassie debated spilling everything about how Travis hit her while they were dating and attacked her the other day. But while her dad would probably kick Travis off the ranch to protect her, he would probably also insist that she quit the rodeo circuit job. It would confirm all his fears about his little girl traveling alone.

“I’m happy to let bygones be bygones,” Travis said with the practiced charm that had won her over in the beginning. Now it just made her want to gag.

Travis wouldn’t try anything while he was at her family’s ranch, would he? There was no safer place for her than right here. Even with a dirtbag like him hanging around. She could convince her dad not to hire him, given a little time. Jason could help with that.

“Sure, whatever. Just leave me alone,” she said curtly, turning around and walking away. She needed to find Jason anyway. With his pointed lack of endorsement, maybe Travis’s interview would be short-lived.

“Hey, Cassie, wait up. Can we talk for a minute?”

Travis was following her toward the exit, and her dad was watching closely.

She flinched away when Travis reached his hand toward her.

“What the heck are you doing here?” She hissed the question, resisting the urge to yell it instead.

“I’m just trying to make things right, baby. I made some mistakes.” She nearly snorted at the understatement. “We both did,” he continued. He glanced back at her dad.

She glared at him. “You’re unbelievable. I’m not your baby. This might be Redemption Ranch, but you won’t find it here. I’m certainly not your ticket to restoring your family’s name.”

“Look, if you would just give me another chance, I think you’d see—”

She laughed, unable to contain her emotions. A mix of outrage, embarrassment, and regret exploded from her. “You’re out of your mind, Travis.”

“You’d be lucky to marry me. It’s not like anyone else would want you.” He whispered the insult, and it wiggled under her skin, stinging just enough to make her recognize his manipulation was hitting the mark.

“What do you say? Want to be Mrs. Stewart?”

There was the gagging again. What had she ever seen in this guy?

“Not in a million years, Travis.”

She took a deep breath, turning her mind back toward where she’d been headed. “Enjoy your stay,” she said with saccharine sweetness. “Don’t hesitate to leave any time,” she added flatly. “I have to go now. And I won’t be seeing you around.”

Pony Patrol lasted for an hour, but it seemed like five, especially after he watched Cassie walk toward the lodge. He'd seen her pause at the sight of the truck. And though it was a hundred yards from the training corral to the lodge, he recognized the strut of the man walking inside like he owned the place.

Travis was here, and Jason was stuck in Pony Purgatory for fifteen more minutes.

The instant class was out, Jason asked Mav to finish up and he took off toward the lodge at a jog. He met Cassie coming out the door, her face red and angry.

"What'd he do? Are you all right?" His hands twitched with the desire to reach for her, but he stuffed them in the pockets of his jeans.

Cassie stomped past him. "Follow me."

Jason raised his eyebrows at the command but didn't argue. Cassie walked around the edge of the lodge to the garden on the side. By the time they reached the small rocky waterfall pond, her anger seemed to have waned.

"What happened?" he asked cautiously.

Cassie laughed. "Would you believe the idiot proposed? He's trying to convince me that things would be different if we were married because it would fix all his problems." She picked up a fallen branch, twirling it between her fingers for a minute. Then, she threw it into the woods with a force that

made Jason take a step back. “Then he said I’d be lucky to have him because no one else would ever want me. So that’s fun.”

Jason stepped toward her. He opened his mouth to argue and reassure her about how wrong Travis was.

But Cassie kept talking. “It’s fine. I know he’s just manipulating me. That’s what he does. I actually was coming to find you.”

Jason was going to have whiplash from this conversation. He didn’t know how to respond, so he stayed silent.

“I got some great pictures and videos of you during Pony Patrol. I was thinking we could get some footage of you... I don’t know, training for your next ride or something?”

“Cassie,” he said with irritation. “I thought we talked about this. We need to talk about what to do about Travis. Why is he even here? Just to propose?”

Cassie rolled her eyes. “Apparently, his grandpa called in some favor with my dad to get him an interview.”

“So tell your dad the truth and have Travis banned from the ranch.” It seemed simple enough to him, but Cassie shook her head.

“No way. Dad already thinks I’m just asking for trouble out on the road.” She looked up at him. “I was thinking you could maybe... let Dad know that Travis isn’t exactly Redemption Ranch material though?”

Jason felt his heart race at the way her focus zeroed in on him, and the way her lips formed the perfect pout when she asked him. The woman could get everything she wanted from any red-blooded male in the county if she had a mind to.

He looked away. “Don’t turn those baby blues on me, Princess. I’ll tell your dad not to hire Travis, but that’s because he needs to know what kind of man he is.” Cassie’s mouth opened to object and Jason continued, “Without all the details of your own encounters.”

“Thanks,” she said after a moment.

Jason asked the question that had been on his mind since they left the police station in Durango. “What if that’s not enough to make him give up?”

Cassie shook her head. “I don’t know. I’ll be in Pueblo this weekend, and then I’ll be back here until finals. I’ll deal with it. Can we just focus on your *Behind the Hat* feature?”

Jason crossed his arms. “Nope. I’m not done. You’re in real danger, here, Cassie. Travis isn’t the kind of guy who is going to let you go that easily.”

“Why won’t you let me help you with your image?” Her voice was laced with anger and frustration.

“Why won’t you let me protect you?” He threw the words back at her.

“Why do you care so much?” she asked, her voice gentler.

“I could ask the same of you,” he said.

Cassie stepped back, turning her head to look into the trees.

“What if... we both help each other?”

Jason frowned. “You’ll let me protect you if I let you fix my image? That doesn’t even make sense, Cassie.”

What was she even thinking?

She turned back toward him. “Hear me out. I need something for work that is big enough to get the attention of the national marketing coordinator. This *Behind the Hat* series with you is just the thing. You need an improvement to your image – also helped by the extra good publicity.”

Jason rolled his eyes. He’d heard this before, although the tidbit about her wanting to use the project to help her own career made him feel a little better about agreeing to do it. Not enough to actually agree, but enough to consider it before saying no.

“And as for Travis...” She hesitated. “You want to protect me?”

Jason nodded. He couldn't explain how much or why to her, but he had to make sure nothing happened.

"Then let's get married."

Jason's heart stopped.

"Haha. Very funny," he said drily. It was the only thing he could say.

"I'm serious. Marry me. It solves everything!"

He turned around and pressed his hands to his face, his body all of a sudden incapable of staying still. "Hold on there! Are you out of your mind? What does that even... I can't... Just, what?"

Cassie was impressively calm. "It's perfect," she explained. "Travis will lose interest once he realizes that I'm off the market, so to speak. And your image can only be helped by marrying into the Reynolds family, right? It's a win-win."

Jason's head was spinning. "It's insane."

"Come on, hear me out."

Jason shook his head. "Nope. Nope. That's crazy. *You're* crazy."

Did she have a head injury he didn't notice?

The fact that she was even bringing this up was ridiculous. She deserved a real marriage to someone who was as driven and cheerful as her. He would only drag her down, even if the marriage somehow worked, which it never would.

He held up his hands in surrender. "I'm going to go back to my house and pretend you never said this. Okay?"

Cassie put her hand on his arm as he turned away, the soft touch stopping him in his tracks. He turned back slightly. "Jason, I know this seems like it came out of nowhere, but I really do think it is perfect. I trust you. And I'm perfectly fine with a marriage that isn't some hopelessly romantic fairytale. We can help each other, support each other, and that can be enough."

Jason nearly lost himself in her eyes as she talked about a future together. His throat grew dry and his words came out rough and scratchy as he pushed away all the desires he had to bury and challenged her instead. “So what? We’d be roommates? Friends?”

Cassie looked down then, her shoulder pulling up in a shrug. “I guess so. Yes.”

Jason turned fully, so he was facing her straight on. A hundred possible responses went through his mind. He studied her face, with the soft, innocent curve of her cheek and the wispy strands of blond hair escaping from her ponytail.

His jaw tightened as he resisted the urge to touch her. She had no idea what she was asking of him. She was too young to declare herself disinterested in romance or a real marriage. She’d be miserable with him within a year, if not sooner.

There had to be an easier way to get Travis out of the picture.

“So what do you say?” She tipped her chin up, only a show of confidence based on the slight quiver in her voice.

There was only one way this could go. Before this crazy idea went any further.

Before he started actually considering it.

“No.”

Essie felt herself deflate as Jason walked away from the garden. She kept her eyes on him, holding herself together until he was out of sight, then sank onto a nearby concrete bench.

It had been foolish to suggest something like that to him. Jason had worked here for fourteen years, but they'd really only spoken in the last week. So why did she feel so strongly that this was her best solution?

Was it the remnants of a school-girl crush? Or simple desperation from the encounter with Travis?

Or maybe it was something more. She couldn't deny that the safest she'd felt in months had been in Jason's arms after the incident with Travis. It was the same feeling of relief and safety she'd experienced seeing Jason outside of the lodge just now.

Whatever the reason, she couldn't shake the idea. But it wasn't as if she could force him to marry her. Sometimes, she felt like Jason looked at her like... like she was more than his boss's daughter. But maybe Travis was right. Maybe he had refused because the idea of being married to her was something Jason couldn't even entertain. She knew exactly why Travis wanted to marry her, and it had nothing to do with her and everything to do with Redemption Ranch.

And judging by Jason's reaction to her proposal, Travis had been right. No one could possibly want her.

It wasn't until the next day that she saw Jason again. Hiding in her old room at the house had been an effective strategy for avoiding Jason and Travis. With the pictures and video she'd taken of Jason at Pony Patrol, she'd been carefully crafting a video splicing his rough-and-tough bull rides with his softer demeanor. He'd given a snarl of permission that she'd decided to interpret as enthusiastic agreement. She even found a few clips of him half-smiling after a ride that gave the video a nice balance. She posted it as the first installation, promising the viewers more to come.

But that meant she needed more.

Even if Jason wasn't going to marry her and use her status, she would help his image with the videos the best she could. She walked to the barn, looking for him. Instead, the sound of Travis's voice around the corner made her duck quickly into the nearest door. Backing inside the tack room, she shut the door and said a quick prayer that Travis and his tour guide would skip this portion of the stables.

"Hiding from someone?"

She gasped and whirled around, her hand flying to her chest.

Jason was there, standing near the small shelving unit that held oils and other supplies.

"You scared me," she admonished him with a half-laugh.

He shrugged, his expression unyielding. She wished she knew what was behind his stony eyes. Had he thought about her offer all night like she had?

A sound outside the door had her glancing nervously over her shoulder.

Jason's jaw twitched. "He out there?" His voice was low, almost a whisper. The low rumbled rolled over her.

She nodded, stepping away from the door. She wanted as much distance from Travis as she could get. A solid wooden door wasn't enough.

But that meant she was closer to Jason. The smell of leather and wood mixed with the scent she was becoming more familiar with every day. It was uniquely Jason, a mix of horses and a woodsy spice that made her think of Christmas. She glanced up at him, unsure what to say.

She was embarrassed that he'd turned her down and was tempted to dismiss the entire thing. Maybe that would remove the awkwardness between them.

She opened her mouth to speak but paused when the door to the tack room opened behind them.

“Oh, good. Jason, I was just looking for you. Hey, Cass.”

Cassie shut her eyes at her father's greeting, frustrated at the interruption. She put on her brave face and turned so she could see the newcomers to the wood-lined room where they stored saddles and bridles. “Hey, Dad.”

Travis stood next to her father, his eyes narrowing as he looked between Jason and Cassie. Cassie felt the anger in his gaze, and it made her step back. Her shoulder brushed against the front of Jason's chest.

“Jason, you know Travis, right?”

Jason's voice was ice. “We've met.”

“Wonderful. Cassie, I was hoping you'd have a minute to take Travis out and show him a bit of the far side of the ranch. The chapel, the western trail, all that.

“Actually, sir, Cassie was going to help me this afternoon.”

Cassie turned in surprise, her mouth falling open before she nodded, instantly ready to agree to whatever Jason was doing.

“Oh?” Her dad looked back at her. “What do you two have going on?”

Cassie didn't know how to answer that. She turned slightly, silently begging Jason to continue whatever plan he'd kicked into motion.

“We’re heading to the feed and seed to finish the restock of the tack room. And Connie asked me to swing by Hobby House to pick up the decorations for the barn dance. I’m afraid that’s a job I’m not exactly qualified for, so I called in some backup.”

Cassie didn’t know for sure if her mom had really asked Jason to pick up decorations, but she wasn’t going to call him out on it right here. “That’s right. Just a few errands, but we really better be going!”

She tugged on Jason’s hand and led him out of the tack room, passing her father and Travis as quickly as possible. They made their way through the wide center aisle of the stable, passing the stalls without even stopping to say hello to the horses.

It wasn’t until she stepped outside the stable that she realized she was still holding Jason’s hand. She dropped it and immediately missed the contact.

“Sorry,” she said, feeling the heat in her cheeks.

Jason raised an eyebrow, but no hint of a smile crossed his face. “For what?”

Apparently, he hadn’t been affected. “Nevermind. Thanks for saving me in there.”

“You need to tell your dad about Travis.”

Dread filled the pit of her stomach at the thought. She shook her head. “I can’t,” she whispered. She knew Barry Reynolds would chase Travis off the ranch. Then he’d slam the gate and throw away the key so she never went back to the circuit.

Jason’s stormy gaze met hers. She knew there was more he wanted to say. If the relationship between them was different, maybe she would push harder.

But then maybe he would push harder.

“I’m sorry. He’ll be gone soon, but until then... thank you,” she reaffirmed.

“I might be many things, but I’m not a liar. So let’s go. We’re going into town.”

Redemption Ranch was about fifteen-minutes’ drive from the town of Redemption Ridge. It was the closest community to them and where many of the lodge staff lived. Cassie had grown up at the church, gone to high school there, and competed in the junior rodeos at the county fair.

When they drove through the gate in Jason’s truck, she asked the question that had been bothering her since he suggested the outing. “Did Mom really ask you to pick up decorations for the barn dance?”

Jason lifted his cheek. “Well, I might have offered. I heard your dad tell Paul that he was going to ask you to show him the ranch. I stopped by the lodge and mentioned to Connie that I was running into town if she needed anything. And suggested that you might want to tag along if the job was big enough.”

She found herself imagining her mom’s reaction to that. No doubt trying to play matchmaker. “So... does my mom know?”

“That you suggested we get married? No.” Jason’s words came fast and blunt, but with an edge of humor.

“Don’t you dare mock me, cowboy. I still think it’s a good idea.”

He raised his eyebrows but kept his eyes on the road. “Well pardon me, ma’am,” he drawled, no doubt a dig toward the nickname. He inhaled. “You would really do that? Just to escape Travis? Not just a temporary marriage? The real deal?”

Cassie thought back to the fear of Travis’s hand around her throat. How she’d cowered in the corner when he came to her trailer, drunk and angry, after hearing someone claim she’d been flirting with a cowboy at the food stall. The pure terror that she felt when she realized that he had invaded her home here in Redemption. Her safe space.

And she thought about the possibility of Travis becoming co-owner of Redemption Ranch. The thought made her stomach twist.

“Yeah, I would,” she said, letting every ounce of certainty fill her words until they were heavy enough to sink to the floorboard of his truck.

Would she marry Jason to save herself? Yes. Would she marry Jason to help his reputation? Sure.

She believed in marriage too much to sign up for something that wouldn't last longer than a few months until Travis disappeared or slipped up enough for them to get the restraining order. It would have to be forever.

Would she marry Jason to save Redemption Ranch from falling into the hands of a greedy man with no work ethic and a short temper? A lifetime in a marriage with someone safe and kind, even if there was no romance. Absolutely, without a moment's hesitation. Jason didn't know that part of the deal, though. And she wasn't sure she was going to tell him. If he knew about the ranch and it made him change his mind... she wasn't sure she would ever be able to trust that he wasn't doing it because he wanted the ranch.

Instead of wanting to help her.

Maybe it didn't matter. But she didn't want to find out. There was something about the feeling that Jason's presence and protection had brought that she wasn't willing to give up. If he wasn't willing to marry her to dissuade Travis, or to help his own image, then that would have to be the answer.

Jason turned his head toward her, his hands on the wheel and arms flexing under his rolled-up sleeves. “Okay, then. Let's do it.”

The wedding happened fast. Even faster than he anticipated. They would have waited a few days, but it was nearly time to leave for Pueblo, and Travis was sure to make the trip.

At least, if they were married, Jason would be able to keep Cassie in his trailer. Safe. Distracting and far too tempting, to be sure. But safe.

One stop at the courthouse later that day gave them their marriage license, and ten minutes later they were ushered in to see the judge. Jason hadn't known what to expect when they said their vows, but the tear rolling down Cassie's face hadn't been it.

He tugged her to the side. "Are you sure you want to do this, Cassie. We can still walk away," he offered.

Cassie shook her head and took a deep breath. "No. I'm sure." She lifted her chin. "This is what I want."

He watched her face, searching for any signs of her hesitation, but there were none. He had no idea what he was doing. All he knew was that Cassie had asked him to do this, and heaven help him, he didn't know how to say no. If she felt it would protect her from Travis, then he would do everything in his power to do so.

They said their vows. He slipped his grandfather's simple gold band from his own index finger and onto her left ring finger, though it was big enough for her thumb. Then, the

judge said the words Jason had known were coming but was incapable of preparing for.

“You may kiss the bride.”

Cassie, who had kept her gaze focused someplace near his ear suddenly shifted her eyes to meet his. Then dropped them to his lips. His throat went dry.

Boss’s daughter.

Off-limits.

Princess.

He reached for her hand and gently lowered his mouth to hers. Her soft inhale went straight to his heart. The kiss was a whisper, just a hint of contact between them before he pulled away. His breath caught, capturing the moment in his memory.

Her fingers came to her lips and her eyes found his. He offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

Then they were gone, walking out of the courthouse with a copy of the license.

He opened her door and closed it behind her after she was in. He walked around the tailgate, wondering what on earth they’d just done.

Barry was going to be furious. And Zeke and Gideon? They were going to try their best to run him off the ranch’ if their father didn’t beat them to it. Even the other wranglers would have words for him, probably assuming the worst.

His heart sank. People would assume that they... that Cassie was... He nearly growled as he opened the driver’s door. How could he protect her reputation at the same time he protected her from Travis though? Once they’d been married for a while, everyone would know that the shotgun elopement hadn’t been motivated by anything untoward. Unless you counted his own desire to keep his WorkMade sponsorship and Cassie’s hope to save his career while bolstering her own.

He sighed heavily and turned the engine over. “Did we just make a huge mistake?”

Cassie shook her head. “No.”

“I don’t know, Princess. I’m here for you. You know I am. It just feels... like I’m missing something.”

