

# More Than an EX-GIRLFRIEND



A Sweet SMALL-TOWN ROMANTIC COMEDY

# Remi Carrington

# MORE THAN AN EX-GIRLFRIEND

A SWEET SMALL-TOWN ROMANTIC COMEDY

COWBOYS OF STARGAZER SPRINGS

BOOK SIX



REMI CARRINGTON



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## MORE THAN AN EX-GIRLFRIEND

**I've been avoiding my ex. More like hiding from, but that's just semantics. That's not possible now that he's my new neighbor.**

We dated all through high school, but then the day after graduation, I ended things, which I know broke his heart. But at the time, I thought I was making the best choice.

Now I regret it. Actually, I've regretted it for a while. Pretty much since the day we said goodbye.

As much as I want to apologize and make things right—if that's even possible—I'm afraid to face him. And telling him why I broke up with him will crush him.

Clinging to the old adage that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, I spend an entire night making him cookies. Apologies go better with cookies, I think.

At least I hope so.

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# CHAPTER 1



## LETTIE

I have two superpowers—conflict avoidance and eating my feelings. Not necessarily in that order.

My conflict avoidance was drowned out by regret when I made the decision to move to the small town where my ex-boyfriend settled after I broke off our relationship. It's been years, and I've regretted it every single day. Six months ago, I moved. And since then, I've put on way-too-many pounds. Possibly related to eating my feelings. But honestly, I started putting on weight long before the move.

A barbecue restaurant isn't really where I need to be. But getting out of the apartment is healthy. At least that's what my bestie, Layla, tells me. There isn't much in my life that is healthy right now. My heart is stuck in the past, and I don't know how to move on. I don't want to.

Breaking up with Archer Hayes was the dumbest and most painful decision I've ever made. But I can't figure out how to undo it.

Moving here was not my best idea, but I wanted a glimpse. To see his smile. To hear his laugh.

I miss him. After so many years, you wouldn't think I'd still be wondering "what if . . ." After all, I'm the one who ended things. But at the time, I thought I was doing the right thing, making a sacrifice so that he could be happy. Looking back, I believed lies and made choices I now regret.

But I don't want to face Archer. Because if he sees me, one of two things will happen. One—hurt will show deep in those brown eyes. Or two—it won't. And I'm not prepared for either option.

My job starts before most people are awake, and I work hidden from view of the public, so when I'm not making donuts at Sweets, I stay home to avoid



bumping into Archer because this is a small town.

From time to time, I see some of the other ranch hands from Stargazer Springs around town. Tessa, my boss, and Layla point them out to me quietly. But most of those guys don't know me. Besides Archer, there is only one other I have to avoid. Grayson. We all grew up in the same small town, and if Grayson spots me, he'll tell Archer. I know it.

But I know what Grayson's truck looks like, and it's not here in the parking lot. And Archer doesn't leave the ranch often, which is why I'm actually going to a restaurant rather than hiding in my apartment. I've managed to go this long without bumping into him, so fate must not want us to meet. I've had a few far-away glimpses and heard others mention him in conversation, but that's it. Who am I to argue with fate?

Layla opens her arms as I walk toward the restaurant. "Look at you! The sun is out, and you aren't disintegrating or anything."

I hug my friend. "I'm not a vampire."

"It was a joke, Lettie." She laughs. "Let's go in. I'm so hungry. I might eat a whole cow. I love working out with Nico, especially when he doesn't wear a shirt." She fans her face. "But then I'm starved."

Laughing, I glance around, ensuring Archer isn't pulling into the parking lot. It's not like I have any clue what he's driving these days. I know it isn't the same Ford Fairlane he had all during high school because he sold that to Mr. Hoover, the old guy who worked security at the cemetery in town.

Once upon a time, I was closer to what people think of as normal. Now, not so much. But I'm learning to be okay with it. I give the parking lot one more sweeping look. "How's Nico?"

Layla and I are roommates. And we work together almost every day at the donut shop. We became instant friends, and I love having this ray of sunshine as my friend. It's a good counterbalance to my storm clouds.

I always ask about her boyfriend because I like the way she lights up when she answers.

She beams. "Nico is amazing. We're one month into his five months of being the perfect boyfriend, and I'm not sure how he can be any more perfect. Actually, I do know, but it's probably way too soon for him to propose."

After pulling open the door, I step aside to let Layla enter first.

Once we're in line, she turns and points at me. "When are you going to talk to your ex? You moved here because of him. Avoiding him is borderline

insane. But I'm proud of you for venturing out of the apartment." She wiggles a finger as she points at me. "One day, Nico is going to pop the question. And you cannot miss my wedding because I want you as my maid of honor. And newsflash, Archer might be invited to the wedding. Nico has met a lot of the guys through his cousin. They're kind of friends now, so . . ." She moves her finger back and forth. "Tick tock."

I don't point out that her finger movement looks more like a metronome than a clock.

But I'm well aware of the fact that I can't avoid Archer forever. Dread washes over me. Just like it does every other time I think about facing Archer. I know I broke his heart, but explaining why will just break his heart again. I'm not sure I can do that to the guy.

A distinct laugh sends my heart soaring and simultaneously fills me with terror. Dread changes to panic, and I drop to my knees.

"Umm. What are you doing?" Layla stares at me like I'm . . . well, like I'm crawling around like a misbehaved child in a restaurant.

The couple in line ahead of us glance at me, then turn back, whispering to each other. This doesn't help me feel any less nutty.

I keep my voice low. "He's here."

"Who's here?" Layla cranes her neck, looking around the restaurant.

There is only the counter separating me from an uncomfortable meeting.

I whisper scream, "Layla, seriously. How many people do I hide from?"

She looks down at me, not even bothering to pretend she isn't talking to someone on the floor. "I've only known you a few months. So I'm not completely sure." She winks, then looks toward a table in the back. "Looks like the ranch hands decided to have dinner together. I should probably go say hello to Nico's cousin. I'm not sure when Dag will finally clue in that his best friend is in love with him. He's clueless, which makes it hard to be around him, but he's almost family, so I'll be nice."

I met Dag once and live in fear that he'd tell Archer that I'm here in town, but so far that hasn't happened. I guess whatever Nico said to his cousin motivated him to keep his mouth shut.

I need to get out of this place without being seen. "Do *not* tell them I'm here."

"No worries. I'll tell them to completely ignore the woman crawling out of the restaurant." She bites her lip, but it doesn't hide her mischievous grin. "Need me to open the door so that you can slither out?"

“Please. And I’m not slithering. I’m just leaving.”

“Right. You look like a racoon scurrying away from a trashcan.” She pushes open the door. “Bye. And keep in mind what I said about insanity.”

I don’t need a reminder that my behavior isn’t normal. I’m on my hands and knees in a public place to avoid my ex. Normal and I have zero overlap on a Venn diagram.

After crawling out the door and around the corner of the building, I stand and dust off my jeans. At least here on the side of the building there aren’t massive windows.

So much for dinner out. I’ll be pulling through a drive-thru and taking my food home. Because now, after hearing Archer’s laugh, I have a lot of feelings—mostly regret—that need to be soothed with calories.

I start the engine, and my phone dings.

**Layla:** I’m getting our food to go. See you at the apartment in a few. And I got an extra banana pudding. Because Archer.

I send a thumbs-up in response and drive to the apartment. Hopefully, Layla hurries with that barbecue because my emotions are tangled in a giant knot.

\* \* \*

LAYLA HANDS me the last banana pudding, then flops onto the sofa. “Okay, so I ate all that food and waited for you to bring it up, but you didn’t, so I’m bringing up Archer.”

“There really isn’t much to talk about.”

She shakes her head. “Then you listen. I’ll talk. First of all, he’s a cutie. I hadn’t met Archer before. But Dag introduced him when I went over to say hello. A bunch of the guys were there. I can see why you are still hung up on him. I mean, he’s no Nico, but no one is.” She sighs. “Anyway, we need to figure out a way for you to talk to Archer. Because the way you’re handling it is going to end badly. I can feel it.”

“As soon as I figure out what to say, I’ll have Tessa arrange a meeting.” That shouldn’t be hard because the woman who owns the donut shop, my boss, is married to the ranch owner’s son. And from what I see and hear, they are like one big family out there.

That makes me happy for Archer. He deserves that. After losing his

parents when he was eleven, his only family was his grandmother. She is not my favorite person. Was, rather. But if I explained why, I'd be speaking ill of the dead, and that feels wrong. Reason number two I can't tell Archer why I broke up with him.

Layla stands and props her hands on her hips. "Or maybe move on. If you aren't all hung up on him, it'll be easier to talk to him. Right? Then when you see him, you just say 'Oh, hi! You're looking good. How are things?' And then go on with your life. Because right now, you don't have a life, Lettie. You are like a trash panda that sneaks around in the dark. Something has to change."

I nod, knowing in the deepest parts of me that she's right. But I don't like the comparison to a raccoon. Even if it sort of fits right now. "Maybe I should move on."

"I'm not going to tell you what to do, only that you need to do something. Because I care about you. And I want to see you happy." She wraps me in a hug. "Want me to cancel plans with Nico so that we can watch a movie or something?"

"Absolutely not. Go and have fun. I'm fine." I'm not, but making her stay home will only make us both gloomy.

Twenty minutes later, I'm alone in the apartment. I reach for my phone and download a social media app. I'm not ready to stop avoiding people in real life, so if I'm going to move on even an inch, it'll have to be online. So tonight, I'll throw some thoughts out into the void and see what connections it brings. Maybe I'll meet someone who will help me move on.

It's hard to imagine anyone making me laugh like Archer did, but I can't win if I don't play. Right?

I stare at the space where I'm supposed to enter a username, and thanks to Layla, all I can think of are raccoons, so I call myself Regretful-Raccoon.

Then I let my fingers fly across the keyboard, and I pour out my heart in such a way that no one would ever know it was me or that I actually broke up with anyone. It wasn't exactly pouring, more like dribbling my heart into the post. But it's the first time I've opened my heart since I broke it, so it feels significant.

# CHAPTER 2



## ARCHER

Stretched out in bed, I read posts on Reddit. It's a nightly ritual at this point. I scan my feed until a headline snares my attention and makes me want to read the post.

I scroll and stop when I read *Regret and Moving on*. I click the link and read the short post.

YEARS AGO, I MADE A CHOICE. AT THE TIME, I THOUGHT WITH ALL MY HEART THAT I WAS DOING THE RIGHT THING. NOW I WISH I COULD TAKE IT ALL BACK. BUT I PUT MY TRUST IN SOMEONE I SHOULDN'T HAVE, AND NOW I LIVE WITH REGRET. I WANT TO MAKE IT RIGHT, BUT I DON'T THINK I CAN. I'M AFRAID TO EVEN TRY.

MAYBE I SHOULD JUST MOVE ON AND TRY TO LET GO OF THE REGRET. BUT I DON'T KNOW HOW. ANYONE OUT THERE SUCCESSFULLY MOVE ON AFTER MAKING A BAD CHOICE? HELP A GIRL OUT AND SHARE SOME ADVICE.

The post is vague, but it resonates. Instead of adding a comment to the post, I send the user a message. I'm careful online not to include identifying info, but my username does give away my unusual hobby. Besides, the username Crocheting-Cowboy is funny.

But regret is my constant companion, not because I made a bad choice, but I couldn't stop someone when they made a choice that hurt us both. And I've spent the last five years trying to move on.

I'm not sure my advice will be helpful because, in my case, moving on is an overstatement. I think about Lettie often, but I haven't wallowed in the same place. After leaving my hometown, I chased my dream. I've built a life

for myself doing what I love, and I'm surrounded by people who are like family.

This person, Regretful-Raccoon, wants hope, and I can offer that. It does get better.

Crocheting-Cowboy: I saw your post. After something happened to me, I moved. Literally. It helped. I'm still working through some stuff, but the life I have now is good. Really good. My advice for how to move on is to think of what you want your life to be like and then take one step in that direction. Then after a few weeks, take another. After enough steps, you'll find happiness. Or maybe little pieces of it that you mold together.

That's my advice. I hope it works for you.