Cassie looked down at her hand, twirling the ring there. “There’s something you need to know.”

Jason twisted in the seat. “I’m all ears.”

She looked up at him. “Travis wanted to marry me because it would make him part owner of Redemption Ranch.”

“Okay? So what? When your dad dies, you and your brothers become owners?”

She shook her head. “Not exactly. When my brothers get married, they immediately become part owners. When I get married? My husband becomes part owner. I would never inherit the ranch if I wasn’t married.”

Jason flexed his hands, leaving them on the wheel. “So you’re saying you married me to...what? Stop Travis from stealing it by forcing you to marry him?”

Cassie shrugged. “Kind of.”

“Kind of? Cassie! Do you know how this looks? Like I’m some gold-digging rodeo cowboy who tricked you into marrying me so I can run Redemption Ranch? I don’t want that. I’m not that guy!”

“I know you’re not, Jason. That’s why I chose you.”

His heart stuttered on her words, trying not to read too much into them. “You... chose me. You mean, you considered others?” The flare of jealousy was unreasonable, but he didn’t care. He’d already assumed he was nothing more than a last resort. Hearing so was still painful.

She shook her head. “No. I mean, not really. I told Travis about the ownership clause when I thought he was going to be the one I married. We were making plans, shopping for rings, and I wanted to let him know that we had something to consider.”

Jason didn't want to hear that she'd been so fooled by Travis. He didn't want to think about her dreaming of marrying that snake. "This is ridiculous. There's no way your father would go through with it." Barry was a determined guy, but this seemed... archaic. "How is that even legal?"

She shook her head. "I've checked. It's legal, and we've had it out enough times about it for me to know that it isn't going to change. My dad is wonderful in a lot of ways. But in his mind, a woman can't own a ranch. Mom doesn't own any of it. Not that it bothers her or limits her from being a huge part of Redemption Ranch, but she's not on the paperwork."

Jason tried to wrap his mind around the idea that Connie, who was so crucial to everything that happened on Redemption Ranch, wasn't a co-owner. He had a lot of respect for Barry, but this was... backwards.

They stopped at the craft store and picked up what seemed like a hundred bags of supplies that Connie had ordered ahead, stuffing them all in the backseat of the truck.

"You hungry?" he asked.

"Starving, actually."

Jason found a parking spot on the town square. They'd decorated for Christmas sometime since he'd been here. The lampposts had wreaths, and the giant planters lining the sidewalks had tiny Christmas trees planted in them. He touched one as he passed. Fake.

But it was cheery.

"Flapjacks or El Cresta?" he offered, knowing that he was fine with either option. The all-day breakfast joint had biscuits and gravy and pancakes that were bigger than the brim of his cowboy hat. El Cresta, on the other hand, was new to town, but he'd tried the original location in Freedom and hadn't forgotten the tacos, or the salsa.

"Oooh, tacos. Yes, please."

Jason smiled, pleased that the decision hadn't been a struggle. The last thing he wanted was to spend their entire marriage debating where to eat.

He dismissed the thought as he opened the door to the restaurant and waved her in ahead of him. But as they sat enjoying their chips and salsa and talking about mutual friends on the rodeo circuit, Jason recognized just how easy it would be to be married to Cassie.

She was light and laughter and everything good. Being married to her would be so easy.

But that was exactly why he had to keep his distance. He'd do his part and get Travis out of the way. Then, even though it might kill him, he'd cut Cassie loose from this marriage so she could find someone and have a real marriage. Maybe he could call Ruby Hayes. She was a lawyer. Maybe they could get one of those annulment things. No matter what he'd said earlier about marriage being the real deal, he couldn't hold Cassie to that.

Not with him. Because while being married to Cassie would be everything he ever dreamed of, he'd never be good enough to make her happy. And he'd always know that she married him out of desperation.

“Will you come to dinner tonight at the house? So we can tell everyone?”

Jason tried and failed to school his expression as he choked on a tortilla chip. He quickly reached for a drink to dislodge it.

“We leave tomorrow for Pueblo,” she continued. “My truck isn't ready, so I figured I'd hitch a ride with you and grab a hotel.”

“You'll stay with me,” he said firmly.

“No, it's fine. I can—”

“You'll stay with me. Or I'll stay with you.” That idea had some merit. He'd be sleeping on the fold-out bed if they shared his trailer. But a hotel? His body would appreciate it far more than the trailer after his events left him sore.

“Okay,” she trailed. “So tonight, we'll tell my family. And I guess...”

Pink spread across her cheeks, making her appear even more delicate, like a fairy princess.

“I mean, everyone will expect...”

Jason immediately felt the heat in his own cheeks. She was thinking about tonight—where she’d sleep.

“It’d seem strange for us not to stay together on our wedding night?” He offered his best guess as to where she was going with those sentences.

She nodded, her lip pulled between her teeth. Lips he’d tasted ever so briefly. Yeah, it’d be better not to think about that.

He cleared his throat, suddenly as dry as Durango in June. “You can stay with me.”

“On Wrangler Row?” she asked.

He couldn’t read the tone of her voice. Was she simply asking for confirmation or did the idea make her want to turn up her nose? She was Cassie Reynolds, after all. All but a princess. His dinky one-bedroom cabin wouldn’t be up to her standards. Her trailer was probably nicer.

Or an even worse thought crossed his mind. Was she scared to stay with him?

But he didn’t ask any of those questions. Instead, he just nodded. “That’s where I live.”

Cassie took a breath. “Okay then. I guess that’s where I’ll be.”

“So, what do we tell everyone?” he asked. This was her grand plan, and he was curious how she wanted to play it. “I’m assuming we’re not telling them that we got married so your psycho ex doesn’t try anything stupid.”

Cassie gave a half smile. “Yeah, that probably wouldn’t go over well. I was thinking we’d just sort of... act like we fell head-over-heels and didn’t want to wait?”

He nodded. “That makes sense. I don’t want to flat-out lie to anyone, Cass. Especially your parents. They...” He

hesitated, unsure how to explain what her family had done for him by making him a part of Redemption Ranch. “They mean a lot to me.”

She lowered her eyes. “I know. I don’t want you to have to lie.”

Their food arrived and Jason held out a hand toward her. “Can I pray?” She was his wife now, as crazy as that seemed. And if he was going to be married, then he was going to do it right. Even if it wasn’t a real marriage in every sense.

Cassie set down her fork and nodded. “Of course.” Her fingertips met his, so soft and small under his own. He needed to get her a real ring, he realized. Noticing how his own still rested loosely on her thumb.

He prayed quickly, not truly processing a word he spoke. Deeper emotions were there, buried under a simple prayer for the food and for their marriage. An unspoken plea for wisdom and open communication, and for the forgiveness they would need for misleading everyone about the reasons for their wedding.

A silent petition for his own heart, already too tangled up in caring for Cassie. She didn’t need him to love her though. She just needed him to keep her safe.

That prayer was there too—that he would be able to do what he’d promised to do.

But when finished the simple spoken prayer, he opened his eyes to find someone standing next to their table. Jason looked up and found Travis glaring down at their joined hands, rage on his face.

Quickly, Travis schooled his features.

“Well, now isn’t this cozy? Does your father know you’re sleeping with the help?”

Jason pressed up to standing, his chair crashing to the floor behind him.

“You will not talk to her like that.”

Travis crossed his arms and an evil smirk crossed his face. “You have no right to interfere with how I talk to her. You’re nothing but a washed-up bull rider who happens to work for her daddy.”

Jason felt the anger rolling through him, begging him to wipe that smirk off Travis’s face. He stepped closer, looking down at the abusive leech in front of them. He let his words drip with disdain and barely controlled rage. “That’s where you’re wrong. I’m her *husband*, and I suggest you leave town before I make you regret calling in that favor from your grandfather.”

E assie paced around her room, so on edge it was as though she had Pop Rocks in her blood. She muttered to herself, simultaneously in disbelief that she had actually gone through with it and convinced that any minute she was going to be struck by lightning for misleading her family.

They didn't know yet, of course, but by tonight, they would. Jason was coming to family dinner, and together, they would tell everyone about their courthouse ceremony. Then she would grab her bag and go home with him.

To his house.

She pressed her hands to her face to cool the burning there. What had she been thinking?

She couldn't be someone's *wife*. Jason didn't expect anything but friendship and some publicity, but still. They would be husband and wife. That wasn't something she took lightly.

How had she ended up proposing to a man she had never dated?

They had both agreed that a marriage was forever. Even one that wasn't founded on romance or love. Respect was a good foundation.

She could do that though. She would have her work. They would have the ranch.

She didn't need rose petals and candlelight dinners. She didn't need sleepy morning cuddles or good night kisses.

Her footsteps faltered, her fingers moving to her lips at the memory of their kiss.

It had just been for the judge, she knew that. It just felt so different from the persistent, almost punishing kisses she'd received from Travis during their relationship. Sure, he'd started out sweet, and she'd been eager to feel so desired. But quickly, his affection had been conditional on her appearance and agreement.

And she had begun to shrink into herself in order to receive those scraps of attention.

She tugged her dresser drawer open until it slammed against the stops. She grabbed a handful of pajamas and tossed them angrily in the duffel bag she used. She might be hiding behind Jason now, but she was done letting Travis control her.

She hated that her initial reaction to him was always fear. Would she ever get over the way her heart raced and her knees locked up when he got close? It was as if her body was paralyzed, stuck in between fight-or-flight mode—not sure what to do and deciding instead to simply freeze.

Part of her wished she were stronger and able to stand up to Travis the way Jason could. He'd handled everything at El Cresta so perfectly. While she wished they could have told her family first, seeing the anger on Travis's face at the revelation that she was married was exactly what she needed.

Travis might be cruel and stubborn, but he wasn't stupid. He had to know that there was no way he'd get his slimy hands on Redemption Ranch now. Based on the rules of the trust, her third of the ownership officially belonged to Jason as of the minute they signed that marriage certificate.

Which meant it was time for Travis to crawl back into the hole he'd come out of and leave her alone. She just prayed he would.

Just before dinnertime, Jason's knock sounded at the door.

Cassie felt her heart thunder in her chest. This was it. The moment of truth. Well, half-truth.

She had given her mom a heads-up, and Connie greeted Jason at the door with a motherly hug. She saw the questions in her brothers' eyes, no doubt surprised by Jason's presence for the second time in a week.

Jason met her eyes across the living room. "Can I talk to you outside for a minute?"

Cassie nodded. "Sure. We'll be right back, Mom."

"No problem, sweetie. Your dad is still off somewhere anyway."

Cassie followed Jason, her eyes on the way his shirt stretched across his broad shoulders.

Once on the porch, Jason turned to the right and walked around the edge of the house, out of sight of the door. This side of the house faced the lodge, but a thick swatch of trees provided enough privacy that it felt more like being alone in the woods.

He rested his hands on the porch railing, looking out over the trees for a moment. Tension radiated from his body. Cassie stood back, her eyes tracing the outline of his jaw. Maybe he'd changed his mind. Her heart sank.

"Cassie—" he started, his eyes still not on her.

"Please don't change your mind," she said, her voice pleading with him.

He looked at her, confusion clearly displayed in the way his eyebrows wrinkled together. "What?"

"I know it's crazy and that it doesn't make sense. But I can't let Travis destroy this ranch."

Jason shook his head and stepped away from the rail to close the distance between them. "And I can't let him destroy *you*," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "I haven't changed my mind."

She exhaled in relief.

Jason shoved his hand into his pocket. "I should have thought of it sooner, but here it is. At least your family won't

wonder why you don't have one."

It was her turn to be confused. Until Jason pulled the small black velvet box from his pocket and handed it to her. He shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"Is this...?"

"A ring." He cleared his throat. "Your wedding ring," he clarified. "Not that I don't want you to have my grandfather's ring, but we should probably get it resized or something."

Cassie ignored his rambling and opened the box. Her breath caught at the shine of the simple diamond set on a gold band. "Jason, you didn't have to—"

"You're my wife." His voice was rough, gravel against the quiet evening. But it didn't scare her. He didn't smile, but she felt the vulnerability in his offering.

"I love it," she said honestly. She pulled the ring from the box and slipped it on her ring finger, removing the gold band. "Maybe... Maybe this one can be yours? Or I could get you one?"

"That's yours too," he said. "I can't wear one while working or riding, so I'll just wait."

Cassie looked at his bare ring finger, wishing he had something to match hers. Selfishly, she wanted him to wear something that claimed him as hers for the world to see. She reached for his fingers, feeling the rough calluses from work and bull riding. She pressed her thumb to the empty spot on his ring finger, just above the knuckle.

"Okay," she said, "for now. Thank you for my ring," she added.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his eyes full of an emotion she couldn't read.

"Are you?" she replied with a smile. "I have a feeling we're both going to be under interrogation for most of the evening."

"I can handle myself," he said confidently. His voice softened. "I'm just worried about you."

Her heart seriously couldn't take much more of his tenderness. How had he kept this side of himself hidden behind angry looks and gruff words for fourteen years?

She squeezed the hand she still held and pushed up on her toes to press a kiss on the edge of his jawline, his five-o'clock shadow scraping against her cheek. "Thank you."

He didn't respond, but she could have sworn she heard his breath catch. She pulled away but kept her hand in his as they walked back to the front of the house. Her father came up the front walk, boots grinding angrily against the white rock as he marched. She felt Jason tense beside her.

"You!" he yelled with a finger raised at Jason. "What on God's green earth have you done to my little girl?"

“Sir, we can explain,” Jason tried to interject. Cassie had stepped in front of him, a gesture he appreciated but didn’t need.

“Daddy, please just listen for a minute.”

“I don’t trust Travis as far as I can throw him, but he told me about seeing the two of you in town. Are you telling me that Travis wasn’t lying? A ring on your finger—” Cassie’s dad lowered his eyes to their joined hands, Cassie’s ring shining brightly in the sunset glow.

“You’re married?”

Jason whipped his head toward the front door where Gideon and Zeke both stood, open-mouthed. Gideon held a bag of chips in one hand, leaning against the doorframe. His shock transformed into an amused smile. But Zeke’s expression was angry, his eyes pivoting between Jason and Cassie and their joined hands.

Cassie released his hand and held both of hers up to get their attention. Jason shoved his hand into his jeans, aware of how much he missed the contact. “Okay, okay. Everyone calm down. Let’s go inside and we’ll talk about it all together.”

There was some grumbling from the other men, but Jason couldn’t help but notice how they all listened to her instructions. Their emotions were high because they loved Cassie, not because they were abusive or controlling.

He sent a quick prayer skyward, increasingly aware of his need for guidance on how to navigate the next several hours. Tomorrow, they'd leave for Pueblo, and he supposed they would have a chance to figure out how to be married.

Married, but not in love.

He was an idiot.

Jason took a deep breath and followed his wife into the house, preparing to face the interrogation that was waiting for him.

Connie was waiting in the kitchen, the only one, he supposed, who didn't know about their relationship status yet.

Cassie hesitated; he could see it in the way her steps faltered. He stepped up next to her, sliding his hand around her waist. Perhaps that was too much, but he wanted her to know that he was with her.

Connie's eyes immediately zeroed in on the connection of his hand near her hip and a wide smile crossed her face. "Oh, Cassie. Really?" She sounded... hopeful. That was unexpected.

"Hey, Mom. Yeah, there is something I need to tell you."

Connie's smile was unconstrained. "I'm so happy for you two. Who would have thought you'd start dating Jason after all this time?"

Zeke coughed from the side of the room and Connie's expression changed. "What? What am I missing?"

Cassie shifted her weight, bumping into him slightly. He stood steadily, ready to give her whatever kind of support she needed. "We're not just dating, Mom." She inhaled, as though gathering her courage. "Jason and I got married today."

The announcement landed like a grenade in the kitchen, and Barry, Zeke, and Gideon started talking over one another. Jason could barely follow the cacophony of questions and disbelief.

But amidst the noise, Connie walked across the room until she was a step in front of Cassie. "Congratulations,

sweetheart.” Then she wrapped Cassie in a hug. Jason released his grip on her waist so she could hold her mom. He saw a tear slide down Cassie’s cheek.

“Thanks, Mama,” he heard her whisper.

The emotional interaction had quieted the outbursts of Cassie’s brothers and father.

In a blink, Connie’s attention had shifted to him. Her eyes were kind but questioning. “You’ve been a part of Redemption Ranch for a long time, Jason. I’m not sure what changed, or why now. But...” She hesitated, and he waited for the disappointed lecture. “Welcome to the family,” she said, her smile soft.

Jason couldn’t hide his surprise. He didn’t deserve this kind of grace. Not after whisking Cassie away for a courthouse wedding in secret. “Thank you, ma’am,” he choked out through the emotion thick in his throat.

“All right, everyone sit down, and we’ll eat before we hear all about this wedding I missed.” Connie shot her daughter a disapproving glance, but it was light-hearted. He had a feeling Connie was more perturbed about not getting to choose flowers and table settings than she was about the marriage itself.

Dinner itself was uneventful, and while they answered a few questions, Cassie’s family seemed to accept their excuse of getting to know each other on the rodeo circuit and not wanting to wait any longer.

But after dinner, when Jason picked up a hand towel to help Connie with the dishes she was placing in the drying rack, she paused to turn to him. “Now, I know my daughter. And I know that when she’s got an idea in her head, you’d be better off trying to teach a bull to roll over like a Labrador than trying to convince her to change her mind.”

Jason didn’t know how to respond to that entirely accurate assessment of Cassie.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, when she waited for a response.

There was a beat of silence before Connie asked, “Should I be worried?”

Jason met her eyes and gave a solemn shake of his head. “Not anymore.”

They left the main house after dinner. When he realized how much the temperature had dropped with the sun dipping below the ridgeline, Jason slipped his jacket from his shoulders and put it around Cassie’s before helping her into his truck.

It was a four-minute drive to Wrangler Row, even when he took the long way, driving past the lodge and the main stables. It seemed like almost immediately he was shifting his truck into park in front of his little cabin.

“Home sweet home,” he offered.

Cassie offered him a sweet smile. “Thanks for tonight, Jase.”

He nodded, a longer reply getting stuck in his throat. So many things he left unsaid.

Once they were inside, he flipped on the light to reveal the space. He’d spent the afternoon here after the wedding, cleaning every inch of the small space, other than running back to town to get the ring. He’d never been self-conscious about his house before. It was mostly just a place to sleep between work and rodeos.

The door opened directly into a small living room, with a tiny kitchen off to the right. White cabinets and a tile countertop wouldn’t land in any interior design magazine. This definitely wasn’t a castle fit for a princess.

“We can find another place... There’s probably something in Redemption Ridge for sale.” He wasn’t rich. But once he stopped spending money on rodeo fees and travel, his ranch salary would be enough to move off site.

“I love it,” she said. He looked for it, but there was no trace of sarcasm or dishonesty in her voice. Perhaps he’d underestimated her.

“I’ll take the couch. Bedroom is back here,” he said, pointing to the door across from the couch. He grabbed her duffel bag and carried it across the living room, pushing the door open and flipping on the light. He set the bag on the dresser. “I cleared out these drawers for you.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” she protested.

“It’s fine. I’ll get myself something for the closet. Or I’ll just use a laundry basket. Most of the time they never make it back to the drawers anyway.”

“Well, thank you. That’s very sweet of you.”

Jason felt his neck warm at the compliment.

He’d never been accused of being sweet.

Grumpy? Yes.

Demanding? Yes.

But never sweet.

“Bathroom is through here. It’s the only one, so we’ll have to share.”

“That’s fine. We’ll have to get used to sharing small spaces, right?”

Jason wasn’t sure what she meant.

“A trailer this weekend?”

“I booked a hotel.” He said it like it was no big deal, but he’d had to call every hotel within thirty minutes of Pueblo to find one with a room that had two beds. He’d spent half of his current savings account on the overpriced room. But sharing this house with Cassie was uncomfortable enough. In the trailer, where there was barely room to squeeze by each other in the galley? He’d never relax.

“Oh. Okay. I just assumed...”

He grabbed his clothes for the night out of the laundry basket, setting them aside. “It’ll be harder for Travis to find us, if he’s dumb enough to do so. And I really didn’t look forward to sleeping on the pullout after a ride.”

“I could have taken the pullout,” she countered.

He grunted. “Not a chance, Princess.”

“Well, Mr. Keen, I do believe you’re what my mama calls a true gentleman.” Cassie’s smile was playful and warm, teasing him. It was everything Jason could do not to tug on her hand and show her just how ungentlemanly he could be.

He rolled his eyes instead and went back into the living room. Cassie shut the door behind him but opened it a few moments later. He was tucking sheets into the couch cushions when he looked up at her.

Heaven help him.

Cassie had changed into her pajamas. If you could call the matching shorts and tank top trimmed with lace pajamas. They were more like a carefully designed torture device. Innocent and effortlessly alluring at the same time.

He turned his eyes away. “I’ll just go change so you can go to bed.”

“It’s eight-thirty,” she replied with a hint of laughter.

Jason grabbed his clothes. “Oh, well...” Words continued to escape without restriction as he rambled to cover his reaction to her. “Early to bed and early to rise and all that.”

He slid past her spot in the doorway, not meeting her eyes and forcing his own to ignore the miles of creamy skin revealed by her choice of pajamas. He didn’t breathe until he was safely behind the bathroom door.

Coward.

As he changed his own clothes, he hesitated before slipping on the white T-shirt he’d planned on wearing. Two could play at this game.

He splashed some water on his face. Leaning on the counter, he studied his reflection in the mirror. The man he saw there had failed a lot of people. His teacher, Mrs. Bennett. His brother and his parents.

But Cassie didn’t look at him and see failure.

For whatever reason, she'd decided he was good.

If she'd let him, he might decide to spend his entire life trying to prove her right. No doubt falling short a thousand times, but he wouldn't give up. He just hoped she wouldn't either.

It should have been awkward, taking a six-hour road trip with the husband you married yesterday to avoid an abusive ex-boyfriend trying to force you into marriage to steal your family ranch.

But it wasn't.

Cassie rode shotgun, flipping between radio stations and singing loudly despite knowing only half the words. She could have sworn she saw a hint of a smile on his face once or twice, but it was probably her imagination. The man was a statue. He was nearly impossible to read, because his face never betrayed his thoughts. Unlike her own, which she knew was an open book revealing any time she was sad, frustrated, or angry.

Travis had liked to use that against her, punish her for her negative thoughts, even if she'd never spoken a word of them. She shook her head against the memory and turned toward Jason.

"So, tell me more about you," she said.

Jason raised an eyebrow. "Isn't it a bit late for that?"

She rolled her eyes. "No. It's not. If I'm going to let everyone think we fell madly in love, I should probably know a bit about you, right?"

Jason's jaw clenched. "No one will believe it anyway," he said.

Cassie wondered where that anger came from. "Why do you say that? Most people don't have anything bad to say

about you.”

“They don’t have anything good to say, either.”

Cassie considered his words. She’d been on the rodeo circuit for three years with her marketing job. Jason’s reputation had been firmly in place before she arrived. Most people kept their distance from Jason, and some were even scared of him.

“It seems to me that you let them think whatever they want and don’t try to change it.”

He shrugged. “Sounds about right.”

“Why not? You’re a good man, Jason. Why do you let people think the worst?”

He took a deep breath. “It’s easier to let people see what they want. When I started riding, I was in a dark place. All day, every day, I was angry and... shackled by it. I tried a lot of different ways to deal with it, but the only time I felt a bit of relief was in the chute and in the arena.”

Cassie had never heard him talk this much about himself. “What do you mean?”

“When you’re in that moment, there is nothing else. There can’t be. It’s you and the bull and that’s it. The darkness couldn’t follow me.”

“Is that why you do it?” She was desperate to know and understand the man sitting across from her. Maybe if she could understand what drove him, she could help. Maybe she could be a good wife to him.

Jason glanced away from the road for a second to look at her. “For a long time, it was. But when the ride is over, everything comes back. I wasn’t... I wasn’t the nicest guy to be around on the circuit.”

“And now?”

“I’m good at it,” he said with a shrug. There was no cockiness in that statement, just a fact. “It...” He paused, as though trying to explain. “It pushes me to my limits.” Then, a hint of a smile as his cheek lifted. “Plus, I like to win.”

She laughed lightly. “Are you still running from the anger?”

He didn’t respond for a long time, and she was afraid he wasn’t going to. Then, when she was just about to change the subject, he opened his mouth. “Some days I am. Sometimes, I get in my head and the only way to get out of that anger spiral is to get onto the back of an even angrier bull. Other days, I’m just doing what I love.”

Jason kept his eyes focused on the road ahead. “So why do you let everyone think you’re a jerk?”

This time, he really did smile. At least halfway. “Because I am?”

She shook her head. “No, you’re not. I’ve known enough of them to say for sure. You might be cranky, and you might have little patience for things or people. But I’ve never seen you be a jerk.”

Jason scowled. “Cassie, until five days ago, we’d barely spoken. Don’t act like you know who I am or try to convince me to be someone I’m not.”

Cassie felt the reprimand like a slap to the face. She shifted away from him, creating as much space in the small truck as she could and crossing her arms over her chest. She stared out the passenger window at the mountains falling away below her as they wound across the highway toward Pueblo.

Maybe she’d made a big mistake.

But the thing was, he wasn’t wrong.

She didn’t really know him. She still didn’t think he was as bad as people made him out to be. But what did she know? She’d married a virtual stranger. Was this their future? Tension and half-truths and sharp comments?

Jason parked at the hotel. Since they had a room for the weekend, he'd left the trailer at Redemption Ranch. The drive was far easier without the extra concern of towing the large trailer, but now he was wishing he'd brought it along. He could have slept in it while Cassie had the hotel room.

But no, that wasn't a good option either. He was here to protect her, and he couldn't do that from the parking lot. That was the whole point of this ridiculous marriage.

She hadn't looked at him for the last two hours. He knew he'd hurt her feelings. He wasn't sure he'd truly cared about anyone's feelings in the last fourteen years. He deserved every bit of the jerk label she'd claimed he didn't. Cassie had just been trying to be kind to him, but he'd shoved her away, with an extra dig at her own choices for good measure.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you," he said quietly. "I try not to be a bad guy anymore. But I also don't care enough to worry about what people think. They can think what they want. I'm not here to make friends."

Cassie's eyes were rimmed with red, as though she'd been crying, and he felt like an even bigger jerk. She lifted her chin. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard, cowboy."

"Geez. Tell me how you really feel, Princess."

Cassie straightened. "You want to know how I feel?"

Desperately.

But he just raised his eyebrows in a silent challenge.

“I’m terrified I made a mistake diving into this, but I’m more terrified of Travis seeking revenge. I’m worried that all I’ve done is put you in the crosshairs instead of me.” She shifted in her seat, never stopping her listing. He hung on every word, eager for this look inside her head, but also feeling the impact of every emotion and the weight of her problems. “I’m tired because I couldn’t sleep last night. I’m nervous you’re going to decide I’m not worth the trouble and march back to the courthouse to get an annulment. I’m excited about the *Behind the Hat* features and how well they’re being received. I’m eager to watch you ride while knowing that I’m your wife. I’m relieved my family didn’t push but also feeling so guilty for letting everyone believe we’re in love when you don’t even *like* me.”

With each new admission, his heart squeezed a little tighter. He honestly didn’t know it was possible for someone to feel so many things at once, but his own emotions were giving him a run for the money.

There was no way he’d be able to list them all out.

“I like you,” he said through a scratchy throat.

Her laugh was sharp and cracked with emotion. “That’s what you have to say to everything I just laid out?”

No. He had so much more to say, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell her.

It wasn’t a mistake. He didn’t care if he was targeted, as long as she was safe. He hadn’t slept either, too keyed up by the knowledge that she was in *his* bed on the other side of the wall. If he could say the words, he’d tell her that he would die before he walked away from the vows he’d said in the courthouse. He’d admit that the idea of her watching him ride with his ring on her finger would keep him distracted the entire weekend. He might even admit that he was impossibly close to falling in love with her completely with every minute they spent together.

But he wouldn't say any of those things. Because she hadn't signed up for the tangled mess of emotions that was buried under the stillness he worked so hard to maintain.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said. "The rest? We'll figure it out, Princess."

She exhaled, slow and shuddering. "Why do you call me that?"

He considered not answering her. He'd ignored the question last time. But after a long pause, he admitted the truth. "Because it reminds me that I'm not a prince."

E assie buried her face in the pillow as sunlight streamed across the room.

“Make it stop,” she pleaded, like she did most mornings. But no matter which direction she parked, her trailer always seemed to let the light in too early.

A low chuckle made her stiffen. She opened her eyes cautiously, realizing that she wasn’t in her trailer. And she wasn’t alone.

It all came flooding back. The wedding, the kiss, the drive to Pueblo.

“Not much of a morning person, I take it?”

Yesterday when she’d awoken in his little house on Wrangler Row, he’d already been gone. Probably taking care of all his wrangler tasks before they had to hit the road.

“You could say that,” she admitted, pressing her hands to the ceiling in a stretch that made her back and shoulders crack. The hotel bed wasn’t bad, and it certainly beat her trailer. Neither of them compared to the sheer bliss that had been sleeping in Jason’s bed.

The man must have spent half his salary on that bed.

“Coffee?” Jason offered her a mug, still steaming. She hummed with contentment. A girl could get used to this.

“What time is it?” she asked.

Jason sat on the edge of the other bed. “Almost eight. Registration already opened and slack starts at ten. Marcus already texted and said they’re expecting almost five hundred competitors in slack.”

Cassie’s eyes widened.

With the big rodeos, there was no way all the competitors could do their event during the official evening rodeo in front of the crowd. That was why almost all the rodeos had official competitions outside of the main evening performances. It was called slack. But five hundred competitors? No wonder they were starting so early.

Slack was also a huge part of her job, because 90% of the results from a rodeo were from slack, not from perf. With the exception of the crowd-favorite events like Jason’s. They were always during the big performance.

The Big Pueblo Rodeo was the last big rodeo before the National Finals. One last chance this year for permit holders to become qualified members, and for others to get their last count to qualify.

She sipped her coffee with appreciation and eventually rolled out of the bed. “I’ll be ready in twenty minutes.”

It certainly didn’t take long for word to spread around the rodeo circuit that Cassie and Jason had gotten married. Bethany had noticed the diamond ring almost immediately. Once Cassie had admitted who the groom was, Bethany all but jumped across the press booth to make sure that the announcer knew to include it when introducing Jason tonight during the performance.

Jason stayed close to the press booth all day, even escorting her to the hospitality tent. “Any sign of him?” she asked.

Jason shook his head. “Nothing so far.”

“Don’t you need to go prepare?”

“Eventually,” he admitted.

“I’ll be okay,” she said.

Jason shook his head. “Please let me. I can drop you off at the booth right before my call time. Then I’ll come right here when I’m done and wait for you to finish up.”

Cassie smiled at him. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” he said.

She glanced around, noticing the many sets of eyes trained on them as they ate together. “You know, I think your reputation is already improving.”

Jason grunted but didn’t look up. “I already told you, I don’t care what they think.”

“You should,” she insisted. “What about WorkMade?”

He rolled his eyes. “Forget WorkMade. If they think I’m so bad—”

Spotting Harmony Carlisle approaching their table, Cassie’s eyes widened and she tried to silently tell Jason to stop talking. When he wasn’t getting the point, she resorted to kicking him under the table.

“Ouch, what the—”

“Mr. Keen, what a pleasure to see you.”

Jason coughed several times, then choked out a hello of his own.

Cassie knew of Harmony Carlisle—almost everyone in professional rodeo did. She was a lawyer who negotiated all the rodeo endorsement deals for not only WorkMade, but also Jameson Saddles, Buckshot Whiskey, and Preston cowboy boots.

Many of the rodeo guys didn’t have an agent, and Harmony played both sides of the table. Cassie thought it was manipulative and underhanded, but she had most everyone convinced that she was unbiased and fair.

But Cassie had heard rumblings of cowboys finding out their sponsorships weren’t as generous as they seemed. Had she negotiated for Jason?

“And who might this be?” Harmony asked, her eyes on Cassie.

“Oh, um... Surely, you know Cassie Reynolds?”

Harmony’s eyes narrowed, then brightened. “Of course, Cassie Reynolds. Barry’s daughter, isn’t it?” She turned her attention back to Jason, effectively dismissing Cassie as irrelevant. “I wanted to pass along a message from WorkMade, Jason.”

If Cassie had claws, they would have extended.

“You forgot the most important part, *darling*,” she said, clinging suddenly to Jason’s arm. “Technically, it’s Cassie Keen now. Or it will be as soon as I get to the paperwork.”

Harmony’s mouth dropped open as she looked between the two of them. “Is that so?” Her smile grew. “Well, isn’t that interesting. Perhaps I have some good news to share with WorkMade after all.”

Jason’s muscle tightened under her grip as Harmony made her excuses and left.

“Does she represent you?” Cassie asked after she was out of earshot.

Jason shook his head. “No, thank the Lord. But she consults for WorkMade on all their contracts, including mine. I almost wish you hadn’t said anything.”

“Why? Wasn’t that the whole point of us getting married? To improve your image?” Cassie knew she had her own motives for the match, but he had to have married her because of how it would help him, right? Otherwise, what would he have to gain?

Jason didn’t answer, and they finished their meal in silence. Slack had ended and the performance was due to start in thirty minutes, which meant Jason would need to report to his station.

He walked her back to the booth. She flashed her lanyard to the security guard at the base of the stairs. She looked back at Jason for a moment. “Good luck.”

“Don’t need it,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, though no smile crossed his lips. “Stay in the booth until I come to get you after, okay?”

She nodded, then turned. She felt his eyes on her as she climbed the steps to the elevated set of rooms above the stands.

When the performance started, Cassie slipped into work mode, gathering images and scores to share live on social media from the photographers and audience capturing the action. Finally, after the other events, it was time for the finale. The bull riders were the last event of the night, the cherry on top of an exciting show.

Cassie scanned the show order. Jason was riding fifth, a bull named Prometheus. With each rider out of the gate, she held her breath. Of course, she’d watched bull riding before. But she didn’t think she’d ever felt every turn, twist, and kick as strongly as she did tonight.

When the fourth competitor was thrown from his bull and landed hard on his shoulder, a shockwave of phantom pain rocked her body. The cowboy got up, cradling his limp arm, and was ushered safely to the edge of the arena while the giant animal was distracted by the bullfighters.

The announcer said Jason’s name and her heart stopped. She could see his hat, just there behind the gate, which rattled as the bull tried to surge forward.

She knew Jason needed a full eight-second-ride, with a high score. But a high score meant a mean bull and a bigger chance of something happening. She said a desperate prayer for his safety, something she’d been doing throughout the day. And then she held her breath and waited.

The chute opened and the bull tore through the opening, barely clearing the front of it before it whipped into a nasty spin. But Jason held firm, his legs anchored in place and one hand tightly wrapped around the rope, the other in the air.

The bull changed tactics, adding a kick to the spin and then reversing directions. Jason was unflappable. He seemed to

anticipate Prometheus's every move and kept his weight centered, his hand and head high.

The pressure in her chest built as the seconds ticked on. Then the buzzer sounded, drawing cheers from the crowd. She still didn't breathe though, not until Jason managed to slip off the angry bull and jog clear of the reach of his nasty kicks.

She exhaled, still clutching her chest with one hand, willing the pounding within to settle. She'd watched thousands of bull riders, she realized with a start, but her heart had never belonged to one before.

Jason couldn't contain the grin that came after he finished his ride. If the strange looks he was getting were any indication, this wasn't his normal reaction. He ignored the congratulations and shoulder slaps from cowboys and wranglers backstage as he headed directly to the press booth.

There was no one he wanted to see but Cassie.

Marcus knew how much he'd needed this ride, but Cassie? Well, she was the reason it happened.

Every other time he'd climbed on a bull and felt the powerful animal fight his presence, Jason's mind had emptied, focused on nothing beyond the strength and anger of the animal. But tonight, his mind hadn't been empty. It had only been full of thoughts of her.

The desire to make her proud, to provide for her, and to come back safely... They had grounded him more firmly in place than any amount of anger and regret ever had. And when the chute opened and Prometheus had tried his very best to dislodge Jason from his back, nothing had been able to shake him.

Jason beelined for the staircase, ignored the security guard at the bottom, and charged up the metal steps two at a time. And like he knew she would, Cassie was there at the top waiting for him outside the door to the box. Her face was sunshine and joy and when she opened her arms to him, he

wrapped her in an embrace that held every promise of forever he could give her.

“That was incredible, Jason. I couldn’t breathe the entire time, but you were amazing.”

Jason set her feet back on the floor but still held her close. He looked into her blue eyes, shining like jewels. Her smile, breathtakingly beautiful.

Then he lowered his lips to hers, trying to tell her with his kiss all the things he wished he could say with words. She’d somehow unlocked joy for him, when he’d been merely existing for fourteen years.

One week with her and he was a different man.

The idea of losing her was unfathomable.

He slanted his mouth over hers, a jolt of satisfaction to find her an equal participant in the kiss, just as eager as he was. Her hands fisted in his shirt and his own hand slid up her side until it was under her ear, cradling her neck in his palm as he finally tore his mouth from hers.