I hit send, then toss my phone aside. It's the first time I've sent a private message on this app, and I probably should've given it more thought before I sent it, but it's done. And while I may regret sending it, I choose to let go of that regret. Maybe this is the next step in my moving-on process.

My phone buzzes, and I snatch it up. Regretful-Raccoon replied. In my head, she's a young woman regretting a breakup. And I picture her with long dark hair and intense brown eyes. That pretty much describes Lettie.

Clearly, I have more work to do until I'm completely over my ex and moved on. But it's a work in progress.

Perhaps hearing from someone who made the bad choice will help me get a better understanding of Lettie's side. The anger I've carried is starting to weigh me down.

In reality, the user could be an older woman who sold stocks at the wrong time. Though, the post had a different feel to it. I don't think it was about losing money.

Regretful-Raccoon: Thank you for your advice. It's simple. Doable. I like that. I'll have to give some thought to what the first step might be. And I like your username.

I must be starved for connection if the first person I message feels like a friend. But they like my username, so I have to reply.

Crocheting-Cowboy: If possible, maybe you could leave the place where you made the bad choice. Distance helped me. That could be a first step.

As for my username, I learned a long time ago and recently picked up the hobby again. It is its own kind of therapy.

And I'm still in progress with the moving on. So don't be discouraged. It can be a bit like a step forward and sometimes a couple of steps backward.

After hitting send, I wait, hoping for another message. But I didn't ask a question. If she answers, I'll make sure to include a question in my next message to keep the conversation going.

My new pen pal replies right away.

Regretful-Raccoon: I guess I've already taken the first step because I did move. But I have mixed feelings about where I am now. I've made a great new friend, but here there's a constant reminder of my bad choice. I probably should've chosen a place that was free of reminders.

And I appreciate the encouragement about it being a journey. I'll have to think of it as a two-step. I'm not sure if in that dance people actually go backward, but I'll pretend.

Have a great rest of the night. My morning starts super early, so I need to sleep.

Without giving away identifying info, can you tell me something that's good about your life now?

She asked a question. That's a positive sign. I connect my phone to the charger and tuck into bed because she's not the only one with an early morning. Then I pick up the phone again and read through the messages. For the first time in ages, I'm excited about something. And this poor stranger has no idea that she's sparked that.

I guess that proves I haven't really moved on. But no one I've met compares to Lettie. After being with someone who could glance at me and know what I was thinking, it's hard to start over.

But admittedly, I haven't tried very hard.

\* \* \*

DURING BREAKFAST, while everyone is chatting around the table, I tap out a quick message to Regretful-Raccoon.



Crocheting-Cowboy: The best thing about my life now is my found family. The people who live near me are wonderful and caring. It's not something I expected.

That's one good thing about my life now.

When thinking about the life you want, what's one thing on the list?

As always, I'm not expecting identifying information.

I'm not just feeding her lines that sound good. My found family is the best thing about my life now. I don't feel the need to be anyone other than myself, and it's clear that people on the ranch care about me. Since I grew up with only my grandmother, a big family feels like a treat.

As I go through my day, I check my phone more often than normal. Regretful-Raccoon doesn't answer until after lunch.

Regretful-Raccoon: I see you decided to start with an easy question. LOL. I've been thinking about how to answer all morning while at work. And having a found family sounds amazing. In an ideal world, I'd have one of those too. But I'm not sure how to step in that direction. I guess talking to people is a good start. I'm chatting with you. Does that count?

I smile because she ended with a question again. It's like a subtle plea for me to keep talking to her, which I'm a hundred percent on board with. But fences need mending and cows need to be fed. Later, I'll send her a message when I'm not running between tasks.

\* \* \*

ALL AFTERNOON, while doing chores, I thought about how to respond to Regretful-Raccoon.

Now I'm headed back home, and I realize I've gone nearly a full day without thinking about Lettie. This is progress. And maybe that's what I'll tell my chat buddy when I message her.

As I pull up to my cabin, Dag is walking out of his. He goes out almost every weekend, and tonight seems to be no exception. But he is dealing with a situation with his best friend, so I am a bit surprised because he hasn't exactly been himself.

I climb out of my truck and wave at him. "You going out?"

“Yeah. Didn’t line up a date or anything, but figured doing something was better than staying here. Want to go?”

He’s invited me out before, and I’ve never said yes, but today, I’m feeling a bit social.

While I’m deciding, he says. “I don’t mind waiting for a bit while you change.”

It sounds like he might want the company.

“You sure?” I tip my hat back. “I can be quick.”

This is a first for me. I normally turn down these invites. No one can rib me about not asking ladies to dance if I don’t go out. And I don’t spend the evening comparing every woman I see to Lettie. But tonight, I’m making a different choice.

One more step down the moving-on road.

“Just knock when you’re ready.” He steps inside his cabin. Then hollers, “If you’re just going to make sure I don’t bother Goldie, I have news for you. I don’t even know where she is.”

Poor guy is really floundering after his best friend turned down his proposal, but I’m hoping he doesn’t try to drown out his frustration with stuff that doesn’t matter. After losing Lettie, I spent so much time wondering what I could have done differently. And I have regrets about things I should have said or tried.

I can’t change the past, but maybe I can help my friend avoid my mistakes.

But I’m not sure he’s ready to hear any of that yet, so I just grin, then hurry in to get ready.

Thirty minutes later, we’re walking into the new country bar that’s opened in town. Patrons are a wide range of ages. Many are in well-worn boots and jeans. Others are in flipflops and skinny jeans. It’ll make for interesting people watching.

In the middle of talking about his best friend Goldie, Dag asks, “Why did your girlfriend break up with you? What makes it so hard to move on?”

Tonight would be so much easier without him bringing up my ex. But I’m honest with him. And honest with myself. “It’s hard to move on because I loved her. Still do, but I’m accepting that it’s over. And honestly, I don’t know why she ended things. I know what she said—it wasn’t working—but she was lying. And not getting the truth hurts. Maybe I took her for granted. I’ve spent five years thinking about it, and nothing has changed.”

I don't want this conversation to continue, and I'm hoping Dag will ask someone to dance and leave me alone with my beer so that I can send off a message to Regretful-Raccoon.

He taps the table. "Maybe one day you can ask your ex about it. You know, if you bump into her somewhere. Possibly."

I can't imagine any scenario where I'd even see my ex from afar, let alone bump into her. "I'm not going to bump into her. Since my grandma's funeral, I haven't been back to my hometown. No reason to go there anymore. So there's no chance I'll see Lettie." I take a swig of my beer. "You going to dance? There are a few ladies who have been watching you since we walked in here."

As soon as I utter the words, one of the women who has been eyeing Dag walks up behind him and rubs her hands all over him. They wander off to the dance floor, and I slide my phone out of my pocket.

Crocheting-Cowboy: You inspired me. I'm actually out with a friend tonight instead of sitting at home alone. I don't think an ideal world exists. The real world is a mix of good and bad, and I just hope that there is more of the good.

And to your question, chatting with me absolutely counts. Bravery isn't always fighting dragons. Sometimes it's just picking up the phone.

I'm proud of you for taking steps.

So when you aren't working early in the morning or moving on from your bad choice, what do you like to do?

Just as I hit send, Dag comes back to the table. Goldie is here on a date, so that causes a bit of awkwardness, but Dag handles it like a gentleman. Mostly. Now that she's out dancing with her date, Dag's staring, his jealousy obvious to everyone except himself and Goldie.

That's when I decide I'm not going to sit on this barstool all night.

When I stand, Dag raises an eyebrow.

"I'm going to ask someone to dance. You good?"

He nods. "I'm just watching out for Goldie. In case she needs me. Have fun." After a quick survey of the room, he asks, "Who you going to ask?"

I spot a woman probably old enough to be my grandmother. She's standing next to a table, wiggling her hips to the music. It's likely she'll say yes and also that she won't expect me to call her after a couple turns around the dance floor, which is exactly what I want. So I nod in her direction. "I'm

thinking that lady.”

Dag shakes his head. “You’re crazy. I’d stay far away from her if I were you. You are young and good-looking. You don’t need to ask old ladies to dance. Lots of women here would say yes. If you want, I can introduce you to Regina.”

“Not interested.” I haven’t dated lots of women, but that woman is trouble with a capital T.

I wander over to the white-haired lady. I’ve seen her around town. The other ranch hands are terrified of her, but she’s never done or said anything offensive to me.

“Evening, ma’am. Would you care to dance?”

Her eyes light up, and a wide smile shows off creases, making me think she smiles often. “I would absolutely love that.”

She’s short, and I have to lean down a little, but we fall into rhythm and two-step to the music.

After three songs, I lead her back to her table. “Thank you. Can I buy you a drink?” I figure that’s a polite thing to do.

“No thanks. I’m headed out soon. Thank you for dancing with me. Most nights, I get to watch other people do what I enjoy, so this was a treat.” She inches closer. “And I don’t believe I’ve ever had the chance to ask you. How would you feel about taking off that shirt and letting someone photograph you for one of my book covers. Young cowboys are hot right now.” She laughs. “Dallas will have my hide if he finds out I’m asking another one of his friends about pictures.”

Now I know why she’s familiar. And why the other guys make themselves scarce when she’s around.

But my reasons for saying no are completely different from my fellow ranch hands. And I try to mask my inner turmoil as I answer. “No one would want to see pictures of me with my shirt off. I enjoyed dancing with you. Have a good night.” Losing my parents as a boy was hard. Seeing a reminder of it every day is even harder.

She catches my arm, concern etched on her face. “Sometimes my mouth runs faster than my brain. And I’m sorry for what flickered in your eyes. I didn’t mean to cause you any pain.”

“No need to blame yourself. You didn’t know. And I won’t mention it to Dallas.” I give her a nudge and a wink, hoping to end our interaction in a lighthearted way.

“I like you . . .” She trails off the last word, squinting.

“Excuse my manners, ma’am. I’m Archer.”

“Please call me Tandy. Ma’am makes me feel old. Shoot. Getting out of bed makes me feel old some days.” Mischief twinkles in her eyes, and she pats my arm. “If you ever need relationship help, you come find me. I have a knack for matchmaking.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

She wiggles her finger. “Don’t just say that to be polite. I mean it. You can ask Kent and Poppy. They’ll tell you.”

“If I ever need help with the ladies, I’ll call you.” I’m not quite sure I’ll ever want anyone’s help with my relationships, but the offer was nice.

When I get back to the table, Dag springs off his barstool. “Oh good. You’re back. Goldie left two songs ago, and I want to be sure she makes it home.”

I know when it’s pointless to argue. “Then let’s go. Or you could, you know, text her. Goldie is smart and knows you are willing to help.”

That doesn’t stop him from walking to the door. “I used to think she was smart, but she picked me for a best friend.” He flashes a grin, but the hurt behind it is evident.

“Let’s head back to the ranch.” As I follow him out, I check my phone for messages, but my new friend hasn’t responded.

I may never meet her, but messaging her has been good. She hasn’t said anything magical. There isn’t some online romantic spark. But I’ve given myself permission to open up to someone other than Lettie, and that feels like huge progress.

# CHAPTER 3



## LETTIE

For the last few months, Crocheting-Cowboy and I continued to message back and forth. I message him about mundane things, like what I made myself for breakfast, and exciting things, like my best friend getting engaged and then married. I don't use names. Identifying info is never part of our discussions. He talks about his job in vague terms and about how so many of his close friends are getting engaged and married.

There was a message where he shared that seeing all his friends in relationships made him feel a little like he was getting left behind.

And since I feel that too, we chatted about that for a while.

Having deep conversations with someone I wouldn't recognize on the street is both weird and cathartic.

My life overall is good. I'm happy. Christmas is right around the corner, and I'm still working at the donut shop.

But the left behind conversation has haunted me for weeks. If I'd ignored Archer's grandmother and stayed with him, we'd probably be married by now. I so wish I could rewind time and make a different decision.

But I can't go back in time. I can't even make myself talk to Archer. The idea of reconciling with him is just a fantasy at this point.

And Crocheting-Cowboy is a nice distraction from real life. His messages are definitely bright spots in my day. Lately, we've been talking about Christmas, and how even though we have people around us, we both feel alone.

I'd never admit that to Layla because she'd feel guilty and try to fix it. But it isn't her fault, and I'm not sure it can be fixed except inside me. And I'm the only one who can tackle that.

But after losing my dad when I was seven and living with an alcoholic mom after that, I got used to being alone. Archer was the exception to that. We were friends long before we dated, and with him, I never felt alone.

After I chased him away, the loneliness returned. It lessened when I was living with Layla, but it was never gone. And ever since she moved out, it's a daily companion.

I'm happy that she and Nico married, but I miss having her as a roommate.

At work, I'm wiping down the counters in the back and listening as customers chat with Layla about Christmas plans.

She is so excited about spending the holiday with her new husband. They had a quiet courthouse ceremony and will have a big wedding in the spring. She says it's so they have time to save money and some other family reasons, but I can't help but wonder if she's arranged it that way because of me. Because the ceremony was tiny and we knew who would be there, I showed up. Unlike her birthday. I wasn't there when Nico proposed because I didn't know if Archer would be there.

And that makes me a terrible friend.

But I'll talk to Archer soon because there's a possibility he might be at the big wedding, and I won't run away and avoid conflict. I owe that to Layla.

It's hard living alone. I've never done it before, and the last few months have been really tight. I can cover expenses if I get enough graphic design work, but saving has become a thing of the past. Layla doesn't need to know that though. I just want her to enjoy her Christmas with her new husband.

Tessa pops her head into the kitchen. "Have a minute? I wanted to chat with you about something in my office."

Whenever I get called to the office, I worry that I've done something horribly wrong and am about to get fired. As I follow her down the short hall, I grasp at memories, trying to figure out what I did wrong and why she wants to chat.

She swings the door closed before dropping into her desk chair. "Have a seat. I wanted to talk back here because this is an awkward conversation."

The lead-in isn't helping to ease my concern. "Okay."

"Layla mentioned that you might be tight on finances. I wish I could bump up your pay or hours, but that's just not feasible right now."

Tessa is the best boss I've ever had. She pays me a fair wage, and I love



what I do. I started right after she began dating Garrett, the ranch owner's son. Because they live on the ranch where Archer works, I get to hear little updates from time to time. I haven't told her the whole lamentable story of why I ended the relationship, but she knows my ex works out there and that I don't want anyone to know I work here or even that I live in town.

I don't want her to think I don't like working here. "I'll be okay. You don't have to worry about me."

"Of course I'm going to worry about you. You're my friend." She leans forward, arms crossed on the desk. "So on the ranch, in a different part from where they run cattle and stuff, Lilith opened a venue. They host weddings, dances, corporate events. All kinds of stuff. Anyway, they're building two guest houses—they're side by side in one building—and were going to rent them out to people visiting the area. But then there was a drunk guy riding a bull and a couple of other incidents, so they decided not to rent them out as weekend rentals." She smiles. "I promise this is going somewhere related to the topic."

I return the smile, confused about how any of this possibly relates to my affording the apartment.

"Lilith asked me if I knew of anyone who was looking for a place to rent. She has someone lined up for one of the places and was hoping to find someone for the other side. She didn't want anyone to feel all alone at night out there."

It's beginning to sound like I'm being offered a place to live on the ranch. The very same ranch where Archer lives and works. But Tessa did say the house is in an entirely different area from where the ranch hands live and work.

She continues, "The rent is low because it benefits the venue to have people living on the premises. The events coordinator, Mindy, and her husband, fabulous people, live almost across the road. He has a small ranch there. And Garrett and I live a bit away from the other houses, and it really isn't that scary. I mean, I don't go for long walks alone at night because there are wild animals, but it's peaceful out on the ranch."

"Except for drunk guys riding bulls." I laugh because the image is funny, but in general, it seems a bit dangerous.

Tessa rolls her eyes. "It was after a party, and that old guy was three sheets to the wind. Thankfully, Chuck—that's the name of the bull—is docile, and Mindy and Jeffrey managed to get the guy out unharmed. So what

do you say? They are just finishing up the houses, so they'll be ready in a few weeks. In January." She slides a sheet of paper with the details written out. "And like I said, it's far away from the rest of the ranch, so you probably wouldn't see anyone that you knew before."

I take one look and nod. "I'll take it." This is a step, progress. Not only will I be able to save money each month, but I'll also be out of excuses to face Archer. Avoiding him while living on the same ranch would be silly. So I need to think of what to say soon.

Tessa grins. "Perfect. I'll give Lilith your number, and she'll be in touch. We'll be neighbors. Faraway neighbors, but still."

"It'll be nice. Thanks for thinking of me." I'm excited. After months of feeling like I was running in a rat wheel, this change feels promising.

I'm reminded of the message Crocheting-Cowboy sent long ago about moving-on being a series of steps. And while I'm moving closer, not away, from Archer, this feels healthy. I'm finally willing to be brave and face him.

Soon.

\* \* \*

I WAKE up Christmas morning and smile at the message from Crocheting-Cowboy.

Crocheting-Cowboy: Before I head out to celebrate with my found family, I want to wish you the merriest of Christmases. Sending you a gift would annihilate our anonymity, but after all these months of chatting, I consider you a friend.

I hope you get a nice surprise today and not just a day of lonely solitude.

Merry Christmas

I hug the phone to my chest, thankful for the faceless cowboy who makes me feel less alone in this world. Then I roll out of bed and make myself coffee.

As I'm filling my mug, someone knocks.

Layla is at the door with Nico right behind her. "Yay! You're still in your jammies. That's what we decided for this year."

I blink. "Decided?"

She nods. "My sister, Issa, and her husband, Ryan, are hosting Christmas

breakfast. No one you know will be there.” She winks as if that’s the least bit subtle.

“You never mentioned . . .”

“Because you would’ve said no. Somehow you have this idea that spending time with you is a burden. It’s not. We like you. My family will like you too. And later when we go to Nico’s parents’ house for Christmas dinner, you can come along. But I’m not sure if Dag and Goldie will be there.” She waves her hands. “Go brush your teeth and pour that coffee into a to-go mug. Breakfast is almost ready.”

Instead of rushing to the bathroom, I throw my arms around her. “Thank you. This is a nice surprise.”

She blinks, then fans her eyes. “I’m not going to cry on Christmas. But you’re welcome.”

On the way to her sister’s, I shoot off a quick note to Crocheting-Cowboy.

Regretful-Raccoon: Your wish came true. My friend showed up, and basically accosted me with an invitation. So I’m spending Christmas with her family. And it’s nice. She told me her parents have a gift for me, which is embarrassing because I only bought one for my friend. But like you said. Life comes with good and bad. Today, there is definitely more of the good.

I hope your day is the same.

Maybe all this time, I wasn’t just standing still, halted in my journey. Acknowledging the ways I’ve grown as a person is important. And my friendship with Layla is a huge step.

Years ago, I leaned on Archer to get me through hard days. His kind words and his smile comforted me when crazy stuff happened at home. The one Christmas my mom was so drunk that she didn’t wake up until late in the day, Archer invited me to his house. When I declined, he showed up at my door.

That was when I decided I loved him. Why did I ever let anyone sway me about our relationship?

And now Layla is that friend who drags me out of my funk. But I still miss Archer. I hope wherever he is, he’s having a fabulous Christmas.

\* \* \*

THIS MORNING, I started extra early at the donut shop because we have a big order that's being picked up first thing. Tessa even came in early to help.

"Ready for the move tomorrow?" Tessa shifts donuts into the glass case, getting ready for the onslaught of hungry customers that will be here in a half hour.

I stop in the doorway before going into the kitchen to grab another tray. "All packed. The owner's wife—I can't remember her name—said that someone different would be living out there. I hope they're nice."

"Lilith. And I'm sure they will be. She hasn't said anything to me about who else will be living out there, but I can ask."

I shrug. "It's not a big deal. I've already given my apartment complex notice, and they always have a waiting list. The new people might show up to help carry my stuff out of the apartment."

"You'll have lots of help moving. Garrett is getting some of the guys to come load and unload."

Cautiously, I step closer to her. "He knows about my situation, right?"

Tessa pats my arm. "He knows. He's not broadcasting. Just quietly asked a couple of the guys. You can meet up with Archer on your own terms. We won't invite him to your apartment."

"Thanks."

She nudges me. "Let's grab more donuts."

In the back, she adds icing and sprinkles to a tray of donuts while I squeeze lemon filling into another batch.

"Leave a half dozen empty. I made a special strawberry filling for them. It's a special request." She starts on another tray. "Will you carry out this tray when you're finished with those?"

"Sure." I fill the last donut, leaving a few for her to pump full of strawberry goodness. "Strawberry sounds good. Maybe you should add that to the regular menu."

"I might." She smiles. "Dag will be here to pick up his birthday order any minute. Don't be startled when someone rushes in before opening time."

I carry the tray of sprinkle donuts toward the front.

Archer is standing on the opposite side of the counter.

I let loose a shocked squeal, and the tray of donuts hits the floor. The hurt in his eyes shatters my floodgates, which are normally locked up tight, and the pain and regret I've held onto for five years streams down my face as I struggle to catch my breath.

Then the look in his eyes morphs into rage, and he spins and marches out of the shop.

He hates me.

I grab the nearest chocolate donut and take a bite. But there aren't enough donuts in this place to help me feel better.

There aren't enough donuts in the whole wide world to do that.

# CHAPTER 4



## ARCHER

*S*torm out of the donut shop. But instead of climbing into Dag's truck, which was how I got here, I keep walking. It's too cold to walk, but anger has me so inflamed, I figure I'll make it at least a couple of miles before the cold penetrates my fury.

How long has Lettie been living in town? And why did she keep it a secret? Of all the places she could live, why here? Why would she follow me to this place?

Clearly it wasn't to apologize because she hasn't done that, and she's had time to find a job. And meet Dag. How else would he know she lived here? She has to be the reason he insisted that I come with him this morning.

The nerve of her to sob. She wasn't the one who had her heart stomped. She chose to end the relationship. It was her decision. When I begged her to discuss it with me so that we could find a solution to whatever was wrong, she only shook her head and cried.

And I suffered from her choice. For years.

The one person I thought would be in my life forever broke my heart without giving me a reason. And I really thought I was starting to get over her, but my reaction says otherwise. Dang it.

I yank the collar up on my coat. My tantrum walk was a bad idea. I'm cold. And nothing about exerting the energy is making me any less angry or miserable. In my head, I just see her sobbing, and it both tears me apart and makes me mad. But the worst part of it all is that she's somehow prettier. The jolt of attraction that zipped through me when I saw her is a betrayal.

Tires sound on the pavement, but I don't stop. I'm out of the road, so hopefully the driver will manage to avoid hitting me.

Dag's truck pulls up alongside me. He slows the truck to match my pace and rolls down his window. "Are you mad?"

Frustrated, I try to remember that Dag isn't responsible for any of my hurt. Clearly, he kept a secret about Lettie living here in town, and I'm irritated about that. Or maybe he just found out about Lettie. But either way, in Dag's head, my bumping into my ex-girlfriend is a good thing. He can be a bit clueless. He's not great at reading situations. If you tell him to read the room, he'll probably ask which room.

But I know he was trying to be a good friend by coordinating this accidental meeting, so I don't bite his head off.

"I don't know what I am." I keep walking, wishing I could rewind time and choose to stay home instead of going with Dag to get donuts.

"If you get in, I'll give you a donut. It hasn't been on the floor or anything. Those are in a separate box. Tessa gave them to me cheap." He sticks his hand out the window and hooks his thumb back toward town. "She was pretty upset. Lettie, not Tessa."

"Don't care." There isn't a lick of truth to that statement, but if I repeat it enough times, I'm confident it'll become truth.

"See now. You say that, but I'm pretty sure you do care. Like that night I couldn't decide if I should give up on getting Goldie to go out with me, forget about winning her heart. Then she called Dallas and wanted him to meet her in San Antonio, and I knew that I did care, and giving up wasn't an option."

I hate that Dag is right. "Goldie didn't rip out your heart and hand it to you smashed. I thought I was going to marry Lettie. And without warning, right after graduation, she broke up with no explanation. The situation isn't at all the same."