Jason glanced behind her, unsurprised to find everyone in the press booth with eyes glued to them through the windows. His lip curled up, the smile from earlier replaced with a satisfied smirk. “Your friends have questions,” he whispered.

Cassie laughed. “*I* have questions,” she said.

He pressed his lips to hers again. “We’ll talk later, okay? I’ll be waiting when you finish up.”

Just then, the score for his ride was announced. Ninety-five, his best ever. And his own portion of the score was nearly perfect at forty-eight. Cassie whooped with delight and flung her arms around his neck.

“There’s no way WorkMade will pull your sponsorship now,” she said with a squeeze.

Jason nodded. She was probably right. Between the high score, the *Behind the Hat* series—which Cassie had showed him was gaining tons of attention online—and his new

affiliation with the Reynolds family, WorkMade wouldn't risk cutting him off.

The interesting thing was that he found that he didn't really care.

And it worried him that Cassie did.

She turned and went back to work, leaving him to trudge down the metal stairs. Was she so concerned with the terms of their marriage? Perhaps preparing to leave him when they both got what they needed?

The idea made his stomach churn, despite his own determination just yesterday to look at how to release Cassie from her vows. The security guard at the base of the stairs glared at him, but Jason just shrugged. It made the man crack a smile. "Good for you, man," was all he said.

Marcus waited just around the corner. "Dude, you were amazing!"

Jason blew out a breath from puffed out cheeks and sat on a nearby bench. He hung his head in his hands. "What the heck am I doing, Marcus?"

His friend sat down beside him. "So... I take it we're not excited about the best ride the Big Pueblo Rodeo has ever seen? Okay... Give me a minute to catch up."

Jason shook his head. "Of course I'm excited about the ride. It was... It's never felt like that before," he admitted, looking toward his friend as he tried to explain.

"It's never looked like that before either," Marcus said with a laugh. "I wouldn't want to be a judge because I don't know what they even found to take points for. What was different?" Marcus's eyes flicked up the stairs. "Well, I know one thing is different," he said. "I heard you got married."

Jason leaned back on the bench, tipping his head skyward. "Yeah. I did."

"I didn't even know you were together," Marcus said. There were questions in the words and a hint of hurt.

How much should he tell his friend? No one knew him better than Marcus, and the nights they'd spent around the fire in the competitor parking meant that Jason had shared more of his past with this man than anyone. Not all of it. But more.

"We weren't," he admitted.

A low whistle escaped from Marcus's lips. "So...?"

Jason looked around, making sure no one was nearby. This corner of the staging area was out of the way. Far from the chutes and the winner's circle and hospitality tent. "We did it to help each other," he said. When Marcus only raised his eyebrows, he continued, "She wanted to help my reputation. Said marrying her would do more than any social media feature or painful meet and greet event."

Marcus tipped his head back and forth, weighing the validity of the statement. "She's probably right. I mean, she's a Reynolds. That makes you all but untouchable."

"I didn't do it for that," he argued. "I mean, I did. But not really."

"So then, what's in it for her?"

"Travis—" He clenched his jaw at the thought of Cassie's ex. "Travis wouldn't leave her alone. Even after last weekend. I can protect her."

Marcus hummed in response.

"It was Cassie's idea," Jason added.

Marcus laughed at that. "You're in so deep, you're going to need a life jacket."

Jason tipped his head back again, exhaling a friendly insult to Marcus. "Aren't you supposed to be helping?"

Marcus shook his head. "No way, man. I'm just going to grab some popcorn and see how this all plays out."

Jason rammed an elbow into Marcus's bicep, but it only made his friend laugh harder. When silence fell between them again, Jason spoke quietly, his eyes still on the open sky above them. "Will you keep your eyes and ears open for signs of

Travis? He's... unstable. And I can't let anything happen to her."

"You didn't even need to ask," Marcus replied, all joking gone from his voice as well.

"Thanks."

"I hope this works out, Jason."

Jason didn't answer, but his own agreement echoed in his soul.

Me too, it said. Me too.

That night at the hotel, Cassie didn't know how to act. Something had shifted between the two of them, but navigating the new dynamic felt tricky. Like their new bond was tenuous at best.

The grinning Jason who had charged up the stairs toward her had been replaced with the familiar stoic expression. She missed the smile, she realized.

"We don't have to talk tonight," she offered. "I'm sure you're tired."

He slipped off his boots and set them carefully by the wall before sitting on the edge of the bed to remove his socks. "I'm usually too wired to sleep after a ride. And this one... well, I don't know if I'll ever sleep again." He stood, and she saw the pain ripple across his face at the effort.

"Are you hurt?"

He shook his head. "Just sore. Like I wrestled a bull," he said drily.

She laughed. "Come here. Let me see."

Jason hesitated but came to sit by her on the bed.

"This arm?" she guessed. The one that held the rope firm when he was being bucked and spun around. He nodded.

She wrapped her hands around his shoulder and squeezed lightly. He hissed through his teeth.

She pulled back.

“Don’t stop,” he gritted out.

She replaced her hands, massaging the muscles with her palms and fingers, his long-sleeved plaid shirt bunching under her movements. He groaned as she slid her hands back up in one long sweeping motion from his elbow to the base of his neck, the muscles there cording and flexing as she tried to give him some relief.

“Is it worth it?” she asked, continuing to massage his arm. She pushed the sleeve up and slid her fingers up and down the muscles of his forearm. “You have to know it seems crazy from the outside, right?”

A ghost of a smile crossed his face, but his eyes remained closed.

“Mm-hmm,” he said lazily. “It’s definitely crazy. And I’d never encourage someone to try it. But those of us who ride, do it for our own reasons. Some for the glory. Some for the rush.”

He didn’t say anything else.

“And some for the silence?” she offered, thinking about what he’d said earlier about his own experiences.

His eyes opened at that, sliding to hers. The steely gray was clouded, his body and face more relaxed than she had ever seen him. Her hands slid back up to his upper arm.

His eyes closed again, his throat bobbing as he swallowed. He nodded. “Yeah. Some for the silence.”

He didn’t offer more, and she didn’t push. They had time.

Friday’s rodeo operated much the same way. Slack during the day, perf at night. She snapped selfies of the two of them in the hospitality tent and shared them on her own social media, tagging the rodeo circuit and Jason’s usually empty profile.

When they finished the early dinner in the hospitality tent between slack and the performance, Jason was called over by a reporter from ESPN. After last night’s score, he was on track to qualify for the finals, so she wasn’t surprised.

“I’m going to go back to the booth,” she said quietly in his ear.

Jason reached for her hand but kept his attention on the question he was answering. When the reporter stopped to write something down, he leaned closer to her. “Wait for me, please?”

So she did, except that the conversation stretched on. With every glance at her watch, she knew she was running out of time. “I really have to go,” she said, slipping her hand from his arm. “I’ll see you later.”

“Now, you haven’t been to the show in Vegas in three years, correct?”

Cassie was halfway across the tent by the end of the question and couldn’t hear Jason’s response.

A couple minutes later, she reached the stairs to the press booth. There was an empty chair at the bottom of the steps, and she frowned at the lack of a security guard. Travis stepped from around the corner and her heart stopped. The fear was cold and familiar. She looked around, searching for anyone who might see him and stop him. But the area was deserted—unusually so.

“I’ve been trying to talk to you, Cassandra.” Travis’s voice slithered over her name and a shiver ran down her spine. “Your guard dog never seems to leave you alone.”

“Don’t talk about him like that,” she hissed, her fear momentarily overshadowed by anger.

“I’ll do what I please,” he replied smoothly. “*Whatever* I please,” he said, with a survey down her body, all the way to her toes that made her shake with disgust. “You think you’re too good for me, and then you end up with that roughie?” He spat on the hard-packed dirt. “Not a chance.”

“Even if I wasn’t with Jason—which I am—I would never be with you.”

His smile was unaffected though, as though her words meant nothing, carried no weight at all to him. “He had a good

ride last night. I'd hate for something bad to happen to him before he gets his chance at Finals."

"Cassie!"

She turned toward Jason's voice. A moment later, relief crashed over her at the sight of him coming around the corner, jogging toward her.

She turned back to Travis, but he was gone.

"What's wrong?" Jason asked, his hands on her shoulders, studying her face. Then he looked around. "Where's the guard?"

Cassie stepped into his arms instead of replying, laying her head on his chest, letting her heart rate slow until it matched his own. When she pulled back, she said, "I have to get up there."

His eyes were on hers, searching for something, but she just gave him a smile.

"See you after your ride?"

"I'll be right here," he affirmed.

She watched his ride tonight, another amazing performance. The smile on his face when he picked up his hat and waved it to the crowd in triumph only made them cheer louder and made her fall further. The lights of the cameras flashed. Jason Keen, smiling in victory after ten years of being nearly unflappable, would be on the front of every rodeo website and magazine out there.

She couldn't think of anyone who deserved it more.

All the time, money, and sacrifice were coming together. This week, he'd let her behind the scenes of the training he did. The way his cheeks blushed slightly when he admitted it was time for him to do his pilates workout, or when she'd asked about the large balance ball that dominated one corner of his tiny living room at home.

He'd been riding for ten years. Jason had worked unbelievably hard, and he was on the brink of seeing it

through to the end. But his alliance with her and his determination to *protect* her might end up ruining it all.

Cassie found herself praying desperately—again—for Travis to disappear somehow, to leave them all alone and let her be.

But even as she left with Jason after the performance had ended and the crowds were dissipating, she swore she could feel Travis's eyes on them.

Jason heard the whimpering first, and thought it might be his own, with the way his body wept with pain, despite the painkillers he'd taken before and after his ride.

But as his eyes opened in the dark of the hotel room, he heard it again.

Cassie.

He ignored the way his muscles protested as he threw the blanket off and got up, crossing the space between their beds without a thought. Nothing mattered but making sure she was okay.

Cassie was thrashing her head, her hands fisted in the sheets as she whined. A nightmare, he realized. He laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Shhhh,” he tried soothing her gently, but she only fought harder. He shook her arm, trying to rouse her from sleep entirely.

“Jason!”

She called his name, her voice laced with panic. His heart stopped.

He pulled her from the sheets and wrapped her in his arms, rocking gently. “It’s okay, Princess. I’ve got you.”

She fought briefly before she settled, her eyes fluttering open. Her head was laying against his shoulder, her legs

tucked across his own. Had he realized how small she was before this?

“You had a bad dream,” he said to ease the confusion on her face.

“Travis,” was all she said, her tone panicked.

Jason felt himself tense. What kind of things had happened if they were bad enough to make Cassie have nightmares?

“You said my name,” he said, letting the curiosity show in his words.

She looked away, curling further into him. “He... he was hurting you,” she said in a whisper.

“You were crying for me?” Did she really care so much that it would make her thrash and whimper in her sleep like it had?

She just nodded in response, and he held her tighter, knowing that he was in way over his head. He’d assumed it would always be uneven, his own feelings dwarfing hers in intensity. But maybe...

He pressed a kiss to her hair. “Everything is okay. You’re safe.”

She shook her head. “Travis was there tonight,” she said, sniffing back tears.

Jason’s hands stilled. “In your dream?”

“At the show. Before. While you spoke to the reporter.”

Jason pressed his eyes shut in dismay. That blasted reporter kept asking question after question. He’d been trying so hard not to be rude—his new image on the line—but when Cassie had gone without him, he’d gotten away as soon as he could.

Not soon enough apparently.

“What happened?” he said through gritted teeth.

Cassie didn’t answer, just shifted her weight until she was laying back on the bed. Jason let his hand rub her back a few

more times, then he stood. Of course, she needed to sleep. They could talk about it tomorrow.

“Will you...” Her voice was quiet and unsure.

“What do you need, Princess?”

He’d do it, whatever it was.

“Will you lay with me?”

He ran a hand over his face in indecision, but this was his wife.

Whether they’d gone into this marriage for the right reasons, he knew it meant something. Jason laid on top of the blanket she used. Her back faced him, and he gently laid his hand there, resisting the instinct to wrap his arm around her and tug her close.

Her breathing grew steady, and he watched the gentle rise and fall of her ribcage, grateful that whatever had happened with Travis had left her unharmed—at least physically. Jason had let himself get distracted. It wouldn’t happen again.

He shifted his weight slightly, letting his muscles relax. His hand still rested there on her side, and there was space between them.

Too much and not enough all at the same time.



HE FINISHED Pueblo with another great ride, but the bull didn’t score as high. It didn’t stop him from taking the purse and the points as the champion. He also didn’t let Cassie out of his sight for longer than it took to complete his ride.

There was no sign of Travis.

“What are you doing for Thanksgiving?” Jason asked the question about halfway into their ride back to Redemption. The holiday was in just a few days.

“I’m not sure,” Cassie said. “I guess we should talk about that, hmm?”

Jason raised his eyebrow. “Why do you think I brought it up?”

She made a face. “Were you going to go home?”

Jason jerked a shoulder. “I hadn’t decided. I’d like to. But I thought maybe... with us, maybe I should skip it this year?”

An expression he couldn’t read crossed her face. “Why is that?”

“I’m not sure I’m ready to tell my family that I’m married...” He hesitated before adding the rest. “You know, since it isn’t the real deal.”

He knew his brother was going to lecture him on what a dumb idea this all was.

“Oh.” Cassie reached for his hand. “I know we sort of jumped into this... and I can’t ever thank you enough for doing that. But I have to say. I’m not really sure where the line is anymore.”

Jason blew out a breath, laced with laughter. “Yeah. Me either.”

“I like you Jason,” she said. “I think you’re an amazing man and I’d... I’d like to see if we can make this relationship work.”

Jason managed to school his features before a goofy grin gave him away. “So, what? We’d date?”

“Sure. That sounds silly doesn’t it? We’re already married...” She pressed a hand to her forehead. “I know why we did it, but now...” she trailed off.

Was she regretting it?

“Am I crazy to think that there is more between us than some foolish bargain?”

He shook his head, unsure how to express just how not crazy it was. “No, you’re not.” He cleared his throat. “I feel it too.”

Her worried expression morphed into one of joy, unrestrained or disguised. Cassie wore her emotions on her

sleeve. Looking back, he wondered how he'd missed the way her relationship with Travis was sucking the joy out of her. Even though he'd only seen her from a distance at shows and occasionally at Redemption Ranch... He should have seen it.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Confusion brought a wrinkle to the smooth skin above her nose. "Why?"

He reached a hand toward her across the truck, unable to resist the need to touch her. He clasped her fingers, letting the contact give him courage.

"I'm sorry Travis couldn't see how lucky he was to have you. I think... I think he must have been so aware of your goodness compared to his own awful soul, he did the only thing he could do to make the contrast less extreme." Jason rubbed her thumb with his own. "He tried to dim your light and cut you down." The twinge of guilt grew stronger. "I'm sorry I wasn't involved enough to stop it. I'm sorry we weren't friends before now. We should have been."

Cassie squeezed his hand. "None of this is your fault. You've been... nothing but kind to me. I actually wish..."

"What?" he prodded, when she didn't continue.

"I wish I hadn't dragged you into this. Travis made it seem like he would do whatever it took to get you out of the way." Her eyes swam with tears.

"Travis can try. But he'll find me far harder to intimidate than his usual targets."

Jason kept his promise, sticking close to Cassie when they were back at the ranch, unless she was at her parents' house or the lodge.

It was Barry that he couldn't seem to avoid though.

"Jason!" Cassie's dad called to him from across the corral.

"Good morning," he said, before using his mouth to hold three nails while he worked. He grabbed his hammer and balanced the fence rail on his knee.

“I’ve been trying to catch you, Jason. You’re a hard man to find.”

Jason just raised an eyebrow, pulling a nail from between his lips and hammering it in place.

“I’ve got some paperwork for you to sign. For the ranch.” Barry grinned, like this was the best news in the world.

Jason exhaled, focusing on the nail between his fingers as he positioned it on the fence board. “I’m a bit busy these days. You should talk to Cassie.”

Barry shook his head. “This isn’t a woman’s matter.”

Jason took out his frustration on the nail, snarling when it bent under the off-target impact. He flipped the hammer around and dug it out.

“Look, Mr. Reynolds, I know—”

“Who are you calling Mr. Reynolds? Come on, Jason. You’ve been around here long enough to know better than that.”

Jason pulled off his hat and hung it on the fence post. He stood up, ignoring his project for a moment, though he still held the hammer. He let the weight of it and the feel of the rubber grip anchor him. “All right. Barry. I know you have arrangements made for the ownership of the ranch.”

“Sure do. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. The papers are all ready to go. I just need some informa—”

Jason held up his hand. “I don’t want the ranch, Barry. That’s not why I married Cassie.”

Barry clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t you think I know that? I see the way you look at her. But the fact is, it’s a package deal. When you married Cassie, you were granted one-third ownership of Redemption Ranch.”

“Give it to Cassie.”

Barry shook his head. “That’s just not the way of things, son.”

Jason picked up his hat and grabbed another nail. “Well, it should be. Your daughter loves this ranch more than anyone. She is capable and smart. I’m just a bull rider who works here between rodeos.”

“Not anymore, you’re not. You’re my son-in-law. And whether you like it or not, part of this ranch belongs to you.”

Jason bent down to finish securing the railing to the post, turning his back on Barry. How could he convince Cassie’s dad that she deserved the ranch?

They stayed at Redemption Ranch for Thanksgiving. Cassie knew that Jason called his family and promised to come for Christmas. The week after Finals in Vegas, it would be the perfect time to get away.

And hopefully, he wouldn't run the risk of leading Travis to his hometown of Freedom and his family that lived there. At least, that was her prayer.

Thanksgiving dinner was a big affair at the Reynolds house. Of course, they also served a Thanksgiving banquet for any guests who were spending their holiday at Redemption Ranch. Zeke volunteered to share the cooking duties with their mother. Cassie found him in the kitchen at the house on Thursday morning, his arm wrist deep in the turkey.

"Seems like all those cooking shows have taught you a thing or two."

Zeke glanced up at her, an easy smile on his lips. "It's a bit more than that. Don't tell Dad, but I have been taking classes online and Don has been training me."

Cassie's mouth fell open. Don had been the head chef at Redemption Grill for a decade and was notoriously protective of his kitchen. "What about your other responsibilities? What about the ranch?"

Zeke rolled his eyes. "Now you sound like Dad." He reached out and grabbed some more stuffing from the bowl. "I don't know, Cass, sometimes I wonder if I wouldn't be happier somewhere else."

“Come on, you don’t mean that, do you?” Cassie sat at the barstool, not bothering to get the cup of coffee she had intended. Jason was out at the barn doing his morning chores. Instead of staying in his house alone, she had come to the main house.