"Actually, there are similarities. Think about how many people saw that first proposal. Goldie didn't even glance at the ring before turning me down. And, not gonna lie, it stung because I was absolutely sure she'd say yes. Granted, that's because I was dumb, but still . . ." He shrugs. "I'm going to wear out the brakes trying to go this slow. Will you please just get in?"

I stop and sigh. "How long have you known? Does everyone on the ranch know?" My brain is in too much of a tangle to even think about damage control on this issue. I like living here. People on the ranch are like family. Except, I haven't told anyone about my past. Never mentioned that my parents died in a fire when I was a kid. Never mentioned that the love of my



life dumped me the day I was planning to propose. The only person who knows that stuff is my buddy Grayson, and he's excellent at keeping things to himself.

But now everyone will know. And I don't like feeling exposed.

Dag's gaze bounces between me and the rearview mirror. "I've known a while. She was roommates with my cousin's girlfriend. Have you met Nico? He's a deputy in the next county. And Layla isn't his girlfriend anymore. They're married now. And I don't know for sure who else knows. But I doubt it's many. I only kept the secret because Nico didn't want to be in trouble with Layla. I just figured y'all would run into each other somehow. I mean, this town is small."

"Why does she live here?"

"Hand to heaven, I have no idea. None." His shoulders relax when I climb into the truck. "But you could ask her."

"That would require talking to her. Where's that donut?"

Stopped in the middle of the road, he opens a box. "You can have whatever you want except the strawberry filled because those are for Goldie. I like you and feel bad that you're upset, but not enough to give you her donuts."

I snag a chocolate one. "Let's stop talking about Lettie."

"Sure. But if anyone asks, I didn't tell you."

My mouth full of donut, I nod. "I don't plan to tell a soul. But thanks for what you did."

Dag shrugs. "Maybe it'll work out."

Now that Dag and Goldie are engaged, he thinks everything in life ends with rainbows.

"Doubt it." Calming down, I take another bite and savor the rich chocolate glaze and lightly sweet donut. "Tessa really knows how to make these. So good."

Dag grins. "Lettie makes the donuts now."

It's like he didn't hear the part where I said I didn't want to talk about Lettie. Ever.

When he parks outside the mess hall, I slide out.

"Hey." Dag raises an eyebrow. "Sorry I didn't say something sooner."

I shrug and head into the building. It's probably a good thing I'm moving out to that cabin at the venue. Out there, I can be even more of a recluse when I'm not working.

When I walk into the mess hall, Beau waves me over. “Let’s chat in my office.”

I follow him through the game room and into his house. Thankfully, going to his office doesn’t feel like being called into the principal’s office. That’s only one of many reasons I’m glad I ended up here at Stargazer Springs Ranch.

It feels like one big family, and that’s something I didn’t have growing up. After losing both of my parents in a fire, I was raised by my grandmother, and that was the extent of my family. Now that she’s gone, I have no one. Well, no one related by blood.

If it works out, I’ll continue being a ranch hand out here until I’m incapable of doing what needs to be done and they’re forced to replace me.

He drops into the chair behind his desk and motions for me to sit. “You still good for moving tomorrow?”

“Yes, sir.”

Nodding, he checks his phone. “I really appreciate it. Lilith had two people lined up, but then one of them backed out, and I just don’t feel comfortable with a woman being out there alone at night.” His gaze snaps up, and he gives a small smirk. “I’m not saying you have to keep her company at night. That’s up to you.”

“That’s not my plan, sir.” I don’t have the slightest clue who my soon-to-be neighbor is, but it doesn’t matter. After this morning’s run-in, I’ll be taking a break from relationships for a while. At least until I get my head on straight and stop comparing every woman I meet to Lettie.

He slips his phone in his pocket. “Either way. I appreciate it. I talked to Clint earlier, and he arranged it so that you’re free after two today. We’ll meet up at the new place. I’ll give you the key, and you can meet the other tenant in the duplex. She’s meeting Lilith out there at the same time.”

“I’ll be there.” I keep my answers short, ready to be done talking.

“Great.” He slides a check across the desk. “I started the extra pay in this check. I know it’s not as convenient to live out there. And I’m glad you said yes because I didn’t have a whole lot of other options. Most of the guys are married now. Anderson hasn’t been here that long, and Dallas would just scare the poor girl with his crustiness.”

I give a polite laugh, reminding myself not to act like Dallas. While I might feel like a curmudgeon on the inside, I need everyone else to see the relaxed and easygoing Archer.

“Ava probably has food ready. Go eat.”

I stand and shake his hand. “Thank you.”

Then I head back to the mess hall, hoping Dag is right about the others not knowing about my connection to Lettie. Well, most of the others. There is zero chance that Beau’s son, Garrett, doesn’t know. He’s married to Tessa, and the look on her face when I walked into the donut shop told me that she knows I have a history with Lettie.

In the game room, I stop and pull out my phone. After chatting with Regretful-Raccoon for months, I still only know her username. I have no clue what she looks like or even how old she is, but she’s been a huge contributor in helping me move on from Lettie. But after seeing my ex today, I’m questioning all that progress.

After checking for a new message and not finding anything, I type out a quick note.

Crocheting-Cowboy: Happy Friday. Oops maybe that gives away too much info. Now you know what side of the international dateline I’m on. I hope you have a great day.

She’ll know I’m joking because we’ve made references to time before. But I crave that connection right now. For all I know, I could be messaging a grandma in Madrid or even Tandy—gosh, I hope not—but the image of Lettie persists. And now that makes this all feel more complicated.

\* \* \*

I TURN into the venue and take the gravel road that leads around the office and cluster of buildings where events are held. The duplex sits about a quarter mile from the office and is situated in the shade of a massive oak tree. Just far enough away from the events area to offer privacy but close enough that if there are any shenanigans at night, I’ll likely notice. All in all, this seems like a good arrangement.

I park in front of the house a few minutes early, so I walk the perimeter, getting a feel for the layout. There is a porch along the back that matches the one in the front. Nothing separates one side from the other, so hopefully my new neighbor is good with boundaries.

The view is nice. Trees, hills, a couple of bulls in an enclosed pasture.

When I agreed to this, I wasn’t sure what to expect. It’s nice. Beau

described the place, which is definitely bigger than my tiny cabin, and I'm eager to see the inside.

But honestly, where I sleep at night doesn't make much difference to me.

I stroll back around to the front. The two doors on the front of the duplex look exactly the same.

Has the woman who is moving in chosen a side? Probably not if she's just coming here for the first time.

To me, it doesn't matter a lick. So I'll let her choose.

Waiting on the porch, I wave when Beau pulls up. He slides out and walks over.

Then he leans against the railing and crosses his arms. "Lilith has the keys. She should be here any minute. We both left my office about the same time, but she was meeting the new gal near the front gate."

Beau has lipstick smeared on his cheek, which isn't an uncommon occurrence.

"You have a bit of something by your mouth." I brush my own face to show him the spot.

Grinning, he yanks a handkerchief out of his pocket. "I really need to start using that little flip-down mirror in the truck to check for this, huh?"

I'm not going to answer that, so I shrug.

Lilith's SUV pulls up, and the passenger door swings open. The way the sun is hitting the windshield, I can't see my soon-to-be neighbor. But after a second, a leg appears, then another. She's wearing cute purple tennis shoes. It's an odd thing to notice, but Lettie used to buy printed canvas tennis shoes when she could afford it. Once, I saved up to get her a pair for her birthday. They were violet, just like her name. No one but her mother calls her that.

I kick myself for thinking about Lettie, and drag a hand down my face, trying to shove aside all thoughts of my ex.

But when I glance at the SUV, I lose all hope of forgetting about Lettie.

She flashes an uneasy smile as she steps closer to the porch, and I cross my arms, hoping no one else notices that my heart is trying to stampede out of my chest.

Lilith and Lettie walk up to the porch, and I force a smile. "Hi, Lettie."

Beau whips around. "Y'all know each other?"

I meet Lettie's gaze and answer with a casualness I don't feel. "We went to high school together."

Hurt flickers in her eyes, which makes it clear that she didn't like that

answer. But it wasn't a lie. Just not the whole truth.

If she wants Beau and Lilith to know that she's my ex, she can make the announcement. Personally, I want to keep this mess private.

Playing with the end of her hair, she steps closer and extends her hand. "It's good to see you."

I shake her hand but don't say anything because I can't offer the same sentiment.

Changing my mind about living here would only draw unwanted attention to the already awkward situation, so I resign myself to living beside Lettie. Besides, the extra pay is nice. Hopefully, I don't end up regretting my decision.

Now would be a great time for Regretful-Raccoon to message. I could use the distraction. But my pocket doesn't buzz on cue.

Lilith claps her hands together. "Y'all know each other. That's great. I'll skip the introductions. Ready to see the place?"

Lettie nods and walks toward the door on the left. Lilith unlocks that door, then the one on the right.

I guess it's decided. The right side will be mine.

Beau pushes open the door. "Have a look around. And take your time. Lilith and I will be out here on the porch, talking."

Nodding, I step inside. My ranch hand cabin was furnished when I moved in. This place is empty. But when my grandmother died, I moved some of her stuff into storage, so I'll easily be able to furnish the place.

I wander through the unit. There are two bedrooms and two bathrooms, but the one in the hall only has a sink and toilet. The kitchen has a counter dividing it from the eating area. And from the living room, I can see both the kitchen and the front door.

Beau walks in and leans against the wall. "What do you think?"

"It's great. I like it." I'm not just saying it to make Beau happy. This is a step up from the cabin.

He nods behind him. "She seems nice."

If he's trying to get me to talk about Lettie, it isn't going to work. "Yep."

Now, Lettie is more than an ex-girlfriend. She's my neighbor. And worse, we share a wall.

Moving on is going to be a whole lot more difficult.

# CHAPTER 5



## LETTIE

With my treasured afghan draped around my shoulders, I open my apartment door. I've been moping since I returned from the new place.

Layla holds up a bag. "Burgers and fries. Nico is working, and I figured you were starving. You know, because of what happened this morning."

I haven't even told my best friend about the unexpected catastrophe.

"Come on in." I step aside, dragging the end of my blanket out of her way. "Actually I haven't eaten anything since this morning. Granted, I consumed way too many donuts, but still. It's weird."

"I'm sorry y'all's reunion didn't go well." Layla sets the bag on the coffee table and opens her arms. "Need a hug?"

I lean down and give my short friend a big hug. "You don't know the worst of it."

"The worst? From what you said, this morning was pretty bad. How could anything possibly be worse?" She sets the bag on the coffee table.

My friend isn't making me feel any better.

"You know how I'm moving to the venue and how Lilith mentioned that there would be someone else living on the other side of the duplex?"

Staring at me, she nods. "Okay. So?"

"There will be only two people living on that side of the ranch. Me and the other person." I'm laying it on thick so she can experience a smidgen of the shock I felt when I saw Archer on that porch.

"You already told me that."

I somehow refrain from rolling my eyes. "Just me and the cowboy living on the other side of the wall." Eyebrows raised, I stare at her, waiting for it to

click.

Her mouth falls open, and she starts shaking her head. “Oh, that is bad.” She scrunches up her face, then smiles. “Or maybe it’s a good thing. Maybe it’ll be like that movie *The Parent Trap* when the girls are forced to share a cabin, but then they end up becoming like best friends and finding out they’re sisters.”

“Archer told Beau and Lilith that we went to high school together. That’s it. He mentioned nothing about the years we were friends or the years that we dated.” I drop onto the couch and peek inside the bag she brought. “Plus, I would seriously fall apart if I found out I was related to Archer. Not that it matters because I’m not sure he’ll ever speak to me again. But if it turns out Archer is my brother, I don’t want to know.”

Layla rolls her eyes. “Y’all look nothing alike. Nothing. And you know what I mean. Don’t be so literal.” She pulls the food out of the bag. “This might be the best thing to happen since you moved here.”

“Doubt it.” I lift the bun to see what’s on the burger.

“No onions, extra cheese, and there are ketchup and mayo packets so you can mix them before putting the stuff on your burger.”