Zeke shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not saying I don’t love it here. Or even that I’m planning to leave. I know Dad has this grand plan where Gideon and I take over the ranch and continue his empire. Everybody knows that’s what he wants. I just wish he cared—even a little—what we want.”

Cassie exhaled a cynical laugh. “I guess I didn’t realize you weren’t on board. You never said anything, even all the times I argued with him about why I should get a piece of Redemption Ranch, whether I got married or not.”

Zeke paused. The water ran over his hands as he stared back at her. “You didn’t.” His eyes were wide. “Tell me you didn’t get married so you could somehow get the ranch.”

But her brother didn’t wait for her to respond before he groaned. “That explains so much.”

Cassie was shaking her head. “No, no. That is not what this is.” At least not entirely, and not anymore.

“Then what the heck is it, Cassie? What on earth would make you jump into a marriage so quickly?”

She didn’t answer. “Just stay out of it, Zeke. It doesn’t concern you.”

His eyes flashed, and he seemed like he was going to say more, but their dad came in, whistling. A worn-out Denver Broncos sweatshirt stretched across his chest.

“Good morning, favorite daughter. Favorite oldest son.”

She met Zeke’s eyes when her dad had his back turned. Would he share his suspicions with her dad? Or would his own secret be enough to keep him quiet?

“Hey, Dad.”

“Smells good in here, Zeke.” Her dad’s compliment seemed to surprise her brother.

“Thanks. Mom is at the lodge, making sure the kitchen has everything they need for the big dinner for the guests.”

Her dad nodded. “Sounds good. Is it bad to say I’m glad we decided to have our own Thanksgiving here this year?”

Cassie smiled. Many times over the years, her family had hosted the dinner at the lodge. Her mother thrived playing hostess for the guests, but it made the day feel a lot more like work and a lot less like a holiday.

“Me too,” she said honestly.

Gideon entered the kitchen, sweaty from something. A mountain bike ride, if she was going to guess. “Hey, sis. How’s married life?”

She blushed. Everyone asked that question—in exactly that same way. She didn’t know how they were expecting her to answer.

Truthfully, it was a mix between terribly awkward and more wonderful than she had imagined. Jason was still sleeping on the couch in his living room, but they’d found a happy rhythm in the evenings, as he balanced on his aerobics ball, feet raised, for what seemed like hours. Sometimes, the TV was on. Usually, her laptop was out and she was busy creating the promotion material for all the Western circuit cowboys who had qualified for Nationals.

And if she happened to spend a little extra time digging for the perfect photos of Jason, that was just because she was good at her job. Not because she had become slightly obsessed with seeing his smile, even when it was only the smallest lifted corner.

She was beginning to recognize his different expressions, though she was sure to most anyone else, they all looked the same. But studying his face during their conversations, and even the interview footage he had from previous rodeos, she had started to notice certain things. The way his jaw clenched when he was angry, or the corner of his mouth lifted just barely when he was happy. Sometimes, his eyes went... softer

somehow when he was talking to her. And when she mentioned Travis, they flashed with a steely resolve.

All subtle enough that she had never noticed them before, but now she celebrated each almost smile, each quirk of his eyebrow.

And she'd watched the video of him after Thursday's ride in Pueblo a dozen times, completely entranced by the smile that transformed his face. It hadn't made another appearance, and she'd decided to make it her mission to reveal it.

"Cassie?"

She blinked, suddenly aware she'd been caught daydreaming. About her *husband* she realized as heat gathered in her cheeks.

Gideon's smirk was enough to have her grabbing a grape from the bowl to toss across the room at him. He opened his mouth and caught it, chewing it with a cocky smile. Stupid superior reflexes.

"Married life is fine."

"Just fine? I would have expected more from Jason." Gideon tsked loudly.

"Maybe we should have a talk with him," Zeke offered.

"Now, boys, leave your sister alone."

"Thanks, Dad."

"And leave Jason alone. He's part of the family now. Y'all know that."

Cassie wasn't entirely sure if he was saying that because Jason owned a third of Redemption Ranch, or because he was married to her.

Realistically, it was probably a mix of both. But she appreciated her dad putting an end to her brothers' teasing. Even if he did have completely backward views on women and ranching.

Jason arrived at the house around noon, freshly showered. He greeted her first, pressing a kiss to her cheek. His spicy

cologne was something he didn't usually bother with but that she could definitely get used to. His lips were warm against her skin.

"Hey, beautiful," he murmured. The words weren't loud enough for anyone to hear, but she still couldn't help but wonder if it was all for show—to convince everyone in her family that this was real.

After the meal, they went around the table, each person required to say something they were grateful for.

Her mom went first, her eyes shimmering as she looked at Cassie and Jason. "I'm thankful to have a new son-in-law," she said.

Cassie felt the guilt hit fresh. She hadn't considered how much this could end up hurting her family if they found out the truth. Thankfully, her brothers and dad gave different answers, focused on the ranch and the family as a whole.

When it was Cassie's turn, she looked to her left, where Jason sat with his eyes focused on her. "I'm really thankful that I got to know Jason at the rodeo this year."

She remembered the first significant interaction. She'd known that he intervened the day before the attack and prevented Travis from following her. It had been just a glimpse, but his had been a familiar face when she felt like she couldn't breathe from the confrontation.

Travis wouldn't have done anything—at least she didn't think he would. But he'd grabbed her, and it had been so much like the times they'd been alone.

He'd nearly lost control, despite the crowd. And if that didn't show her how close to the edge he was, the following morning had. It was hard to believe that was barely two weeks ago. Because in that short time, Jason had become... well, he'd become her husband. And her closest friend.

He placed his hand on her leg under the table, and she covered it with her own.

Then it was Jason's turn.

“This year... Well, there are a lot of things. But right now, I’m thankful to have the most amazing woman as my wife. I’m incredibly blessed.”

Cassie felt her heart expand, overwhelmed with the simplicity and kindness of his words. She’d roped him into this mess, and yet he never faltered. She was the blessed one. If it was a competition, it wasn’t even close.

On Saturday, they went into Redemption Ridge to do some shopping. Next week was the barn dance, hosted annually at the ranch and open to the entire community. Shortly after that, they would need to head to Vegas to start preparing for the Finals.

Then Christmas.

Cassie was determined to get some of her Christmas shopping done early, so she wouldn’t be bringing back Vegas souvenirs for her brothers. Walking through downtown Redemption Ridge with Jason brought lots of curious looks and some outright questions from familiar faces.

It shouldn’t have surprised her, but it did. Jason had lived in the area for over a decade, and she’d been there since she was a girl. People knew both of them, but never as a unit.

After a quick stop by the sporting goods store for a gift for Gideon, they went to Olive and Sage. The little store smelled earthy and spicy, no doubt from the myriad of spice blends and salts they sold along with the large vats of olive oil and balsamic vinegars you could taste before filling one of the beautiful glass bottles they sold.

Cassie grinned. It was the perfect place to get something for Zeke.

She and Jason tasted and smelled and landed on a variety gift set of spices.

“I could get used to this,” Jason said.

She glanced up at him, trying to read his expression. “Get used to what?”

“Only buying one gift for everyone – from the both of us.”

Cassie's laugh bubbled up. "That is such a 'typical guy' thing to appreciate."

He shrugged. "It's true. I never thought much about it... but I remember my dad being just as surprised as everyone else when it came time to open presents for things like Grandma's birthday." His eyes twinkled. "I think Mom even signed his name to the cards."

She rolled her eyes, but inside, a thrill went through her. Would she sign their names?

Merry Christmas. Love, Jason and Cassie.

After Olive and Sage, Cassie saw Jason look longingly at The Cakery. The cupcake bakery was a Redemption Ridge staple, and thoughts of the sweets inside made Cassie's mouth water.

"Should we..." she trailed off, letting the lift in her voice ask the question.

"We haven't even had lunch yet," Jason said.

She shrugged and pointed to the sign in the window, reading it out loud. "Life's short. Eat dessert first."

Jason's cheek twitched. Almost a smile.

"Can't argue with that," he said. He tugged on her hand, leading them toward the store with its pink facade and black-and-white striped awning.

Caroline Taylor was working. Her family owned a ranch east of town. Her two brothers worked there, but she was the head baker at The Cakery.

"Good morning, Cassie! And Jason," she added, a hint of surprise in her voice. The baker looked between Cassie and Jason with questions in her eyes.

"Hey, Caroline." Cassie smiled. "We're taking your advice and having dessert before lunch."

"It's flawless logic, if you ask me." She wiped her hands on her apron and stepped up to the register. "What can I get for you?"

Cassie chose a blueberry lemon cupcake, and wrinkled her nose at Jason's choice of carrot cake. "That's an old man flavor," she said as Caroline plated them up.

Caroline dropped one of the plates. "Oh, sugar!"

"Sorry about that. Give me a second." She grabbed a washrag and scooped up the splattered cupcake. She plated a new one and slid it across the counter. "There we go. One carrot cake and one lemon blueberry."

"Is carrot cake an old man flavor, Caroline?" Cassie asked with a teasing tone.

"No way, Jose. I am not getting into this."

He simply raised his eyebrow. "I am an old man, Princess."

Her heart stuttered at the endearment. "You're not *that* old," she grumbled. "You just have gray hair." His hair had been light brown when he was new to Redemption Ranch but was nearly all silver now. She thought it was striking.

"Older than you," he countered, unbothered by her comment about his hair. "You're twenty-six, right?"

She nodded. "And you're..." She hesitated, trying to do the math in her head. She'd been twelve when he came to Redemption Ranch. He'd been an adult—barely, it had seemed. But still so much older than her. "Thirty-two?"

"Thirty-three," he corrected. "I was almost twenty when I moved here."

"Hmm. You're right, you are an old man. Might as well take you out to the south pasture and put you out of your misery."

His smile was quick, she almost didn't catch it.

"So sassy," he said in a whisper, making her cheeks flush. He paid for the cupcakes, and they took their seats at a small bistro table near the window.

"Any ideas for what to give my mom and dad? And we should get stuff for your family, too."

They talked through options for gifts but were interrupted by her phone ringing. It was the number for the ranch. She answered it warily.

“Hello?”

“Cassie, it’s Milo. Are you guys okay?”

She frowned, her eyes meeting Jason’s across the table. Why was someone from the security team calling her?

“We’re fine. What’s wrong?”

“There’s been a fire.” Her gasp made Jason’s eyes narrow. “Jason’s house was destroyed.”

She shut her eyes against the onslaught of emotions. “No,” she protested, but she knew Milo wasn’t lying.

She handed Jason the phone, feeling like she couldn’t tell him herself. Not with the guilt assailing her. This had been Travis. There was no doubt in her mind. She saw the anger flash in Jason’s eyes and saw the way his jaw clenched. She couldn’t hear Milo’s words through the phone, but she was sure it was the same as what he’d told her.

“Is everyone okay? Was anyone else’s property damaged?” The fact that Jason’s first thought had been about others was not lost on her.

In a few moments, Jason hung up the phone and ran a hand over his face. He leaned back in the tiny white bistro chair.

“I’m so sorry, Jason. This is my—”

“Don’t.” His word sliced through her own. She closed her mouth, surprised by his intensity. He sounded angry, and she really couldn’t blame him. Another apology tried to sneak out, but she bit her lip.

Jason’s knuckles were white as he gripped the edge of the table, her phone forgotten beside his half-eaten cupcake. Her own sat in front of her, but her stomach turned at the thought of taking a bite.

“Jason, I—”

His eyes flicked toward her and the shadows within them made her stop mid-sentence.

“You could have been there,” he said, anguish written across his face.

“But I wasn’t,” she replied, reaching for his hand across the small table.

Jason blew out a heavy breath. “I knew he was trouble and that you were in danger... but I don’t know, I guess I thought he would give up.”

Cassie squeezed his fingers. It wouldn’t do any good to tell Jason that she’d known Travis wouldn’t give up. He was too far gone—too desperate to save face. She knew the fire hadn’t been to hurt her.

No, Travis wanted the ranch. He wanted her by his side, even if it meant she was his prisoner. It was just that Jason had now become another obstacle to Travis getting what he wanted.

“So what? We can go to the police, right? Let them know that he did this?”

Jason nodded. “That’s where we start. But you better believe that won’t be the end.” Jason’s steely eyes met hers, and she felt the promise he made deep in her bones.

Jason stared at the charred remains of his little home in disbelief. Whatever Travis had used to burn it down was certainly effective. The roof had caved in, and there wasn't a surface inside that hadn't been turned black and covered in ash.

He was upset, but not at the loss of stuff. It was just a house. Not even truly his house, since it belonged to the ranch and was part of his compensation package. It was the implication. Travis could get close, and he wasn't holding back.

They'd gone to the police and explained everything. They promised to bring Travis in for questioning, but no one seemed to know where he was. He hadn't been a guest at Redemption Ranch since before the rodeo in Pueblo.

After surveying the damage, Jason turned back around and went back into Redemption Ridge. Other than the boots on his feet—which he was inexpressibly glad he'd decided to wear on their shopping trip—he had nothing. He hurriedly bought new jeans, shirts, towels, and bedding. He dug his credit card out of his wallet at the checkout. He'd deal with that problem later. The purse he'd won at Pueblo was generous, but he'd forgotten how expensive everything was. But he didn't want Cassie to worry. She had enough to worry about.

They'd be sleeping in his trailer for the foreseeable future, since all the houses on Wrangler Row were full. Paul offered

to give up his little house, but Jason wouldn't ask his boss to do that.

Cassie met him at the truck and helped him unload the bags from the department store and carry them into the trailer. Quickly, the entire common area was filled with the unpacked stuff.

He groaned as he lowered himself onto the cushioned bench that ran along one wall. It was the closest thing his trailer had to a couch. "We need to talk," he said. He extended one arm along the back of the bench. "Sit with me?"

Cassie seemed to hesitate, but she came and sat, her side resting against his. "Should I be worried?"

He looked down at her, wishing he could will away the dark circles under her eyes and the wrinkle of concern that seemed permanently etched between her eyebrows. "We need to tell your family. About Travis," he clarified.

A brief visit from Barry earlier had confirmed that they still thought the fire was nothing but an accident. But they needed to know.

Cassie tensed against him, but he pulled his arm around her shoulder, rubbing it gently.

"I know you don't want to. But we need them to know. We need Milo and the security team to be aware so they can keep an eye out. We need your brothers and the other wranglers to do the same."

Cassie took a deep breath. "You're right," she said finally.

A bit of the tension eased out of him. "Can you say that again into my phone recorder?"

"Very funny," she said. The hint of a smile played on her cheek and his eyes caught on the movement. He was so darn glad she hadn't been in the house when Travis lit it up. He'd never forgive himself. Maybe he was just fooling himself to think that he could truly protect Cassie.

But if she'd agree to let her family in on the situation? Everyone on the ranch could stop him.

Not alone. But together, as a family. Make no mistake, he knew that's what Redemption Ranch was. Heck, the whole entire town of Redemption Ridge was one big family. And if they spread the word about Travis, he wouldn't make it five hundred yards into town before meeting a whole line of opposition.

Maybe Cassie wouldn't let him go that far, but at least here at Redemption Ranch, they could work as a team to keep her safe.

He squeezed her tighter. "How do you want to do this?"

She laid her head on his chest, and he grazed her hair with his lips.

"Do... Do we have to tell them the truth about us? That I roped you into this whole thing?"

Jason tilted away from her so he could see her face. "Is that what you think?"

She nodded, barely meeting his eyes. He lifted her chin with a finger. "Do you really think I do *anything* I don't want to do? Is that the Jason Keen you know?"

She sniffed. "I don't know... I just know that it was my stupid idea, and you went along with it so that I would help you save your image."

Jason shook his head. "You're crazier than I thought if you think I did this for my image. I don't give a flying frog about my reputation. I managed just fine for ten years on the circuit with everyone convinced I was a playboy renegade."

Cassie started to argue. "But you're not—"

"I never cared enough to argue," he said, ignoring her. "I know it wasn't true, at least not to the extent everyone thought. It didn't really matter. I would figure out a way to compete without sponsors, if I really needed to."

She looked up at him. "So why? Why did you agree to marry me?"

Instead of answering, he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. He hadn't kissed her since the first night of the Pueblo

rodeo. It was easier to pretend it didn't happen. Or that it had simply been a result of the adrenaline and excitement of the record-breaking ride. But he would be lying if he said he hadn't thought about it a hundred times.

The warm honey of her lips was a spike of sensation, rising and cresting above the others. Her body pressed against his side, the smooth skin of her cheek under his rough palm. All of it combined into a relentless wave of pleasure, with undercurrents of tenderness and love.

He couldn't say the words, but there it was. The reason he'd said yes to Cassie's proposal. Even then, after a few days of talking with her and a decade of watching her – there was a part of him that knew.

She was it for him.

He thought he simply wanted to protect her. But he could have done that without the marriage. But when she'd offered him everything he couldn't admit that he wanted, he hadn't been able to say no. Hadn't wanted to.

The kiss gentled as he pulled back. Cassie's eyes were closed, her mouth slightly parted as she caught her breath.

“Does that answer your question?” His voice was rough.

Cassie's fingers skimmed her lips. “Umm. Not really?”

He smiled, and her eyes widened. She was adorable. “I married you because I wanted to, Princess. That might make me a villain in this story, but it's true. I wanted to marry you. Not for me or my reputation. But because of you.”

The wrinkle in Cassie's brow grew deeper. “I don't... I'm not sure I understand.”

He pressed his lips to the crease, then rubbed it with his thumb. “You asked me to do it. And I couldn't say no. I was already in too deep,” he admitted. “I'm the crazy one, Cassie. You jumped into this marriage to save the ranch. I bet you never counted on me falling in love with you.” He shut his eyes, not sure he could take the pain of seeing her reject his honesty.

The sharp intake of breath was his only warning before her mouth crashed into his. The kiss was hard and hurried as though their time was about to expire.

And maybe it was. Maybe this castle of lies they'd built was about to collapse.

But he was done lying about the way he felt. With the way Cassie was driving this kiss, it seemed maybe she was done pretending as well. Or perhaps that she'd never been pretending at all.

His hands came to her hips, pulling her on top of him so he had a better angle. Her fingers gripped his hair firmly, like she was holding on for dear life. He trailed his kisses toward her ear, pressing his lips just below her earlobe.

"You're perfect, Princess. Just perfect," he murmured against her skin, still amazed that this was happening. He was holding Cassie Reynolds—no, Cassie Keen—in his arms. He broke the contact of his lips on hers and cradled her to his chest. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too. It's a little scary how much."

His lips twitched into a smile at her declaration.

"I'm scared, Jason," she said quietly.

He wrapped his arms around her, squeezing a little tighter. "I know, Princess. Me too. But we're going to stop him."