“You’re the best, Layla.”

She grins. “Nico says that all the time.”

Laughing, I shake my head. My friend knows how to make me laugh even when I’m in the dumpiest of dumps. Like today.

“And you might want to put your blankie over there so you don’t get your special sauce on it. How would you explain that to Archer?”

I drape it over a chair far away from the food before mixing the condiments. “Thanks for bringing dinner. And I’ll be okay. The deal is too good to pass up, not that I’m opposed to living near Archer. But I’m not expecting things to change. It’ll be awkward.”

“Let me tell you about awkward. I never expected to be a mermaid in need of a rescue or to kiss a complete stranger before getting his name, but—you know—love happens.”

“I wish, but the look Archer gave me in the donut shop did not exude love. At all.”

“Give him time. To me, the big reaction means he still cares.”

I grab onto that thought because I need it. And more than anything, I want it to be true.

“The upside to all this is that it doesn’t matter who helps you move. No



more secrets.” She grins. “There’s always a bright side.”

That’s true for Layla, but I’m not sure my life got the memo. After my dad died, my mom became an alcoholic, and life was anything but bright.

Then I remember the note from Crocheting-Cowboy. “I got another message from the crocheting cowboy. So that’s good.”

“You aren’t giving him personal info, right?” Eyes narrowed, she wags a finger at me.

“I got super personal in the last message. Now he knows I live in the US.”

She pulls a face. “You need a man you can hold hands with, not someone who hides behind a keyboard.”

“He’s nice.”

“He could be a serial killer. Or ugly.” She giggles. “Either of those would be bad. I vote for Archer.”

Layla doesn’t seem to get that Archer isn’t an option.

“Eat. You’ll feel better.”

I take a bite, hoping she’s right. “Maybe it won’t be too horrible.”

She dips a fry into her milkshake. “Like I said, there’s always a bright side.”

\* \* \*

I SHOULD BE SLEEPING. But my darn brain only wants to replay both meetings with Archer over and over and over. I give up trying to sleep and slide out of bed. As I’m unpacking boxes and pulling out ingredients to make cookies, my phone buzzes.

Crocheting-cowboy: It’s good to know we’re on the same side of the international dateline. I feel closer to you already. (That was a joke.)

I had quite the day. It’s not something I can talk about without giving way more than I’m comfortable sharing on the internet, but it’s nice to be able to message you and forget about everything else. How was your day?

I’m not the only one up late. Likely, he’s on the West Coast where it’s barely midnight. Not in this part of Texas. Only a crazy person makes her ex’s favorite cookies in the middle of the night.

I mix cookie dough, thinking about the internet stranger that I’ve spent so

much time messaging these last few months. Admittedly, when he sent me that first note, I only answered because his username reminded me of Archer.

But Archer wasn't—and the last time I looked still isn't—a social media kind of guy. He isn't on Facebook or Instagram. I didn't even bother looking on TikTok. And the thought of him on Reddit makes me laugh.

Crocheting-Cowboy is funny. And I've found myself reaching for the phone a lot more often just to see if he's messaged. We agreed in the beginning that we wouldn't share personal information that could be used to identify us, but I imagine he knows I'm on the younger side because our first interaction was when he responded to my post about my regret over a bad choice. It wouldn't have taken Sherlock to figure out I was talking about a breakup.

In the post, I didn't give the internet details about my age or why I made the bad choice. If I can't tell Archer, there is no way I'm telling a server full of strangers, but posting about it in vague terms was a way for me to yell into the void. I sort of hoped I'd hurt less after letting go a bit. That's not the case.

Layla isn't a fan of my new messaging buddy because she says I'm using him as a crutch to continue avoiding Archer. That's not true now.

After sliding the first batch of cookies into the oven, I type out a message.

Regretful-Raccoon: Maybe it's the cold weather that's making the world go crazy, but it's been a bit nuts here as well. So I'm baking cookies. Because that's what you do in the middle of the night, right?

I hit send and then realize my mistake. Giving away my approximate time zone doesn't narrow it down much, but it's a reminder to be careful. I'm tired, and it would be easy to slip up and tell him something that would lead him right to my front door.

And if his intentions were bad, I'd have no one to protect me except Archer. And I'm not his favorite person.

I don't wait long for a reply.

Crocheting-Cowboy: Cookies? Yum! What kind?

Regretful-Raccoon: Toffee. Someone I know really likes them. And I like them too, of course. But he's the reason I'm making them.

It's an hour before he responds.

Crocheting-Cowboy: I hope your cookies turn out great.

I continue baking for the rest of the night.

Fifteen minutes before people are set to arrive to help me, I pack the cookies into containers. I have several dozen for the guys helping and another container set aside for Archer. Hopefully six dozen cookies are enough of a peace offering.

I look like I've been dragged by a truck over a dirt road. Except the dust is flour. I wash my face and tie my hair into a messy bun. Some women have a knack for twisting their hair into a perfectly tousled knot. Sadly, I lack that talent. My messy bun looks like rats moved in and created a nest atop my head. But that's not fixable right now.

My only goal for the next few hours is to get everything loaded and unloaded. I just need to stay upright until all my stuff is moved. Then I can collapse.

Wait. That's not true. After the move, I need to come back here and clean, which will take even longer than I anticipated because I made a complete mess of the kitchen. Dang it. Why do I make life harder on myself?

I take a deep breath when someone knocks. There is zero chance it's Archer, but I'm still nervous.

Dag grins when I open the door. "The muscle is here. And Goldie too." He leans in and pretends to whisper, but he's looking over his shoulder at her the whole time. "She's stronger than she looks."

Layla updated me on Dag's relationship with Goldie, and they're just as cute in person as they are in the stories I've heard.

I tuck a few stray hairs behind my ear. "I appreciate the help. So much."

"Of course. Tyler and Dallas will be here soon. I think we can handle it. The other guys were . . . busy."

Goldie, who I am just meeting for the first time, walks up and extends her hand. "Nice to meet you. I'm Goldie."

I've heard all about her. And she's just as nice as people described.

Dag bumps her shoulder. "This may surprise you, but I think I made things awkward. I said the other guys were busy, but she totally knows they're helping you-know-who." He looks from Goldie to me. "Sorry."

Goldie shakes her head, an amused smile on her lips. "Dag—"

I wave off his apology. "Don't be sorry. I'm glad people are helping Archer move. Really."

“Oh, good.” He grins. “And just so you know. He acts like he hates you, but I’m pretty sure he doesn’t. But that’s just me spouting off.”

Goldie jabs him in the ribs.

“What? I’m just making conversation.” He shrugs. “Plus, she needs to know. Because I didn’t. Until I did. And I’m not talking about Archer.”

Goldie loops her arms around his. “I know what you mean, sweetheart.”

Nico and Layla pull up, and I wave. Now we can get started actually moving. Right now, standing still is a dangerous idea. If I fall asleep while upright, I’ll definitely break some part of me when I fall over. And a broken heart is bad enough.

Thanks to all the alone time I’ve had, all my boxes are labeled. The first few are labeled with what’s inside. But after that, I just wrote the room where the box should go.

Goldie nods to the three kitchen boxes I tore open last night. “Want me to repack those?”

“I have to clean the pans and dishes first. It was dumb, but last night I decided to bake cookies.”

Dag shakes his head. “Cookies aren’t dumb. Ever.”

Layla laughs and beelines to the kitchen. “I’ll clean everything, and Goldie can help me pack it all back up.”

Soon, they’re all busy cleaning and moving boxes, and I’m trying my best to be helpful and not be in the way.

By the time the trucks are loaded and we’re headed to the new place, my exhaustion is gone, replaced with a mix of terror and anticipation.

When I park outside my new place, Archer is standing in the same spot on the porch as he was the other day. I run up to him as the guys back their trucks up close to the house.

“Hey. Did you get moved in?”

He nods. “I did. Need help unloading?”

“I don’t expect you to carry my stuff. I’m just hoping that things between us will be neighborly. Maybe.” I search his face, hoping for a glimpse of the tenderness I used to see.

With an accusatory stare, he bores holes into my soul. “Why did you end things?”

Truck doors slam, and any minute someone will come walking up.

As much as I want to tell Archer everything, I can’t. I’d rather he be upset with me. If I explained that I left because of what his grandmother said to me,

it would crush him. And I refuse to do that.

I squeeze my eyes closed, hoping Goldie and Layla will hold the other guys back another few seconds. “I can’t talk about it, Archer. Please can we just start over from today?”

“Start over?” Disdain drips from his words.

“As friends or just neighbors. Please.” I feel raw, exposed, and fat. “I’m not even expecting you to forgive me for the way I ended things, but I can’t talk about it.”

Silently, he studies my face before brushing past me and marching toward the trucks. “Her place is on the left. We should probably start with the couch. At least there aren’t any stairs.”

Layla rushes up to me and winks. “This is totally like that movie. Only different. Instead of *The Parent Trap*, it’s *The Boyfriend Trap*.”

“I don’t want to trap him.”

“Figure of speech. Trap, nab, get. Call it what you want, but it’s easy to see that you want him. And it’s soooo obvious that he wants you too. But it might take him a while to figure that out.”

“Thanks, Little Miss Sunshine.”

“Just wait and see. I’m right about this.” She pushes open the door and whistles. “This place is great. Bigger than the apartment. And looky at the door that connects the two units. You don’t even have to walk outside to say hello.”

I must’ve been seriously distracted when I toured the other day because I didn’t notice a door. Or maybe Layla is just pulling my leg.

Curious, I hurry inside. There is indeed an adjoining door.

# CHAPTER 6



## ARCHER

As soon as everyone climbs into their trucks, I shut myself into my house. This is where the weird starts.

Footsteps sound on the porch, and it isn't hard to guess who's knocking at my door.

My grandmother didn't raise me to be rude, so I open it.

On the ground, there is a plastic container with a sticky note on the top that reads *For my new neighbor*.

I spent the wee hours of the morning convincing myself that it was a crazy coincidence that Regretful-Racoon was baking my favorite cookies, but this container proves I was wrong.

When I lean down to pick up the cookies, her door closes.

After retreating back inside, I pop open the lid and grab one of my favorites. I haven't had one of these in a long time. Lettie always was good at baking. It's not a surprise she ended up working at a place like Sweets. What's surprising is that she ended up here. Where I live. It can't be an accident.

Munching a cookie, I slide my phone out of my pocket. Lettie is Regretful-Raccoon. After reading through our Reddit messages, I unblock Lettie. It doesn't make sense to keep my neighbor blocked. That wouldn't be very friendly.

Staring at the adjoining door, I bite into another toffee cookie, listening as Lettie drags furniture around. It feels wrong not to offer help, but my feet refuse to move.

I'm still trying to process that I've spent the last few months getting over Lettie by talking to Lettie. How, out of all the people in the world, did I end

up messaging her? The story she posted didn't even mention that she broke up with someone. Just that she made a decision she regrets.

I pick up a third cookie and continue to stare at the door.

She cries out in pain, and I'm spurred into motion. Instead of walking out to the porch, I set the cookies on the table, then unlock the bolt and open my side of the adjoining door. Just like connected rooms in a hotel, there is a door on each side, and my side of her door doesn't have a knob. Besides, it's probably bolted.

So I knock.

After a few beats of silence, she calls out, "Coming. Just give me a sec."

"Are you okay?"

"Mostly, but I need to put on . . ." She must've changed her mind about finishing that sentence, which leaves me with a giant question.

What is it that she doesn't have on?

"Okay." Leaning on the doorframe, I listen for footsteps.

"I'll only be a minute." She's just on the other side of the door, then hurries away.

And for nearly a whole minute I try not to think about what she doesn't have on.

She calls out again. "Coming."

The bolt on her door clicks, and the door swings open. Lettie smiles, but the hesitation in her eyes tugs at my heart. It was never like this. We were friends before we dated, and talking to her was as much a part of my day as breathing.

Her brow furrows. "I'm sorry if I'm making too much noise. I was trying to move the couch and dragged it right over my toe."

The wires between my mouth and my brain finally connect, and I say, "Ouch. Where do you want it? I can move it."

The woman baked me cookies. I can at least be polite and gentlemanly.