*H*er dad's anger rolled through the room. Cassie had called a meeting with her family to bring them into the loop about Travis. It was nearly ten at night, but everyone was there.

"I'm going to bury him," her dad all but roared across the table. He turned his angry stare at Jason. "And you! You knew about this?"

"Daddy, please. You can't blame Jason. He wanted to tell you from the beginning."

"He should have, you mean."

Cassie sighed, reaching for Jason's hand. "Jason protected me from Travis while we were on the road." She hesitated before continuing. "But none of it is his fault. I covered up Travis's abuse for too long."

"How long?" Gideon demanded, his arms crossed over his chest.

"*Too long*," she repeated. "We dated. It was serious. He was... mostly sweet. And then he wasn't, but it was too easy to look past it. I blamed myself," she added, as the realization struck her.

Jason's hand flexed under hers. "That—"

"I know it wasn't my fault," she reassured them. "I thought... I thought I loved him. I told him about the marriage clause. He was... interested." She remembered how he'd asked so many questions. Looking back, she could hear how

calculating they were. She took a deep breath, gathering the courage to share the rest.

“When his dad lost everything earlier this spring, he snapped. He’d been cruel before, mostly with backhanded compliments or outright taunts. But the week everyone found out about the bankruptcy and just how bad it was, he lashed out at me. I told everyone that the bruise was from a fall.”

Her brothers’ outrage made her feel loved, but also foolish. Why had she waited to tell them?

“I stayed a few more months after that. He didn’t hurt me again, at least not physically. He proposed in September, but I said no. I knew I couldn’t marry him. It would have meant losing myself. But Travis isn’t giving up.”

She turned to Jason, letting his confidence in her give her strength before she turned back to her family.

“He has been harassing me ever since. Jason stepped in a couple times, and that was how we started getting to know each other. And now, I’m pretty sure Travis has turned his sights on Jason. I don’t even think he wants me.”

Jason muttered under his breath, “Idiot”

She bit her cheek to pull back the smile. “Travis wants Redemption Ranch, and he is desperate enough to think there is a way for him to get it—if I’m no longer married to Jason.”

“Not going to happen,” Jason growled.

“Why didn’t you tell us any of this, Cassie? I brought him here. I interviewed him for a job! Heck, I almost gave him one.” Her dad turned back to Jason. “But you warned me not to,” he said slowly, as though realizing what Jason had known but not shared. “You should have said more,” her dad said through gritted teeth.

“It wasn’t my story to share, sir.”

“I’m sorry, Dad. I wanted to handle it myself. I felt so foolish, knowing I had let him treat me poorly for so long, and that I had shared about the stupid marriage clause. None of

this would be happening if he didn't think he could get the ranch."

"He'll never get to you. Or the ranch." The promise came from Zeke, and she smiled at her older brother, always so strong. Gideon echoed his agreement.

Her mom spoke for the first time since the beginning of the meeting. "So now what?"

Cassie looked at Jason, urging him to take over.

He spoke, his voice firm as he explained their plan. "The police already know, and there is a warrant out for his arrest. We bring in the wranglers and the security team. We can think of a few folks in town who can keep their eyes open. We're going to make sure that Travis doesn't have anywhere to hide. Then when he comes back, we'll be ready."

As they climbed back into the trailer around midnight, Cassie nearly moaned as she fell onto the bed fully clothed. "That was quite possibly the longest day I've ever experienced."

Jason sat on the bench and slipped off his cowboy boots as she watched through the narrow doorway. "Can't argue there. Are you okay?"

Cassie sat up slightly, leaning on her elbow. "Me? You're the one who lost his home today."

Jason stood up and walked toward the bedroom. "It was *our* home, sweetheart. And I asked you a question."

Her heart stuttered at the sight of him coming toward her. Her husband was strong and serious and handsome. *Devastatingly* handsome when he smiled. He wasn't smiling now, though.

She was lying diagonally across the bed, her feet near the doorway, hanging off the bed since she hadn't even bothered to remove her shoes. He sat near her feet and slipped off her tennis shoes. Then her socks.

When he gently pressed his thumbs into the arch of her foot, she nearly melted at the exquisite torture of pressure and

skin. “Are you okay?” he asked again.

“I’m amazing now,” she said lazily, making her enjoyment of his ministrations obvious.

He lifted one side of his lips into a smirk. “I’m glad, but that’s not what I meant.”

She rolled over onto her back, keeping her feet in his lap and praying that he wouldn’t stop whatever magic he was working on them.

“It was your house,” she said, her eyes falling closed.

“Just a house. I’m just glad you weren’t home.” His voice cracked, betraying the emotion he so often kept buried.

“I’m glad I was with you,” she whispered. “I didn’t know how messy this would all get, Jason. I don’t know what I would have done without your help.”

Jason switched to the other foot. “You would have been strong and brave. You’re a survivor, Cassie... I’m afraid I don’t deserve you.”

She sat up. “Why on earth would you say that?”

Jason kept his eyes on her feet. “I’m even more afraid that I won’t be able to protect you.”

Tugging her feet from his hands, she leaned closer. “Jason Keen, you stop that right now.” A hint of a smile played on his lips at her scolding tone. “You are a good man. We’re going to stop Travis, but even if we don’t—” She held up a hand as Jason started to object. “We will, but even if we don’t, it won’t be your fault.”

“It could never be your fault,” she reiterated. “All of this, every last bit of it, is on him and his twisted sense of entitlement. In some ways, I guess I owe him a thank you.”

Jason’s smile disappeared. “Tell me you’re joking.”

She shrugged, smiling at him. “If it hadn’t been for Travis, we might have gone another fourteen years existing in the same circles and seeing each other weekly. I might have never

worked up the courage to admit how much I wanted to know you.”

“Hmm. I guess that’s true. I might never have admitted how much I wished I could charm the princess in her golden tower.”

She pressed her lips up to his. “You didn’t turn into a frog, after all,” she said, loving how he smiled when she teased him.

He wrapped her in his arms, and his lips brushed her hair. “And you’re just as enchanting as I imagined.” He held her like that for a long time, until she fell into a blessedly dreamless sleep.



THE CHRISTMAS BARN dance at Redemption Ranch had been a Redemption Ridge tradition since Cassie was a kid. Each year it seemed to get bigger and bigger, and this year was no different.

Cassie stretched onto her tiptoes from the top of the ladder, trying to slip the pine garland onto the nail protruding from the giant beam. Two days to go until the dance and her mom had given everyone a list of tasks. Apparently, this job would have been better suited to someone more gifted in the height department.

There was no sign of Travis anywhere since the fire, but the ranch was on full alert. Despite the gate at the entry, it wasn’t as if the ranch was impenetrable. There were acres of unattended fence and paths from the mountains that anyone could hike through to get onsite.

The week of the barn dance always saw a bit of an uptick in reservations at the lodge, mostly regulars who came back each Christmas season to partake in the holiday festivities at the ranch and in Redemption Ridge. With snow finally starting to accumulate in the mountains, the skiers were starting to come as well. Silver Run Slopes was only a short drive from the town.

While decorating for Christmas started just after October ended, the Barn Dance seemed to truly be the holiday season kickoff for Redemption Ridge. After the barn dance, the town would be busy with everything from concerts and plays to parties and the annual snow sculpture competition. There was even a Christmas pageant.

She was so close, her fingertips brushed the nail. Just another... little... She pushed up onto one foot and the garland slipped over the nail head. She wobbled and caught herself on the beam. For a second, she was stretched over open space, one toe barely on the ladder behind her and one hand pushing against the wood. She tried to shove herself back toward the ladder but didn't have the leverage.

Two strong hands came around her waist, stabilizing her and easing her back toward the safety of the ladder. Jason stood in front of her, a few steps below her on the ladder and with a flash of irritation in his eyes.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack, Princess?”

She carefully lowered herself to the bottom step as he guided her. She ignored his question. “Thanks for the save. Would have been hard to dance with my leg in a cast.” She smiled broadly, but her heart was still racing from the near fall.

He didn't return the smile. Instead, he climbed up and finished hanging the garland, easily reaching the last two nails that held it onto the beam stretching across the open dance floor of the event barn.

The huge Christmas tree was in the far corner, already decked out in this year's colors—creams and golds and tans. There were wooden ornaments, and even an old birdhouse in the limbs, but somehow it worked. That was probably Amanda's doing, one of the managers at the Lodge. Technically, she managed Ridgeline Grill and something her mom called “Visitor Experience.” As far as Cassie could tell, that meant anything Connie and Amanda wanted to handle, from decorations to events and staff training.

Jason climbed down the ladder and turned toward her. “Are there other things that need to be hung up?”

She shook her head. “That’s all.”

“Good,” he said. “Then you won’t be needing this.” He folded up the ladder and carried it away.

She laughed. “Thank you!” She hadn’t expected Jason to make her laugh as much as he did. For someone who rarely smiled, he sure made her smile a lot.

Existing in this constant state of tension couldn't be healthy.

Jason buttoned the sleeves of his shirt, wriggling against the stiff collar, an unfortunate side effect of having to buy all new ones. Cassie came up behind him in the tiny trailer bathroom, and he stepped aside to let her through to use the mirror. She met his eyes in the reflection.

"I love that shirt," she said, her eyes lighting up as she fiddled with an earring.

The light-blue color of his shirt made her eyes shine brightly, the blue even deeper than usual.

That settled it. He had a new favorite shirt. The collar would soften up, but it wouldn't matter anyway. If Cassie liked it, he knew he'd wear it every chance he got.

He was probably pathetic, but he couldn't seem to care.

Somehow, in the span of two weeks, his entire existence had become focused around Cassie. For the first time in as long as he could remember, there was more than just his own ambitions.

"You look beautiful." He knew the words were inadequate, but they were the best he could do. He still couldn't believe that Cassie—gorgeous, brilliant, the heiress of the Reynolds Ranching legacy Cassie—was his wife. And she was looking at him the way a wife looked at a husband.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “Can you help me zip my dress?”

She turned, offering her back to him, and his breath caught at the wide expanse of skin. He trailed his fingertips down to the base of the fabric, finding the zipper. He pulled it up slowly, inching it closed. He pressed a kiss to the base of her neck, where it met her shoulder near the wide strap of the sparkly red dress.

“You look like a Christmas present,” he said, flipping a finger under the edge of her neckline.

Her eyes flashed to his, a naughty glint in them. “And were you a good boy this year?”

“The answer to that probably depends on who you ask.”

He smirked at her reflection, releasing the strap and ignoring the urge to admit just how much he looked forward to unwrapping that particular present... Someday. Their marriage had been unorthodox, and neither of them had planned on the strength of the feelings that had grown. He felt hopeful that in time the marriage would be as real as any other.

After all, they had forever to figure it out.

“Shall we?”

Jason had attended the Christmas Barn Dance once or twice over the years he'd been in Redemption Ranch, but usually he avoided it. Too many people and too much Christmas cheer for his usual broody self.

Even having seen the decorations while helping set up, walking into the barn tonight felt nothing less than magical, even to him. The barn was warmly lit, with twinkle lights adding an extra glow. The band in the corner played a cheery version of “Rockin’ around the Christmas Tree,” while dozens of people mingled around the edges of the dance floor and a brave few had already started dancing on the scarred wood floor.

Jason scanned the room, looking for any sign of Travis. The fact that they hadn't heard from him in a week after such a drastic event was strange, and Jason had been on edge the

entire time. He'd barely let Cassie out of his sight, which had paid off when she'd nearly broken her neck falling off a ladder. She'd brushed it off like it was no big deal, but he'd noticed she was far more careful climbing down.

The barn looked amazing, but it paled in comparison to the woman on his arm.

He saw her eyeing the couples on the dance floor. She was light and laughter. Of course she would want to dance.

And he wanted to make her smile at him in the way only she did.

He cleared his throat, ignoring the nerves and the fear of her reaction. "Would you like to dance?"

The smile she revealed at the question eased the tension that squeezed his heart as he'd spoken. That was his answer, even if she hadn't said yes.

"Are you sure?" she asked as he took her hand.

Instead of answering, he led her to the dance floor and moved one hand to her waist. He had come to the barn dance before, but usually he avoided it.

And he never danced.

But he suddenly wondered how many barn dances Cassie had danced alone. Or worse, with someone else. The thought had him tightening his hold and pulling her a little closer, their bodies brushing as they gently swayed to the slow country Christmas rendition of "Baby, It's Cold Outside."

Cassie's eyes reflected the soft glow of the tiny lights strung throughout the barn as she gazed up at him. Her delicate scent tickled his nose, inviting him to press his lips to her hairline and drink it in. He cleared his throat, ignoring the urge. He could feel the eyes on them, people from Redemption Ridge watching. Questioning. He knew many already knew they were married—there were few secrets in a small town like Redemption Ridge. Whether they knew about the wedding or not, he was sure the questions in their mind were the same.

Why was Cassie Reynolds with someone like him?

Cassie frowned, her gaze still fixed on his face. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head to dismiss her concern. “Nothing.” He moved his hand from her waist and ran his thumb along her cheek, filling with satisfaction as she pressed into the touch and her lips lifted into a hint of a smile.

He gave in this time, submitting to the desire to claim her in front of these people and show them that it was real. They were real. He lowered his hand to her waist once more, then pressed his lips to her hair and pulled her head toward his shoulder. From head to knee, there was nothing between them but their clothes.

Tipping his head down, he whispered to her, “I could hold you like this all night.”

As though determined to ruin his plan to do just that, she lifted her head at the admission. She met his eyes with a pleased smile.

“Works for me,” she said with a teasing lilt to her voice. “I might need different shoes if we’re going to dance *all* night though.”

Jason remembered the dress just fine—and would likely feel the whisper of its zipper beneath his fingertips for weeks—but he didn’t remember the shoes. He pulled away from her on one side, leading her into a slow spin as his eyes trailed down to where her dress gave way to silky smooth skin and a pair of strappy red shoes with heels that looked sharp enough to stab a man.

A far cry from her usual cowboy boots, the shoes were clearly meant to torture. Whether his limits or hers, he wasn’t quite sure. “You’re stunning,” he said when he pulled her back into his arms after the spin. It wouldn’t have mattered if she was wearing fuzzy socks and the ridiculous pajama pants with cows wearing flowers that he’d grown surprisingly fond of before they burned in the fire—Cassie was beautiful no matter what she was wearing.

“I’m glad you think so,” she said with a smile. “I wanted to dress up for you.”

Jason wasn’t sure he hid his surprise at her words. “Why?” The question came out gruffly, not at all an indication of the warmth that was spreading through his chest at her admission and the way she looked at him.

“Because you’re my husband,” she said, a hint of vulnerability shuttering across her face before she smiled again.

Jason was dumbstruck. He’d assumed she’d gotten dressed up for the dance and for everyone they would see tonight. But she’d put on those terrifying and delicious shoes and curled her hair for him?

You’re my husband, she’d said.

“Yes, I am,” he said, crashing his lips to hers. It was a plea and a celebration and a promise of the future all in one. She *was* his wife and *would be* his wife. Forever.

He gripped her waist and lost himself in her, the music and the watching eyes and the Christmas decorations fading away. Nothing mattered but her in his arms and against his mouth.

A moment later, he pulled back, breathing heavily. “I’ll never hurt you, Princess.”

Her eyes were shiny as she nodded. “I know you say you’re not a prince, but I like to think that you’re mine.”

He groaned, nearly undone at the way her words made him wish he could explain how he felt. Instead, he kissed her firmly again. “Only yours,” he admitted, knowing that it didn’t even touch the true depth of what that meant. He’d be her prince, her knight in shining armor. Anything she needed, he’d give her.

Jason held back a growl as a tiny woman approached them. Piper Wells owned a second-hand store in town. Last he’d heard, she was dating Graham Lockhart. But Jason didn’t exactly stay up to date on the local gossip and the police officer wasn’t anywhere in sight.

As much as he liked Piper, Jason wasn't really in the mood to socialize. "I'm going to grab a drink. Do you want something?"

Piper smiled. "Ooh, the Cowboy Christmas Cider is especially good this year. I keep trying to get Connie to hand over that recipe."

Cassie grinned and hugged the other woman before replying. "Good luck with that! I'm her daughter and she hasn't shared it yet."

"I heard you two have big news," Piper was saying to Cassie as he left the two of them to chat but kept his eye on Cassie while he filled two cups with the bubbly pink punch. He'd forgotten how good the sweet but tart drink was. As far as he knew, the Christmas Barn Dance was the only time Connie made it.

When he finally made it back to Cassie, Jason was over the whole 'being with people' thing. His social battery wasn't especially powerful to begin with, but large crowds seemed to zap it even faster. Being at the rodeo didn't count—he hardly talked to anyone there. But here, everyone seemed to want to congratulate him on his recent win or wish him luck at Finals. And if they didn't care about the rodeo, they were digging for information on the whirlwind romance and shotgun wedding between Cassie and him.

He handed Cassie her punch. She smiled at him but was talking to Levi Thompson. Levi had been a wrangler on the ranch almost as long as Jason had. He'd gone to school with Cassie and her brothers, and Jason ignored the faint twinge of jealousy. He'd heard Levi express his brotherly affection for Cassie on more than one occasion.

Leaning in, he whispered to her, "I need some air. You'll stay in here?"

She nodded. Jason had to assume she'd be safe surrounded by all the familiar faces.

He stepped outside the barn, enjoying the relief as the noise inside was muffled. He hadn't realized how loud the

combination of music and conversation had become as the party kicked into gear.

The night was cool, but the sky was clear. A wide expanse of stars stretched between the dark shapes of towering pines and rocky ridge along the back edge of the event barn. Cars were still pulling in, winding toward the barn on the dirt road with headlights that cut across the pasture. He knew from experience that the last guest wouldn't leave until after midnight. No doubt more than one wrangler would sleep through Sunday services tomorrow at the chapel.

He watched as Milo greeted everyone at the entrance to the parking lot. To most, it probably seemed nothing more than a friendly welcome, but Jason knew it was actually a way to ensure that Travis didn't crash the party. They'd come up with the plan earlier in the week when Jason had considered whisking Cassie away to Freedom with his family this weekend to avoid the vulnerability of the dance.

Cassie had seemed willing to go if he insisted, but he'd seen the sadness in her eyes when he mentioned it. She wanted to be here.

And so here they were. He drained his punch. It was time for him to head back inside. Maybe he could convince Cassie to dance again. All night, perhaps.

The crack of a branch came from the trees to his left, and he turned toward it. The sight of a man rushing toward him was all he saw before everything went dark.

Cassie felt as if she'd seen everyone in Redemption Ridge, and they all wanted to hear about how married life was going. News of Jason's qualification for National Finals Rodeo had spread quickly through town. He'd even mentioned that The Mesa wanted him to come and say a few words at the charity concert on New Year's Eve.