She backs up. "Thanks, but I'm not sure where I want it. I'm seeing how it feels in different spots." She leans around me and looks into my living room. "Where did you put yours? The floorplan is flipped, right?"

"Yeah. And I left the couch where the guys put it down. In front of the TV." I've given zero thought to where furniture should go. Whoever put it down made that decision.

"Of course. Makes perfect sense." The apples of her cheeks rise as she smiles. "I won't turn down help if you're willing."



I nod. “Thanks for the cookies. They’re as good as I remember.”

She glances down at her bleeding toe, and it’s obvious her comment earlier wasn’t about a bandage. “I couldn’t sleep and figured that maybe cookies would make you hate me less.”

The words sting. I rub the back of my neck. “It’s working.”

I’m not ready to pick up where we left off. Dating her is out of the question, but hating people isn’t in my nature.

Besides, Lettie got me through the hardest, darkest time of my life. And for that, I’ll always be grateful. But it’s also what made the breakup so difficult to accept. She was my safe place. Until she wasn’t.

“You probably need to put something on that.” I nod to her toe.

“Yeah. I’ll do that. I just . . .” She spins around, looking at the stacks of boxes. “I’m not sure where the bathroom box ended up.”

I walk down the hall and poke my head into the half bath. “In here. At least I’m guessing the box labeled bathroom is the one you’re looking for.”

“Thank you.”

I rush out of the hall as she gets closer. The space is much too small, and there is zero chance she’d walk past without brushing against me. I am not mentally prepared for that. I might never be. “Take your time. I’m going to grab another cookie.”

Cookies are just my excuse to get away from her. Living here is going to be harder than I thought. Because not only is Lettie my neighbor, she’s also the person I’ve been chatting with for months, and I’m the only one who knows.

I’m not even sure what I’ll say when she messages next.

Standing in the adjoining doorway, I wait, trying not to drop crumbs on her side of the door.

“Okay. I slapped a bandage on my toe. I’m good now.” She stops on the other side of the living room and smiles as I take another bite. “Thanks for offering to move my furniture. If you’ve changed your mind now that you know I don’t have a plan, I get it. My feelings won’t be hurt.”

For years, I thought I hated her, but being around her has made it clear to me that I don’t. I can’t. But the hurt feels fresh. I’m struggling with how to navigate my feelings.

And I’ve never been good at keeping a poker face.

She tugs on a lock of hair that’s fallen out of her bun. “I’m sorry, Archer. I’m sorry for hiding for so long. I’m sorry you were forced to be my

neighbor, but mostly I'm sorry I hurt you."

I'm not really ready to talk about any of that unless she wants to tell me why she walked away, and she already told me that she can't talk about it. So I shrug. "Where do you want to try the couch first?"

She studies the room. She's changed in the years since I last saw her. She's curvier now, which I'm finding quite attractive.

I don't realize I'm staring until she crosses her arms and clears her throat. "You didn't hear any of that, did you?"

"Nope. I was thinking about something else." It's best not to tell her I was mentally comparing her old body to her new one. And comparing isn't even the right word. I was just appreciating how she looks now.

If our meeting yesterday had been the first time meeting Lettie, I'd be working up the nerve to ask her out. I'm not like Tyler and Dag, confident enough to just walk up to a woman and ask her out. Not that they're doing that anymore because both those guys have found their special someones.

"Maybe you should tell me again." I make eye contact with her, refusing to let my gaze wander.

She points to the wall and explains where she wants the TV stand and the couch. And I shove them into place without breaking a sweat.

Then I head back to the door and wait while she walks through the space. This doorway is like the safe spot in a game of tag. It feels safe because I'm only one step away from shutting myself away from her.

She sighs and puts her hands on her hips, which, of course, draws my focus there. "I'm not sure. With the TV there, it might get glare from the window. What do you think?"

I tear my gaze away from her curves. "I think you shouldn't move the couch without shoes on. And I think you could hang curtains if the sun makes it hard to see the TV."

"Are you saying that just because you don't want to move the couch again?" Her dark eyes focus on me, a friendly tease dancing in them.

Falling back into the way we used to banter comes naturally. "I don't even want to *think* about the couch again."

She laughs, and I reach back into my house and grab two cookies. "Want one?"

She shakes her head. "I'm avoiding sweets right now."

"So you bake dozens of cookies? How does that make sense?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I baked." She starts shoving the couch toward the

other wall. “And I didn’t want you to hate me.”

“And cookies are the remedy?”

She drops down onto the sofa. “Do you . . . hate me?”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I resist the urge to take one step backward and close the door. “I don’t, Lettie. But seeing you and then seeing you again has been a lot. It’s dredged up a ton of hurt.”

Wiping her eyes, she nods. “This isn’t the way I imagined us meeting up again.”

“Yeah. We’re a bolted door away from being roommates. But I don’t hate you. The cookies are just too good.” I’m an adult, and being a perpetual grump to her so that I can remind her that she broke my heart is dumb. And pointless. It would result in both of us being unhappy.

She springs up and goes back to shoving. “I think if I move the couch over there, it’ll be better.”

I grab the other end of the sofa and help her shift it into place.

She nods. “I like this. We can shift the television over a tad, and it’ll be perfect.”

“We?” I chuckle as I move the TV cabinet. “Is that where you want it?”

“Perfect. Don’t you think?”

“Oh! Much better. When I get sick of my arrangement, I’ll have you over to move my stuff around.”

“Now you’re just making fun of me.”

I retreat back to my safe spot. “I wasn’t trying to make fun. I was trying to—you know—start over.”

Hope explodes in her dark eyes.

And I rush to correct the misunderstanding. “Just as neighbors.”

# CHAPTER 7



## LETTIE

Sleeping isn't easy with Archer on the other side of the wall. Most days I have to be out of bed at three in the morning to be at work by four, which means I'll be running on fumes tomorrow. But eventually I'll figure out how to sleep knowing Archer is on the other side of the wall. My body will shut down and force me to crash.

Since I spent last night baking cookies instead of sleeping, I'm exhausted. But that doesn't change the fact that I'm staring at the ceiling. I'd get up and bake like I did last night, but Archer would hear me. Probably. The walls are insulated, but I hear him sometimes. And in the silence of the night, he'd definitely hear an oven timer.

So I pick up my phone and type out a note to my Reddit pen pal. It's dangerous to send messages when I'm sleep deprived, but I spew out a message anyway.

Regretful-Raccoon: When I posted about something I regret, I was talking about breaking up with my boyfriend. It probably wasn't hard to figure that out. But anyway, I saw my ex. It was unexpected and didn't go well. And I'm writing to ask you a question. Reading between the lines of some of your messages, I gather that someone broke your heart. So I want to know, is there any scenario where you'd forgive her and consider giving the relationship another chance? I convinced myself that when I saw my ex I'd realize that my heart had moved on. But nope. Seeing him again made my heart flutter like the first time he kissed me. And he's changed. For the better. The lanky guy I loved in high school has filled out and become a man. An incredibly hot man. Sorry that's probably TMI. And I'm not even sure why I'm telling you that part. I'll probably delete this whole thing right after I send it. Which is dumb, but whatever. I can't even sleep because I just keep thinking about him. Anyway, if you see this, let me know if you'd give your ex a chance. Or maybe tell me only if the answer is yes. I just want a sliver of hope that maybe we can get back together. By we, I mean my ex and I, but you probably gathered that. Now I'm just rambling. Bye.

I hit send and read the message again. Crocheting-Cowboy won't see this message until morning, and while he hasn't talked about his breakup, I can tell it hurt him. But maybe I don't want to hear his response. And if he doesn't message me back after that text vomit, I'll assume he won't give her another chance, and that will just make me sad.

The bed creaks on the other side of the wall, and I freeze. Is Archer awake? Or was he just rolling over? Footsteps confirm that he wasn't just moving around in bed. He's up.

I stay as still as possible, listening. Any movement risks making noise, so I stare at the message, waiting to delete it until he's back to sleep.

But I'm not sure how I'll know when he's back to sleep. Unless he snores loudly.

After a few minutes and another spurt of bed creaks, everything quiets. And I finally delete the message I should never have sent in the first place. Crocheting-Cowboy will see that a message was deleted, but I'll worry about that if he brings it up.

Right now, I should just be happy that Archer and I are on friendly—excuse me, neighborly—terms. That's more than I expected. But he made it clear with his just-as-neighbors bit that there is no chance of anything more. That isn't a surprise. Because not only did I hurt him, but I also ballooned. I'm not the twig he dated in high school.

He's gotten better looking, and I've gotten fat.

\* \* \*

Turns out my body can't make it two nights without sleep. My three-a.m. alarm wakes me, and I lunge for my phone. I don't want to wake Archer at this ungodly hour. After turning off the alarm, I slide out of bed and tiptoe through the house. Being extra quiet, I rush through my morning routine, then head to work.

There is something therapeutic about being alone in the kitchen making donuts before sunrise. Country music plays from my portable speaker, and my mind wanders while my hands are busy.

I knew from the beginning that moving here was a risk. But I had nothing to lose. When my dear mother threw me out, I decided to leave my hometown for good. Life after my dad died was only tolerable because of Archer. So the years after he left town were miserable.

For the longest time, I made excuses for my mom. She was never the same after Dad's death, and I let her use grief as an excuse for many inexcusable things. But that ended when Archer's grandmother died and I saw him at the funeral. The man I loved wouldn't even look at me.

That's when I realized that I'd sacrificed for people who didn't even care about me, let alone love me. I scrimped and saved, forming a plan for setting out on my own, which was derailed thanks to my mom throwing me out. But I made things work.

Meeting Layla helped. Rooming with her connected me to Tessa and this new job, which has been a godsend, and not just because of the money.

For the first time in years, I feel connected to people. Accepted.

I haven't felt that since Archer.

Layla hurries in before opening and grins. "I want all the details. Have y'all talked? Kissed and made up?" She flexes her arm, showing off toned muscles. "If he's being mean, I'll have a conversation with him. 'Cause I've been working out with Nico."

"You've been working out with Nico since forever. And no matter what you say, I'm convinced it started because you wanted to see him without a shirt on."

She rolls her eyes. "No. That's not why. I wanted to learn self-defense.

But the man looks fantastic without a shirt. And I tell him so often.” She dances her eyebrows. “He taught me all kinds of self-defense moves. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind helping you if you want to learn. I mean, it will be a little different than my lessons because I’m married to him, but you know.”

“I have my own self-defense plan. I eat tacos and donuts so that I’m too heavy to be dragged away.” I slap my hip. “All this has nothing to do with eating my feelings.”

She shakes her head. “Offer stands. And now that you and Archer are friends again, maybe it’ll be easier.”

“Friends is stretching it. We’re neighbors. He made that clear.” I slide a tray of donuts into the glass case. “But it’s better than him hating me. So I’ll take it.”

My phone buzzes and I slide it out of my back pocket. No one calls me this early. Except apparently my mom. I haven’t spoken to her in almost a year. I decline the call and get back to work.

If it’s important, she’ll leave a message.

Layla claps. “We need to hurry. There will be a rush of fireman and cowboys in here any minute, and that case is half empty.”

“You make coffee, and I’ll finish up here. No coffee makes for grumpy customers.”

She laughs. “No coffee makes for a grumpy me.”

Never once have I seen Layla grumpy. It’s a wonder we get along so well.



# CHAPTER 8



## ARCHER

*I*t's been two days since Regretful-Raccoon sent and then deleted her message, but she hasn't messaged since. And I'm not about to start a new conversation.

I have a few minutes until I need to head over to the mess hall, so I grab my mug of coffee—the single-cup coffeemaker was a great investment—and step out to the back porch. Lettie starts making donuts really early, so I'm not worried about bumping into her out here.

Leaning on the rail, I stare out as the morning light spills golden hues on the hills around us. Birds are chattering with glee about the morning or maybe complaining. It's hard to tell. As the world wakes up around me, I sip my coffee.

I freeze when a door opens behind me. Staring at the longhorns, I sense Lettie but don't see her until she's beside me.

“Good morning.” Her voice is quiet, like she's trying not to disturb the wildlife.

“I'm surprised you're here. Figured you'd be at work making donuts.” My full sentences hopefully sound neighborly.

“The donut shop is closed on Mondays.” She backs up a step. “I'll leave you alone and let you drink your coffee. Sorry to bother you.”

“You can stay. I'm not going to chase you off the porch. You live here too. I just wasn't expecting you to be here.” I swallow down a gulp of coffee, wishing it would wash away the sour taste in my mouth.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her reach for me but then pull her hand back. “I don't want to make life harder on you. I'm truly sorry about how all this ended up.”

“I’m fine.”

She wraps a strand of hair around her finger. “You look good. Cowboying seems to agree with you.”

Every single word of her message comes flooding back. And my ego swells a bit.

“Thanks. I like it. This is a great place to work.” I finally turn and look at her. “Want some coffee? I can make you a cup.”

She shakes her head. “I’m good.”

For a couple of minutes, only the birds are talking.

“Are you hungry? I can make us breakfast.” Hope is etched on her face, which is my cue to skedaddle.

After downing the last of my coffee, I shake my head. “I’ll eat in the mess hall. Ava cooks for all of us.”

“That’s nice. Do y’all eat around one big table? Like in the movies?”

“Yeah. Long wooden table with benches on each side. Makes it feel like family.”

Her hair is longer now than when we broke up. And she has it pulled up like the day we moved. It’s all I can do to keep from reaching for one of the loose strands. I know from experience how silky it is.

She must read my mind because she tucks the strands behind her ear. “I’m happy you found a family, Archer. You deserve that.”

“Thanks. Listen, I should probably go.”

When the wind gusts, she crosses her arms. “Thanks for chatting with me.”

“Sure thing.” I slip inside, hoping that between here and the ranch I can shove aside thoughts of Lettie.

I wanted to clear my head while having coffee, but instead the opposite happened. The woman is a perpetual distraction.

How in the world am I going to get used to living next to her?

\* \* \*

HEAD still under the tractor’s hood, I shout, “Start it.”

“Don’t!” Grayson startles all of us with his order. The guy barely talks, and he never gives orders.

“What?” I am in no mood for nonsense.

“Get your arm out of the engine.” Motioning for me to follow, he walks to the far corner.

I’m a bit shaken by how close I came to serious injury. Rubbing the back of my neck, I say, “Thanks.”

“Everything okay? You’re usually the safest one out here.” His voice is low.

Grayson and I have a bit of history. We grew up in the same small town and went to high school together. He knows Lettie, and if he knows she’s living here, he hasn’t mentioned it. Since he was busy with his wife Daisy on move day, he didn’t see Lettie. And I’d rather not bring it up.

“Just tired after the move, and I haven’t slept well the last few nights. Adjusting to the new place, I guess.” I haven’t slept well since seeing Lettie at the donut shop, but I don’t want to explain all that to Grayson. I also don’t want to tell him that I can still smell her shampoo from when she was standing next to me early this morning.

His brow furrows, and he opens his mouth but then closes it again. He walks back to the tractor and takes over my spot. “Fire it up, Tyler.”

After standing awkwardly in the corner for a couple of seconds, I check my phone. It’s only a ruse so that I can leave without making a scene. “Since y’all have this, I’m going to go check in with Clint.”

“Sounds good.” Tyler waves.

Grayson nods.

And I beeline out of there.

Outside, I stop and breathe in the cold air. The bright sunlight penetrates my haze, and I climb into my truck.

Clint’s truck isn’t at the main house, so I drive to the horse barn. Even if Clint isn’t there, Parker always seems to know where to find people. And worse case, I can text Clint. But he isn’t always the fastest to respond. We joke that if we need him right away, we get his wife, Joji, to shoot him a message. Her texts must have a different chime.

Parker’s truck is outside the barn, but he isn’t inside.

As I’m about to leave, Anderson strolls in through a side door, whistling. “Hey, Archer. What’s up?”

“Just stopped in to see if y’all know where I can find Clint.” I glance at the bench but don’t sit because I might fall asleep after two heartbeats.

Anderson shoves his hands in his pockets. “He and Beau are out working on a windmill or something. Parker is out riding one of the new horses. If you

have the time, you could help me feed the horses.”

“Sure.”

He picks up a bucket and tosses it to me. “I heard you moved.”

“To the other side of the ranch. Not far.”

“Cool.” Anderson ducks as he walks into a stall. The man is tall.

He’s the newest of the ranch hands. Technically, he’s a wrangler, but he’s always willing to pitch in wherever, which we all appreciate.

He takes one side of the barn, and I handle the other. After a few minutes of quiet, I decide to risk a conversation.

“You seeing anyone?”

He shakes his head. “I wish. I spent the last ten years raising my sister, so dating wasn’t even on my radar. She just started college, which is why I moved here. She’s in San Antonio, so I found a job close but not too close. But I’m hoping I’ll meet someone.” He swings a stall door closed. “You?”

“Not since my ex dumped me years ago. I was finally feeling ready to get back out there, and she shows up here in town.”

“Ooof. On purpose?”

“Guessing so. She moved here at some point. We just hadn’t bumped into each other.”

“Crazy. But I guess with all the recent growth, you don’t know everyone anymore.”

“And I stick pretty close to the ranch.”

“I’ve noticed that. So you rekindling things? Or did it end badly?”

“The breakup was abrupt and unexplained. Not sure I’d risk a relationship again. But the fun part is that she’s living on the other side of the duplex. At my new place.”

“Whoa. That’s complicated.”

“Yeah. I haven’t said anything to the other guys about my history with her. Dag and Grayson know, but...” I shrug.

Anderson gives a conspiratorial smile. “And I don’t tell many people that I raised my sister. It sometimes makes things awkward.”

“I avoid awkward whenever I can.” I refill the bucket and finish up my side. Then I dust off my hands. “Thanks for letting me yap.”

“Anytime. And I’m guessing you’ll figure it out. Someone once told me not to chase love, but to let love find me. Maybe your new neighbor is more than an ex-girlfriend. Maybe she’s your meant-to-be.”

Once upon a time, I thought she was. I never expected her to be an ex.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” That’s my polite way of saying that there’s no way that’s true.

But his words remind me of Lettie’s message. The one she unsent. I have a screenshot, but I’ve read it so many times, I could probably quote it.

When my phone buzzes, I check it and read a text from Dag. Then I shout to Anderson, who is in the tack room. “I’m going to head out. Dag needs help clearing brush along the fences.”

“Have a good one. And thanks for the helping hand.”

I hadn’t intended to share any of my situation with Anderson, but having someone to talk to—someone who isn’t riding cloud nine after getting engaged—feels pretty good.

\* \* \*

TWO WEEKS LATER, I know Lettie’s schedule pretty well. She works a really early shift at the donut shop, then is home by the time I get back after dinner. Every day except Monday. Then she’s home all day. Leaving for work before four most mornings means her side gets really quiet about seven in the evening.

We don’t see each other often, but when we do, I’m polite. Ignoring her seems immature. I haven’t stepped out to the back porch since that Monday morning. But I miss her. And knowing she’s so close but not talking to her is hard.

Thankfully, after a few rough days, I started sleeping at night, which is good. Safer. I still spend a lot of mental energy thinking about Lettie. That hasn’t changed a bit in the last two weeks.

After dinner, I head back home, and the first thing I do is take a shower, then stretch out on the bed. Lettie’s phone rings on the other side of the wall, and that reminds me to tuck my phone under my pillow. If my phone had been on a table when she messaged that night, she might’ve heard the buzz. So I’m intentional about laying my phone on soft surfaces.

Her phone rings several times before stopping, but I know she’s home. I’m spending way too much energy guessing her movements and motivations. But then I expend more energy and read over the message she sent then deleted. It was nice of her to mention that she’d likely delete it. Because as soon as I read that, I snapped a screenshot of the message.

Reading through our messages on the app has been my nightly habit since we moved in. I keep looking for clues to her identity, questioning why I didn't realize it was her sooner.

Tonight, I'm just reading the most recent message, thinking about what Anderson said and wondering how I would've answered had she not deleted it. Is there any scenario where I'd give her—by extension us—another chance? Not knowing why things ended makes me hesitant to open my heart to her again. But the attraction is still there.

Shoot. I'm more attracted now than back in high school. But it takes more than attraction for couples to get a happily ever after. However, focusing on where the relationship might end up feels like chasing something.

In the years we've been apart, we've both changed. My energy should be on getting to know this new Lettie. And allowing her to get to know me. In a friendly way. While some things about me haven't changed and never will, like my scars, other things have changed. More than just my manly physique.

Grinning, I read that part of the message again. Then skip back up to the part where she talks about the flutters and our first kiss.

I close my eyes, and instantly I'm that lanky kid again, and I'm walking Lettie home. We'd been friends for years, and that night, I reached for her hand as we walked back from the school dance. She'd smiled when our fingers touched.

With each step, my confidence grew. Then we made it to her front door.

Her mom was at work, which meant no one would be peeking out the window. After unlocking the door, Lettie waited to open it. For a full second, she stared up at me, smiling.

And I took a chance and leaned in for a goodnight kiss.

When she kissed me back, my heart felt like it was going to explode. Everything was perfect. For years, it stayed that way. We did at least. The rest of life was still kind of rocky. Especially for her.

But then the night after graduation, she broke up with me. And it crushed me. She was supposed to be my forever.

A loud crash snaps me back to the present, and I jump up. There's an intermittent banging on her side, and Lettie lets loose an explicative, a word I've never heard leave her lips.

I yank on a shirt and knock at the adjoining door. "What's going on?"

The bolt flips, and Lettie swings the door open. There's a cookie sheet over her head, and she's hunched down.

Lettie is one of those people who are tough and can take care of themselves no matter the circumstance. So the look of panic on her face shocks me.

She points into the kitchen. “I went out to the back porch because it’s nice out, and then one of those big, awful tree roaches crawled in. I tried to stomp it, but it took flight.” After a glance around the room, she continues. “I will bake you an infinite number of cookies if you get it for me.”

Laughing, I walk back toward my couch.

“Don’t leave me. Archer, please.” She follows me in, then closes the door. “Or we could switch sides. The sheets on my bed are really soft.”

“Since when are you afraid of anything? And I wasn’t leaving you. I was getting a shoe and this.” I hold up a tennis ball. “In case it lands somewhere up high.”

“Did you know they could fly? It’s got like a four-inch wingspan. That’s nightmarish. Seriously.”

I can’t argue that point. Once—or maybe twice—I’ve almost hit the deck when one flew in my direction. “Where is it?”

“On the wall next to the fridge. Up high.”

Before opening the door, I look over my shoulder. “If you want, you can wait here.”

She drops onto the couch. “I owe you.” Then she holds out the pan. “Take this. You might need it.”

I take it but refuse to use it as a shield. I’m facing off with a roach, not a wolverine.

As I swing the door closed behind me, she shouts, “Good luck.”

That must’ve sounded like a battle cry to the beastly critter because it comes out of nowhere and divebombs my head. And I hit the floor. Good thing that door is closed so Lettie didn’t see.

I’ve faced down angry bulls, maneuvered calves in need of medical attention away from protective mamas, and dealt with more fire ants than I can count. But these roaches are worse. Between the barb-looking things on their creepy legs and the fact that even the barn cats will only kill tree roaches but not eat them, it confirms that roaches are vile.

After a quick scan, I spot the dark brown demon insect on the wall above the television. This may not end quickly. And I need to be strategic. Keeping one eye on the bug, I close all the doors in the hallway. And I start with Lettie’s bedroom. As curious as I am, I don’t take time to peek. I just need



her room blocked off because if the roach ends up MIA in her room, I cannot offer her the other bedroom in my place as there is no bed in there. And the two of us sharing my bed is out of the question.

Needing to think about something other than Lettie in my bed, I stare at the roach. “Okay, buddy. This is how it’s going to go. You are going to come down here, and I’m going to end your life. That is the way it will end. Whether this is a quick death or a long drawn-out ordeal is up to you.”

“Who are you talking to?” Lettie has the door open a crack.

“The roach.” I raise my arm to toss the ball, and the door slams.