He'd agreed to do it, but when he told her about it, his tone made it obvious that he thought it was ridiculous. Cassie had filled with pride though. As much as Jason tried to underplay his accomplishments and his soft side, the folks in Redemption Ridge saw him for what he was—kind, generous, and honest.

Agnes Hawthorne laid a sun-spotted hand on Cassie's arm. "A little bird told me that you and Jason just marched into City Hall and got married right then and there! Isn't that just so... romantic?"

Agnes's tone made it obvious she was dying for more information, but Cassie simply gave her a sweet smile. "We just couldn't wait any longer to make our vows."

Cassie saw her mom across the room, and once she extricated herself from the nosy questions of Agnes, she headed that way.

"Have you seen Jason?" Cassie hadn't seen him since she was talking with Amanda about Cassie's ideas for updating the Lodge website. Where was it he'd said he was going?

"Sorry, sweetie. I haven't. Maybe check with your father?"

Cassie chewed on the inside of her cheek in worry. “Okay, thanks.”

She scanned the room, searching for his black cowboy hat and blue shirt. Over the last few weeks, she’d had a sixth sense about where he was. In Pueblo, from her place in the press booth, she’d been able to zero in on him from across the arena. Earlier tonight, her eyes were drawn to him anytime they were separated, as though seeking the reassurance that he was still near.

But now, she couldn’t find him.

“Is everything okay?” She could hardly hear her mom’s voice over the music and the rushing in her ears. Her heart was racing as she continued to scan the room more methodically.

No Jason.

Cassie tore her eyes from the crowd to a friendly wrangler blocking her path. “We meet again,” Levi said with a smile. Then his face fell. “What’s wrong?”

He’d been with her the last time she saw Jason.

“I can’t find Jason. I need you to find Milo and see if he’s seen him.”

Levi’s face held a confused frown, but her instructions didn’t leave any room for questions. She brushed past him and beelined for the front door of the barn. *I’m going to get some air*, he’d said. How long had that been? Ten minutes? More?

Outside, her eyes struggled to adjust to the dark as she searched for any sign of Jason, praying he would simply be leaning against one of the posts that formed a wide overhang along the front side of the barn. But he wasn’t there.

Her eyes strained into the trees that lined the clearing for the barn. Outside the circle of the floodlights above the door, the darkness was impenetrable. Where would he have gone? She circled the front corner of the barn, away from the parking lot. There was a worn path between the side of the barn and the tree line. Away from the lights, her eyes began to adjust, and the trees grew more defined.

The music inside the barn was muffled but still loud enough that she couldn't hear much else. A break in the trees revealed a narrow trail. Had he taken a walk? A dark shape caught her eye, and she walked over to it. Her fingers skimmed the smooth fabric of the cowboy hat she knew without a doubt belonged to Jason.

Stay inside, he'd told her.

But if he was in trouble, there was no way she wouldn't come. She glanced back toward the front of the barn, where the lights still illuminated the parking lot. Slipping off her heels and holding them between her fingers, Cassie stepped between the trees onto the worn dirt trail.



JASON WOKE, forcing himself to lay still and consider the unfamiliar throbbing in his skull. Must have been one heck of a ride for him to not remember. He evaluated the rest of his body before he tried to move. Other than the headache, he didn't feel like he'd been bucked. So what had happened?

Then he heard the voice.

"No, he's out cold."

Jason gritted his teeth. Travis.

"Where are you? You're supposed to do the rest. That's why I'm paying you, isn't it?"

Jason cracked an eyelid open and tried to evaluate the situation. He wiggled his fingers enough to realize that he wasn't restrained. Travis must have assumed the blindside crack to the skull would be enough to take Jason down for longer than it had.

Unfortunately for Travis, Jason was used to taking hard hits to his even harder head.

He'd been unconscious, so he probably had a concussion, but he'd deal with that later. It wasn't the first. Or even the fifth.

For now, he needed to get the upper hand. He listened as Travis grew more and more agitated with whoever was on the phone. Between his ranting, Jason heard the soft rustle of footfalls on the dirt.

He opened his eyes farther, confident that Travis couldn't see him from this angle. It was dark, but the sound of someone approaching was unmistakable. Was it Travis's partner? Or Milo?

When the face came into view, his heart stopped and every muscle in his body tensed. Cassie couldn't be here! He watched the moment that she saw him, her hand covering her mouth.

Jason jerked his eyes to the side, trying to silently yell at her to leave. But either it was too dark or she was too stubborn, because she looked toward Travis. His back was turned, but he was pacing. As he reached the end of the small clearing, he spun back around. Jason shut one eye, trying not to reveal that he was awake while desperately praying that Cassie would just stay out of sight.

Somehow, he had a feeling she wouldn't.

Jason saw Travis's feet come into view. He was still talking on the phone, obviously frustrated. "Tiny said not to work with you. I should have listened to him. I won't forget the way you hung me out to dry here!" Travis swore colorfully.

Behind Travis, Jason could see Cassie peeking around the tree. Again, he tried mentally screaming at her not to do anything.

Then she moved, and the sound of a twig snapping under her foot was like a gunshot in the silence. Travis's boots spun toward the sound.

Jason pushed away every thread of pain still tightening around his temples and prepared to make his move.

Cassie's body and mind seemed to be completely disconnected. Her body was frozen, clinging to the skinny cedar like her life depended on it. But her heart and mind were yelling at her to get in there and fight for Jason. He hadn't moved the entire time she'd been standing there watching. She'd never been so angry at anyone as she was with Travis at this moment for the way he'd decided to target Jason.

Sweet, grumpy Jason who was inexplicably kind. If Jason was hurt... The thought turned her stomach. She had to do something. She could hear Travis on the phone. Whatever he had planned wasn't working out. This was her opportunity. She looked around, trying to gauge her options, wishing she had a better weapon than a stiletto.

Maybe if she could just distract Travis long enough, Levi or Milo would find them. They weren't very far from the barn. And she could make a lot of noise.

Decision made, she stepped out from behind the tree. She winced as the branch dug into the tender flesh of her arch. Then she started yelling as loudly as she could.

"You want me, Travis? Prove it!"

Travis's eyes flashed with a nauseating combination of pleasure and irritation. She could see his hands, one still holding a cell phone, the other holding a gun—now pointed at her. "Tsk, tsk, Cassandra." Her stomach turned at the way he

said her name. “What do you think you’re doing? You weren’t supposed to see—”

She forced herself not to move her eyes from his face. Even though she saw the movement behind him as Jason pushed himself up. She watched in horror as Jason dove, his arm pushing Travis’s arm skyward as he tackled him.

She shrieked as the sound of a gunshot echoed off the mountains. The men wrestled for control. What if Jason had been shot? He hadn’t stopped fighting. She had to do something. Jason grabbed Travis’s wrist and smashed it on the ground, the gun slipping out of his grip and skidding across the hard-packed earth. Jason’s fist smashed into Travis’s face, and Travis desperately swung and kicked, trying to escape.

Cassie ran toward the gun, but Travis must have landed a blow because he managed to escape Jason’s grasp. He reached for the gun, and Cassie kicked it farther away. No weapon at all was better than one in Travis’s hand. He snarled at her and swiped at her face, the impact of the strike making her head spin briefly.

She fought back, kicking and pushing. Then, she pulled her arm back and swung broadly. Travis howled as the spike of her stiletto hit his face. He pulled away, his hands coming up to the wound. Blood seeped between his fingers.

Jason was beside them in an instant and forced Travis to his knees. “Cassie, get the gun.”

Travis moaned, his fingers still holding his face. He swore colorfully at her. “My eye! You stabbed my eye, you little—”

Jason kicked Travis in the ribs, knocking him over from his kneeling position and cutting off the insults he was spouting.

Cassie took a deep breath and shook her head. What had Jason said?

Oh, the gun. She gave Travis a wide berth as she crossed the clearing to find it.

Her hands shook as she picked it up and looked back toward Jason. His hand was out. “It’s okay, Princess. Give it to

me.”

She handed the gun to Jason, thankful when the cool metal of it no longer pressed against her fingers. He held the gun pointed at Travis and wrapped his other arm around Cassie. A shaky breath shuddered through her, and she became aware of voices and heavy footsteps approaching them through the trees.

“We’re over here!” Jason yelled.

Levi Thompson came through the trees, with Milo right behind him. “We heard a gunshot,” Levi said.

Jason gestured to Travis. “You got anything to secure him while we wait for the sheriff?”

Milo scoffed. “Geez, Jason. I’m a security guard for a luxury dude ranch. It’s not like I detain people very often.”

Cassie tensed. Travis had pushed himself to sitting after Jason kicked him over, but she wouldn’t relax fully until he was handcuffed or something. Or better yet, behind bars.

“So... that’s a no?”

Milo grinned and dug through his pockets. “Good thing I still have some zip ties left from setting up the parking perimeter fence.”

Jason kept the gun trained on Travis while Milo and Levi zip tied his hands behind his back. He was spewing ugly words the entire time, struggling against the two men.

After the makeshift restraints were on, Milo pressed a finger to Travis’s face. “Ouch. That looks like it might scar. Such a shame about that pretty face of yours.”

Travis snarled, but Milo just chuckled and hauled him to his feet. The red-headed security guard probably had a hundred pounds on Travis. She held tight to Jason and watched Levi and Milo lead Travis down the mountain.

“Is it over?” she asked quietly.

Jason’s grip tightened on her waist. He gently turned her toward him and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Yeah. It’s

over.”

In the dim light, she could see the evidence of the fight on Jason’s face. A split lip and red, puffy jaw. She traced her fingers lightly over his cheek and he winced. She pulled back, but he pressed his hand over top of hers, deepening the contact.

His eyes drifted closed. “I thought he was going to shoot you, Princess. You shouldn’t have come after me.”

She shook her head. “No one could have stopped me. You’re my husband,” she reminded him. This mess with Travis might be over, but in truth, this was just the beginning. They still had a whole life to spend together. Unless... Her heart squeezed painfully.

“Now that Travis is out of the way, do you... Do you still want me?” She felt sick to her stomach even saying it, but if Jason wanted out, then surely they could find a way to end this marriage.

She stared at the buttons on his blue shirt. There was a part of her that was still convinced Jason would want to end things. She’d had to talk him into this crazy idea of hers. Why would he want to stay with her forever?

His finger found her chin and he tilted her face up until she had no choice but to meet his gaze. “Princess, as long as you still want me, I’ll be here. The thought of losing you... I would never be the same.”

At his words, relief and joy broke through the anxiety and insecurity she still harbored.

“I love you so much, Jason Keen.”

“And I love you, Cassie Keen.”

“My husband calls me Princess,” she said. The smile was still on her lips when his pressed against them.

Jason had never loved Las Vegas. Walking down the strip with Cassie on his arm and seeing her excitement might be enough to change his mind though. He thought Freedom and Redemption Ridge went over-the-top for Christmas, but he'd seen more Christmas lights here than he ever imagined in one place.

And with how Vegas embraced the National Finals Rodeo, it was like Cowboys and Christmas threw up all over the city. If something wasn't decked out in Christmas lights, it had a giant cowboy hat plastered on it.

"Oh wow! Alicia Carver is performing this week? I wish I didn't have so much work to do! She's amazing."

"She's a... singer?" He was totally guessing, but judging by the huge billboards he was seeing all over, Alicia Carver was someone he should know.

Cassie rolled her eyes. "Come on, I know you're not that old. You know... Alicia Carver. She played Megan Reynolds on *Family First* back when she was a kid. She's only, like, the biggest pop star ever right now."

Jason shrugged. "I remember the show. Jared and I used to watch it." He glanced at the billboard again. He had to focus on training and studying the film from the bulls that were tagged for the Finals, but maybe he could find a way to get them tickets. It'd be worth it to see Cassie's excitement, even if it meant he had to sit through a concert with a thousand

screaming fans. Besides, he hadn't had time to get Cassie a Christmas gift.

Between talking to the police about what happened with Travis, sorting out the fire with the insurance company, and dodging Barry's attempts to bring him up to speed on every single part of Redemption Ranch's operation... there hadn't been a moment to spare. What little time he'd had, he'd spent trying to sleep. That blow to the head from Travis hadn't knocked him out for long, but he'd fought headaches for the next several days.

It was a minor concussion, but a concussion nonetheless.

It was a very good thing he would be finished bull riding after this season. He'd been blessed to have only minor injuries in his career. But even minor injuries added up over time.

"Oooh, we could go ice skating?" Cassie said, pointing at the giant billboard on top of the Cosmopolitan advertising their winter setup.

Jason made a face. "If I promise to take you in Redemption Ridge before Christmas, can I pass? If I fall on my butt, I'd rather it be where some reporter from ESPN isn't bound to catch it on camera."

She laughed. "Fine... How about Chinese takeout in the hotel and a movie?"

Jason pressed a kiss to her head. "Now you're speaking my language, Princess." Starting tomorrow, he had ten straight days of rides ahead of him. It would be a grueling marathon of performances, without the normal recovery time he was used to.



IF SHE DIDN'T KNOW how much this meant to Jason, how much he wanted this win, she would have asked him to quit. Instead, she simply ducked under his black hat and kissed him,

pressing her hand to his face. “Ride that bull, and come back to me in one piece. You got that?”

Jason’s lips twitched into the hint of a smile she loved so much. “Yes, ma’am.”

She kissed him again. “I love you, no matter what happens out there. I’m so proud of you.”

“Love you, too. Just one more to go,” he said.

She took a deep breath. “One more.” It had been their refrain all week long. Five more. Then three. Now, this was it.

She knew he wanted to win, but she couldn’t bring herself to worry about that. She just wanted him to be uninjured. Two of the fifteen competitors had been hurt seriously enough that they hadn’t been able to finish the last several rounds.

All week long, the announcers had been leaning into the story of Jason’s comeback, and the video of his ride in Pueblo had been prominent in his highlight reel during every introduction. Much to his chagrin, the lines for his booth during the mandatory autograph sessions were longer than anyone else’s.

It also didn’t hurt that WorkMade was a major sponsor for the finals, and they were using his ad campaign for most of their advertising space. His face was plastered all over Vegas, almost as much as Alicia Carver’s. Whoever had planned her concert during finals rodeo week hadn’t realized that it was mostly country stars during this week. That hadn’t stopped her show from selling out, of course. Cassie had looked at tickets briefly, but the ticket sites only had prices that were four and five times face value.

They didn’t have time anyway. She’d have to see Alicia perform some other time.

Right now, she was going to watch her husband ride one last time.

The arena in Vegas was one of the largest in the country. The attendance was more than ten of the average circuit rodeos combined. Nearly 17,000 fans crowded into the stands every single night to watch the fifteen best competitors in

every single event. Jason was in second place coming into tonight's performance. He'd been grumpy the last three days, but Cassie couldn't exactly blame him. Her husband had to be one giant bruise from all the rides. Every night, she held her breath for ten seconds and prayed wordless, desperate prayers for Jason to be okay.

Tonight was no different.

Across the arena, she knew Jason was in the chute, poised over the bull. Her view wasn't good, so she looked toward the big screen instead. The cameras were on him, but his attention was completely focused on the animal below him. She prayed, watching the hard lines of his face, which was blocked by the helmet he wore. With each heartbeat, the sounds of the arena faded.

He lowered onto the animal and it jerked, but the stall was tight and it couldn't move. In the video, Jason's mouth moved, and she knew that he had given the green light.

The chute opened and Cassie held her breath, moving her eyes from the big screen to the action on the floor. Her fists clenched tightly around the railing as she watched the action a few feet away. The bull spun and kicked, but Jason seemed to almost float above him. His hand raised and lowered with each thrust. After about three full spins, the bull changed directions, spinning the other way. Cassie's heart seized, but Jason never faltered.

He held steady, centered directly above the wild tornado of an animal. When the buzzer rang, Jason eased off, landing on his feet with his arms raised in triumph. The crowd thundered their approval of the ride, while the bull fighters quickly distracted the bull, leaving Jason to celebrate the moment. He ran toward her and hopped up on the fence. Behind the helmet, his smile was huge. His hands grabbed her shoulders, and she grinned up at him. Then, he pulled her to his chest, the railing between them.

"You did it! That was amazing, Jason."

"We did it, Princess. I could have never done it without you."

The weekend before Christmas, Jason walked into Stories and Scones. Being back in his hometown of Freedom had always been a reminder of the ways he'd messed up. The way he'd failed to recognize the danger Mrs. Bennett was in. The way he'd alienated his family in his anger. The way he'd neglected his faith for so many years.

But today felt different.

He was different.

It wasn't the World Champion title or the nearly six-figures he'd won for his scores in Vegas. It had everything to do with the woman currently drooling over the cookies and pastries in the bakery case. They'd driven to Freedom this morning and dropped their bags off at the house before heading into town for a quick tour until his parents got home from an appointment.

"Jason Keen, is that you?"

He tore his eyes away from Cassie to see the familiar face of Jan Clark. O'Rourke, he corrected himself.

"Your brother mentioned that you were coming to town, but I didn't believe it."

"Come on, we both know Jared is too good to lie."

Jan smiled and wrapped him in a hug. "It's good to see you, Jason. Congratulations on your championship. Pete and I watched every night. Well, Pete watched." She leaned in as

though telling him a secret. “I had to close my eyes every time you rode.”

Jason chuckled. “Thanks. It still feels a bit surreal, but I’m just glad to be done. I’m officially retiring.”

“I imagine that has something to do with this beautiful lady right here?” Jan turned toward Cassie.

“Cassie, this is Jan. She’s a Freedom, Colorado staple. Jan, this is Cassie. My wife.”

Jan’s eyebrows raised before she smiled. “Well, that deserves a bigger congratulations than the crazy bull riding thing!”

Cassie smiled. “Nice to meet you, Jan. Your shop is amazing.”

Jan told her a bit about the store and how she’d started it. The bookstore and bakery was busy this morning, small tables scattered through the space filled with groups in conversation or people working on laptops.

“What can I get for you?”

“Well, I think Cassie ought to try a Ridgetop Mocha. And I’ll just take a black coffee. Oh, and I’m supposed to pick up a pecan pie for Mom.”

Jan rang up the drinks and pulled a few cookies from the bakery case as well. “On the house. Your brother loves the pumpkin snickerdoodles. We’ll see if you do too.”

Jason wiggled his eyebrows. “I’ll be sure to rub his nose in the fact that I got some.”

Cassie smacked his arm lightly, but Jan just laughed. “You boys always were ornery together.”

Jason took the box and said thank you.

When they got back to his parents’ house, Jared and his wife, Alexis, were in the living room talking with his parents. His brother stood, tucking his hands in his pockets.

Jason hated the awkwardness that existed between them. He’d apologized, but relationships didn’t recover overnight.

He was going to do whatever it took to build that bridge again though. He stepped across the room and wrapped his brother in a bear hug, picking him up off the floor like he was a kid.

Jared groaned. “Can’t. Breathe,” he wheezed.

Jason let him go and turned to his brother’s wife. “It’s really good to see you, Alexis.”

He hugged her, too.

Then, he hugged his mom and dad.

Finally, he took a deep breath and stepped next to Cassie. “Everyone, this is Cassie. My wife.”

He’d expected surprise and shock at the announcement, but instead his mom just smiled and stepped toward Cassie and wrapped her in a hug. “It’s lovely to finally meet you, Cassie.”

Jason frowned and watched the rest of the family make similar statements.

“Wait, wait, wait. What do you mean ‘finally’?”

Jared rolled his eyes. “Dude. Did you think it was a secret? They’ve been talking about you marrying Cassie almost every time they show you on ESPN. The announcers love to point out how your attitude improved after the wedding.”

Jason groaned, and Cassie laughed. She grabbed his arm and leaned into him. “Told you I was good for your reputation.”

He pressed a kiss to her hair. “You were right, Princess.”

Alexis’s eyes brightened. “Ooh, did you hear that?”

Jared reached for his wife’s hand. “What? You want me to call you Princess?”

Alexis punched his shoulder. “Not that part, doofus. *You were right*. Pretty romantic words if you ask me,” she teased. “I think Jason is going to be great at this married stuff.”

“Are you trying to say that I’m not?” Jared asked with a mock indignation.

Alexis rolled her eyes. Jared tickled her ribs in response, and her laughter filled the room.

Jason watched with amusement as his brother and his bride laughed and teased one another. The two had been best friends for years before they finally admitted their feelings, and it seemed as though their friendship was as strong as ever.

Jason reached for Cassie's hand. In some ways, he wished that he and Cassie had spent the last fourteen years building a friendship. On the other hand, he knew that the unconventional way their relationship had begun was exactly how it was supposed to.

If he could save Cassie the hurt of being under Travis's thumb, he would. But without it, they might never have connected. They most certainly wouldn't have gotten married after only a handful of conversations.

His mom interrupted the flirting couple, speaking through her own laughter. "Come on, come on. Let's have dinner, and then we'll open presents."

As the small group headed into the kitchen, Jason's mom stopped him. "Hey, Mom," he said, a sheepish smile on his face.

His mom's eyes were shiny as she pressed a hand to his cheek. "I'm just so glad you're here this year."

"I was here last year for Thanksgiving," he protested weakly.

Mom shook her head. "No, not really. But you're here now. And you seem... Well, you seem like you finally found whatever you've been looking for all these years."

"Redemption," he said, answering the question she hadn't technically asked.

He'd left fourteen years ago, looking for a way to process the anger and frustration he felt. Instead, he'd only found a way to silence it—eight seconds at a time on the back of a bull.

It wasn't until this year that he'd truly found the redemption he needed. It hadn't come from winning the title.

It hadn't even come from being able to save Cassie—the same thing he hadn't been able to do for Mrs. Bennett all those years ago.

The last year had helped him find his redemption in the Lord. Cassie had just helped him truly accept it. She'd helped him banish that anger and doubt for good, by seeing the good in him when he wasn't capable of seeing it himself.

“Redemption,” his mom repeated. “Hearing that is a pretty awesome Christmas gift. I love you, honey.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

He gave her a hug and followed her into the kitchen, taking his place next to Cassie in line.

“Everything okay?”

He nodded, pressing a kiss to her lips. “Never better.”

Essie loved getting to meet Jason's family. He was so different from his brother, Jared, it was hard to imagine the two of them growing up. Though, she'd noticed the way they brought out the teasing and snarkiness in each other.

They'd left Freedom with armfuls of presents and lots of pumpkin snickerdoodles, which she had declared to be her new favorite food. They'd attended Christmas Eve candlelight service last night and woken up early this morning to make the drive. A few hours later, they were back at Redemption Ridge, driving through the familiar wrought iron gate, decked out with garland and red bows.

"Home sweet home," Jason said, the words coming out with a sigh.

She stretched her legs out as far as they would go in the passenger seat of the truck. "Do you think you'd like to move back to Freedom someday?"

Jason turned toward her, his eyebrows furrowed. "What brought that on?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's where you grew up and where your family is. I just wondered if you'd go back, now that you're not competing."

Jason reached for her hand across the truck. The warmth of his skin enveloped her fingers. "Princess, I've lived at Redemption Ranch for nearly fourteen years. If I wanted to leave, I would have left a long time ago. And now, I've got an even better reason to stick around. I'm not leaving."

Cassie nodded. “That makes sense. You’re one of the owners now and all.”

Jason’s lips twitched. “That’s not the reason I’m talking about, Cass.” He parked the truck in front of the plot of land where their trailers were parked. “I couldn’t care less who owns this place. We’ll stay at Redemption Ranch because I know I could never drag you away from it. And nothing could drag me away from you.”

Her heart expanded at his affirmation that he wasn’t sticking around for the ranch, but for her. She wasn’t sure why she had such a hard time accepting that she was enough for him, but she was determined not to doubt it again. He’d never made her feel like anything less than cherished and valuable.

It didn’t matter that his name would be listed as the owner of the ranch. It could be his. Because he was hers.

“Mom, we’re back!” Cassie announced their arrival as they let themselves in the main house.

Her mom came around the corner from the kitchen. “Merry Christmas, sweetie! Come in, come in. We’re all just finishing brunch. Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” said Jason with a little smile as he gave her a small hug. “Smells delicious.”

They took the two empty seats at the table and answered questions about their visit to Freedom.

“I’ve heard the slopes there are awesome. Pretty sure they’ve got two Black Diamond runs. I should take my snowboard up there sometime.” Gideon was ever the adventurous one. Of course he’d be interested in the mountains around Freedom.

Jason nodded. “It is nice. We used to go growing up. Let me know if you head up there. I’ve got friends who work at the resort. I can probably get you a lift pass or something.”

“Whoa. You’ve got friends?”

Cassie gave her brother Zeke a glare. “Rude,” she said. But Jason’s laughter was unrestrained.

“Hard to believe, but yeah. I’ve got a few.” Jason lifted his arm around the back of her chair, looking comfortable being part of the family gathering.

When they moved to the living room, she nestled next to Jason after he finished handing out the box of gifts they’d brought for everyone. She watched with joy as each of her family members opened the gifts they’d picked out. Zeke opened every single spice blend and smelled it, talking a mile a minute about the types of meat he was going to cook with each one.

Her dad stood up and handed Jason a manilla envelope. “Here you go, Jason. These are for you.”

Jason took a deep breath and opened the envelope. His jaw clenched. “I thought I told you how I felt about this.” She could hear him fighting for control over his frustration. She looked at her dad, trying to decipher what was going on.

Jason stuffed the papers back into the envelope. Then he stood up and walked out of the living room. She gave her dad a hurt look and stood up to follow her husband. She found him by the passenger side of his truck, digging through the glove compartment.

“Jason! What’s going on?”

“Go on in, I’ll be there in a sec.”

She didn’t listen. She waited until he turned back and shut the door behind him. He was holding a stack of papers.

“What’s that?”

He grabbed her hand. “Come on. Your dad needs to hear this, too.”

She followed him inside, still trying to understand what was going on.

The conversation in the room died when they came back in, and soft Christmas music from the TV seemed to grow louder to fill the awkward silence.

Jason grabbed the manilla envelope off the couch where he’d left it, handing it to her. “Your dad signed over one-third

of Redemption Ranch to me,” he said.

Cassie pulled the papers out, skimming the legal document. “Okay?” She was still confused. “We knew that was going to happen. Actually, I kind of thought it already had.”

Jason shook his head and turned to face her. “Cassie, I don’t want this ranch. I already have everything I could ever want. As many times as I told your father not to go through with it, he still did. So... I have some papers of my own.” He pulled the stack of papers from the back pocket of his jeans.

“I had Ruby Hayes put together a document, and I already signed it. It relinquishes all ownership rights of Redemption Ranch and grants them to Cassie.”

Her eyes began to fill with tears.

Her dad was on his feet now. “You can’t do that.”

Jason barely looked at him; his eyes were locked entirely on hers. “I assure you, I can. You sent me the unofficial version of your documents, and Ruby read over the entire thing with a fine-toothed comb. Once you transferred my shares, I’m free to do whatever I want with them. Like, give them to my wife for Christmas.”

Cassie felt the love she had for Jason expand even more. “You didn’t have to do this,” she whispered.

Jason pressed a kiss to her forehead. “There is no one more deserving of a share of Redemption Ranch than you, Princess.” He turned to Barry. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, sir. And I hope you won’t hold it against me—or Cassie. I have a lot of respect for you, but in this case, you’re just flat out wrong. I trust that over time, you’ll see how much Cassie has to offer the ranch as part owner.”

She held her breath, waiting for her dad to say something.

Instead, it was Zeke who spoke first. “Congratulations, sis. The ranch is lucky to have you.”

Gideon echoed his thoughts.

Barry sighed. “Who knew giving someone three million dollars’ worth of business shares would be so difficult? Cassie, maybe Jason’s right, and I was wrong to withhold Redemption Ranch from you. It’s a tough business, and I just figured... if I could shield you from the messiness, I would be doing you a favor.”

“I don’t need to be protected by you, Dad. Not from the challenges of hard work. I just need you to believe in me. Teach me all the things you’ve learned over forty years of being in the ranching business! I’m sorry...”

Barry’s mouth pulled into a little smile. “You’re right. I’m sorry, Cass.”

“And you.” She turned to Jason, pressing her pointer finger into his shoulder. “You aren’t getting off that easily.”

The surprise on his face was comical. “What? What did I do?”

She held up the papers he’d given her. “You don’t get to pull this kind of stunt again, okay? We’re a team. And we’re going to go back to Ruby’s office and make her draw up papers that make us *both* owners of our one-third share of Redemption Ranch. Got that?”

She replaced her finger on his shoulder with her head, hugging him gently. “I know you didn’t sign up for this, but I want to do this together.”

He held her tightly. “Okay. I’m in.”

She smiled at his agreement, unable to resist echoing the words that had jumpstarted their entire marriage. It seemed only fitting that they would usher in this next phase, too.

“Okay, then. Let’s do it.”

EPILOGUE

Jason surveyed the crowd through the bright lights on stage at The Mesa. The local restaurant and bar doubled as a concert venue, with the huge two-story building featuring an open balcony around the top of the main room. The owner, Laramie Trace, had retired from his country music career in Nashville, but brought the vibe with him to Redemption. The Mesa was known to feature some of the best up-and-coming country artists from time to time.

Tonight was no exception. Morgan Peters was performing for the annual New Year's Eve charity concert. Jason didn't pay much attention to music, but he'd heard some of his music on satellite radio.

"How's everybody doing tonight?" he asked, feeling unbelievably awkward. Why was he up here again?

But the crowd's loud cheering spurred him on, as did the little glance he shot toward backstage, where Cassie was watching him from the shadows.

"I said *'How's everybody doing tonight?!'*"

The crowd grew louder.

"There we go, there we go. If you don't know me, I'm Jason Keen."

"Marry me, Jason!!"

He blushed as the slurred voice of a woman rose above the crowd. "Sorry, I'm taken. Someone take her keys," he said, only half-joking.

He focused on the task at hand. His job was to keep the evening moving along and help convince the concert-goers to donate above and beyond their ticket purchase.

“You might know that I ride bulls for a living, so I’m pretty used to getting beaten up and tossed around. I signed up for that particular experience from a bull who doesn’t know better. Some people say that makes me brave. But I tell you what...” He felt the emotion thicken in his throat. “That’s nothing compared to the courage shown by the women and children we’re talking about tonight.”

He swallowed, thinking about Mrs. Bennett. Thinking about Cassie. “Harmony House is a safe haven, right here in our community, for women and children who have been abused and hurt and terrorized by men who should have protected them. These are families, building a new life after taking the incredibly brave step to break the silence and seek help.”

He looked back at Cassie, once again grateful that she’d been brave enough to leave Travis and brave enough to ask for his help.

“We’re going to listen to some great music tonight and we’re going to have an amazing time ringing in the New Year. And as we celebrate tonight, every dollar of your donations goes directly to helping these families! Harmony House provides protection, legal aide, job training, childcare, and even relocation and housing assistance. Let’s give it up for all the wonderful things they’re doing over there.”

The crowd cheered wildly.

“Hey, Cassie, would you come out here?”

Tentatively, she came out on stage, waving shyly to the crowd. He took her hand.

“I mentioned I ride bulls for a living... well, that’s not exactly true. What I should have said was that I *used to* ride bulls for a living. I’d like to officially announce my retirement from the professional bull riding circuit. I’m going to focus on

being here for my beautiful wife, my family, and the community here in Redemption.”

He squeezed Cassie’s hand.

“In the spirit of the concert tonight and because Harmony House is such a worthy cause, near and dear to our hearts for many reasons, Cassie and I would like to announce that for every dollar donated here tonight, we are going to match it.”

The crowd cheered again, and Cassie’s smile widened.

Jason pointed to the bar area. “Donation forms are at the bar, ladies and gents! I’ll be back up here in a little while, but without any further delay, here’s Nashville’s hottest rising star – Morgan Peters!”

A moment later, as the crowd yelled their excitement, the band struck their first note, and the young country star came on stage. Jason shook his hand, and then he and Cassie scurried toward the backstage area.

The music was too loud to have a conversation. They watched for a song, Cassie tucked against him with her back to his front and his arms around her waist. Then he gently tugged on her hand and pulled her outside.

The air was noticeably cooler than the warmth inside The Mesa. The crisp air carried a sense of stillness, despite the sounds of the concert bleeding through the walls. On a blanket of inky sky, the bright stars seemed to dance to the upbeat country anthem.

He took a deep breath, glad his first portion of the night was complete. He’d talk more during the band’s first break and then at the end of the night as they counted down to midnight. But the hard part was out of the way.

“You did amazing, Jase.”

Cassie’s encouraging words settled his nervous heart a little more. He pulled her close again, needing to feel her warmth. Thinking about the women who found themselves trapped in abusive relationships, thinking that Cassie might have been among them if she hadn’t gotten out when she did—the thought ripped his heart to shreds. Even though Travis had

been arrested and would likely have a nasty scar across his face forever... it didn't seem like enough for the pain he'd caused Cassie.

Jason knew he couldn't dwell on that though. They had to move forward. They *got* to move forward—together. What a gift.

“Thanks for letting me in, Princess. I never thought...” He hesitated, not sure how to admit his feelings. “I never thought I could love someone the way I love you.”

“I love you, too. Sometimes, I just sit and think about the fact that we're married. And how you're all mine. Forever,” she added with a laugh. “It feels like a dream. Like I'm waiting for the clock to strike midnight.”

He gripped her tighter. “I told you I wasn't a prince. I'm not going anywhere.”

Her eyes twinkled in amusement. “Well, in that case... Will you kiss me anyway?”

His smile widened into a grin only she could draw from him. “That would be my pleasure.”

He pulled her closer to him, pressing her body tightly into his with his hands on her lower back. Gently, he covered her mouth with his own. Kissing Cassie was a tantalizing experience that was becoming wonderfully familiar. Kissing his wife was more than chemistry and a racing pulse. She was peace and steadiness and joy.

Cassie was home.

And even though the path to find it was unexpected and messy, he would never stop thanking the Lord for bringing them together.

READY FOR MORE? Return to Redemption Ridge in [Remembering the Rancher](#), the next book in the Christmas in Redemption Ridge series.

Will her forgotten memories of the past be the key to healing their future?



JOIN IN ALL the fun at our Facebook Reader Group

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For sneak peeks, giveaways, and tons of Christmas romance fun!

CONNIE'S COWBOY CHRISTMAS CIDER



- 1 cup fresh cranberries
- ½ cup water
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 4 cups apple cider, chilled
- 2 cups ginger ale, chilled
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 2 cups 100% cranberry juice, chilled
- Crushed ice

1. In a small saucepan, combine the cranberries and water and simmer for 2-3 minutes, until the cranberries split.
2. Stir in the sugar and remove from the heat.
3. Cool to room temperature.
4. Combine the cranberry mixture, apple cider, ginger ale, lemon juice, and cranberry juice.

5. Serve over crushed ice.

Notes:

Fresh-pressed apple cider works best. It is typically slightly cloudy, but you can use cider from the juice aisle as well.

If you'd like to make ahead, you can mix everything but the ginger ale ahead of time.

Recipe and photo from Mel's Kitchen Cafe (melskitchencafe.com) as Sparkling Cranberry Apple Cider Punch

CHRISTMAS IN REDEMPTION RIDGE SERIES

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(Chaz and Margie)

By Elle E Kay

Year 3

Dreaming About Forever

(Jordan and Alicia)

By Mandi Blake

Bidding on a Second Chance

(Graham and Piper)

By Emily Conrad

AUTHOR NOTE

Last summer, I heard my cousin Jason's testimony for the first time. He's fifteen or so years older than me and my memories of him as a kid are few - but almost all revolve around the rodeo and my own quiet awe of him. I also DO remember him sleeping with his cowboy hat over his face at family gatherings, just like Jason did during his brother's book (Blind Date with the Hero)!

My Jason was a team roper (not a bull rider!) on the rodeo circuit and walked some truly dark roads before meeting the Lord at his own rock bottom.

Then, he met a girl and fell in love. He's now a rancher in western Nebraska and a father to some amazing girls. To hear this grumpy, rugged cowboy speak so openly of God's love and kindness has me tearing up just thinking about it. God really does transform hearts, friends.

I know I couldn't do justice to his entire story, but I wanted to honor him by giving Jason in the book some of his personality and characteristics.

Writing Jason and Cassie's story was so rewarding for me. I hope you enjoyed it!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost – Father, I am so unbelievably grateful for opportunities you have given me. For this book and all the others – but especially the friends I have made while walking in (sometimes reluctant) obedience.

Those friends include the amazing Mandi Blake and Hannah Jo Abbott. I wouldn't be who I am as a writer, mother, or woman without you! I thank the Lord for you every day.

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To Jason, for telling me your testimony and letting me tell portions of your story here.

Thank you to Brandi from Editing Done Write for fixing a million misplaced commas and fixing every en and em-dash.

Lastly, thank you to my amazing husband. You might not be a cowboy, but you are my Prince Charming. I love doing life with you and you are, without a doubt, my favorite human.

And to Mister B, Little C, and Baby L... Mama loves you beyond words.

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Curious about Jason's brother (Jared) and Alexis?

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