The tennis ball bounces off the wall, only an inch away from the target. Then I scramble to catch the ball but shift my focus as the bug takes flight. Again.

I’ll find the ball later.

The roach flies at me, but this time I’m prepared. I swing the cookie sheet, and it connects with the crunchy exoskeleton in midair. When the roach hits the ground, I slap it with a shoe repeatedly until the little legs are no longer twitching.

Then I grab a paper towel and walk the remains outside just in case it somehow revives itself.

When I walk back in, Lettie is standing in her living room. “You released it?”

“It’s dead, but I didn’t figure you wanted any roaches inside, dead or alive.” I hand over the cookie sheet. “And I’ll get you a new one of these because I used this to end that thing.”

Nodding, she steps toward me, then stops. “I was going to hug you, but I guess I won’t. I really appreciate you saving me from that thing. I thought I could handle anything, but not flying roaches apparently. You are much braver than I am.” She crosses her arms. “I want to show my gratitude for your help. That was why I wanted to hug you. But . . .” She tugs at the end of a strand of hair. “And I know I said cookies, but maybe I could make you dinner on Sunday. If you want.”

Looking at her, I see the skinny kid who sat down next to me and told me that crying was totally allowed after losing my parents. She knew because she’d lost her dad. And I recall the months of messages with Regretful-Raccoon, who for reasons I know now was just as warmhearted as Lettie.

“Sure.” I drop my shoe onto my side of the duplex. It would be inconvenient to leave it here accidentally. “I’d like that.”

“Just dinner or both?”

Her hopeful gaze does funny things to my insides, and I answer without giving the consequences much thought. “Both.”

Grinning, she closes the distance, and for the first time in years, I’m holding her in my arms again. This feels too right. I’ve missed her more than I can put into words.

Maybe we’re more than neighbors. But until I know why she ended things, friends is as far as it can go.

# CHAPTER 9



## LETTIE

I think I know how the contestants on the Bachelor feel when they're getting ready for their big one-on-one date. This is my one shot to impress Archer, and I've spent days stressing about what to make.

In the years since we've been apart, I've learned how to cook. Baking was always something I loved, but now I can make very tasty dinners. Deciding between an elaborate fancy dinner and a simple meal he always loved was tough. I went with the simple dinner. But I made it a tad more complicated. Instead of store-bought chicken strips, I'm breading and frying my own. Making everything from scratch will hopefully impress him, and remembering his favorite meal will hopefully let him see how much I still care.

After whipping the mashed potatoes, I drop corn on the cob into hot water and stir the gravy. While those are doing their thing, I'll fry the chicken. I wipe my hands on my apron, then drop a breadcrumb into the oil to make sure it's hot enough. The sizzle lets me know the temp is perfect. I lower the first batch of tenders into the oil, then set the table.

I flip the chicken, and when a truck door slams, I peek out the window.

Archer's home. The first thing he always does after getting home is take a shower. I know because I can hear when the water is running in the pipes. And I expect today will be no different.

My phone rings, and assuming it's Archer, I swipe to answer without checking to see who's calling.

"Finally. Why are you ignoring my calls? You need to come home. My hours were cut back, and I need your help to cover bills."

Conveniently, she doesn't mention Wes. He's probably spending all his

time playing video games and drinking.

I should've looked at the screen before answering because I don't want to deal with her now. Or ever. "I'm not moving back, Mom."

She responds with a slurred string of obscenities. Clearly, not much has changed with her.

With the phone away from my ear, I wait until she finishes her tirade. "You can look for a roommate or maybe Wes can get a job, but I'm happy where I am. I like living here." It's the most I've said to my mom in a year.

"Your father would be ashamed of the way you're treating your mother."

The line goes dead, and I clench my jaw, willing tears not to fall. I'm not much of a crier, but mentioning my dad is guaranteed to get me emotional.

Blinking, I realize my eyes are burning not because of the mention of my father but because my house is filling with smoke.

Frying chicken and having a difficult conversation do not go well together.

I lift the overdone chicken out of the oil, open the kitchen window, then wave a dish towel around, trying to clear the air. But my efforts don't make much of a difference.

Archer will be out of the shower any minute, so I put the next batch of chicken in and set a timer. I'll definitely be checking my phone before answering from now on. I'm sad that Mom doesn't care to know how I am, but at the same time, I'm relieved to be away from her.

I will no longer let anyone guilt me into doing things I'd rather not do. Granted, guilt was a big part of the reason I baked Archer all those cookies, but hope was mingled in there too.

I'm clinging to that same hope—that I can get to his heart through his stomach—as I pull chicken out of the pan. When Archer knocks, smoke still hangs in the air. So much for impressing him tonight.

After a deep breath and then coughing, I open the adjoining door. "Hey. Mind if we eat at your place? Everything is ready."

He leans in and looks toward the kitchen. "Sure. What do you want me to carry?"

I love that he doesn't ask about the smoke. "I have the corn and chicken on a platter. You can get that. And I'll grab the mashed potatoes and brown gravy."

A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. "I haven't had that in ages."

"I wanted you to see how I've learned to cook, so I made the tenders

myself. They aren't frozen from a bag. But I ended up leaving the first batch in a little too long. That's why there's smoke." I head toward the kitchen.

He follows, then taps my arm. "Is the smoke why your eyes are red?"

I turn to face him, and he studies me with a gaze that makes me feel like he can see into my soul.

"Only part of the reason. But let's start dinner before everything gets cold."

\* \* \*

ARCHER DRAGS a chicken strip through his mashed potatoes, then pours extra gravy over all of it. "This is the best meal I've had in ages, and don't you dare repeat that to anyone. Ava and Goldie are amazing cooks. But this is still my favorite." His gaze meets mine and holds me hostage for several heartbeats. "Thank you."

"I've missed you."

The warmth in his eyes is replaced by hurt. "How long have you lived here in Stadtburg?"

My plan to ease into that conversation just imploded. "A year, give or take."

"And not once did you look me up." He stares down at his plate as he drags another chicken strip through the potatoes.

All my reasons for delaying our meeting seem silly and dumb. "I was afraid you'd hate me. And I wanted to lose some weight." My habit of honesty with Archer isn't playing in my favor. Why did I even mention my weight?

I just pointed a neon arrow at my fat hips and jiggly curves.

"I already said I don't hate you. I wish I knew why you ended things, but I won't force you to tell me." He shoves his empty plate to the side. "You were there for me when my parents died, and I can't forget that. So I'm working on getting over my hurt. We're neighbors and friends. I kill your roaches and move your furniture, and you treat me to my favorite things."

He's nothing like the scared kid I befriended so many years ago. But he's also so much the same.

He rubs the back of his neck, signaling that he's uncomfortable or about to say something he thinks will make the conversation awkward. "Why were

your eyes red?”

“My mom called.”

His eyes narrow. “Is she . . . the same?”

I shrug. “It’s the first time I’ve spoken to her in a long while. She threw me out. That’s why I moved to Stadtborg. But she called because she needs help with the rent and wants me to move back. At least that’s what I gathered from her slurred words.”

“But you aren’t, right? Moving, I mean.” Concern swirls in his brown eyes. “You’re staying here.” The last part is a statement not a question.

“I’m not leaving.” Now that I’ve reconnected with Archer, I can’t imagine anything would make me move away from him.

“Does she know where you are?” He falls right back into the protective role he played for so many years, and that stirs up my regret.

I shake my head. “I never told her I moved to be closer to you.”

A grin spreads across his face, and he nods toward the adjoining door. “You achieved that. Closer to me, I mean.”

“I was shocked when I saw you on the porch. Living on opposite sides of that door wasn’t part of a grand plan or anything.”

“Just luck, huh?” The crinkles near his eyes are a giveaway for his teasing.

I stand and pick up the plates. “I like to think so.”

He grabs the other dishes and follows me back to my side. “Smoke is mostly cleared.”

“We could play a game after I’m done with the dishes. I mean, if you want.”

Leaning on the wall, he crosses his arms. “You remember our old Minecraft world?”

“We spent hours mining and building.”

“When we should’ve been studying.”

“Yep. That seems like a lifetime ago.” I rinse the plates and start loading the dishwasher.

He’s quiet for several seconds while I work. Then he walks toward his side. “I’ll connect my old console and see if it still works. If it does, we can do that if you want.”

“That’d be fun.”

I’m not sure who to hug and thank for my ending up living next to Archer, but I’m happier than I’ve been in years. I’ll find a way to be content

with only his friendship. Because I'd rather be close to him like this than apart from him.

A short while later, I walk into Archer's living room. "Your grandmother's couch." I've been here before, but we haven't talked about it.

He nods and hands me a controller. "I guess the outdated floral print gave it away, huh?"

After he sits down at one edge of the couch, I sit on the other. As much as I want to sit right beside him, I'm trying to give him space. I can't expect everything to be like it was just because I made him his favorite meal.

I move my character through the world. "This looks exactly like I remember."

"I haven't been in this world since right after you broke up with me."

The beats of silence that follow are heavy, so I say something that I hope he'll find funny. "You got in and grieved my stuff, didn't you?" I'm laughing but stop when he doesn't say anything.

He shoots me a sideways glance. "I did, but then I felt so awful about doing it that I logged back in and built it all back the way it was. But I threw your diamonds down the waterfall. Sorry about that."

What a gem. Only Archer would take the time to fix everything.

"Archer, I'm sorry. And I don't blame you. I deserved it, and you had no reason to believe I'd ever play this with you again."

"All true. But I'll go down into the mine and see if I can find you more diamonds."

We both go down into the elaborate labyrinth of mine shafts we created long ago and start digging. It's quiet for a bit, the only noises coming from the game.

But then Archer bounces in his seat. "Found some diamonds. And redstone." He's hacking away at the stone, cheering whenever he finds something else. He digs down another level. "Crap!"

I glance at his side of the screen and see his pickaxe, diamonds, and other gemstones strewn on the ground of a large cavern. "You found a cave."

"Grab my stuff before it disappears." His character respawns, and he hurries back to the mine.

Just as I gather the last of his stuff, a creeper approaches, then explodes. And I laugh.

Archer makes it back to the spot in time to get our stuff before it vanishes. "I'm starting to think diamonds are bad luck."



“Maybe we should give up on mining for a while and explore a bit more.”  
I smile when I realize that he’s inched closer to me as we’ve played.

“Good idea. But I want to put this stuff in a chest before I fall again.”

I maneuver my character back to the surface. “I forgot how much fun this could be.”

He flashes me a quick smile, then focuses back on the game. “Yeah.”

\* \* \*

MONDAY AFTERNOON, a knock startles me. I set my laptop and drawing tablet aside and hurry to the door. Layla was by here earlier, and she didn’t mention coming back. It’s too early for Archer to be home. Unless he’s hurt.

I yank open the door.

A gray-haired woman smiles and holds out a book and a box of chocolates. “Hi, Lettie. I help out at the venue some of the time, and Lilith mentioned that you just moved in. So I brought you something.” She taps the book. “This is one of mine. See the guy on the front? He’s not really a cowboy. He’s a fireman who lives here in town.”

I glance down at the cover, where a man is shirtless and has a cowboy hat obscuring his face.

She laughs. “I ask almost all the guys I meet around here if they’ll pose shirtless for my covers. It’s funny to see how they react. Only one has ever said yes.”

Before I can stop the words from tumbling out, I say, “Don’t ask Archer.”

Her focus sharpens, and she’s looking at me with a renewed interest. “I already made that mistake, but it’s interesting that you, his brand-new neighbor knows that he wouldn’t like the question.”

I have royally put my foot in my mouth, which makes it conveniently easy to stay quiet.

“I’ll wager a guess that you didn’t just meet Archer a few days ago. Also, I think you know why he doesn’t want to be seen with his shirt off.”

I’m hoping that the truth will set me free from this conversation. “Archer and I went to high school together. Dated. We’ve known each other a while.”

“You’re his ex?” A bright smile has twinkles dancing in her eyes. “He’s such a nice young man. And I’m sure he’s pleased to have you as a neighbor.” There isn’t a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

“He’s great. And we’re friendly.”

She turns to go but stops before leaving the porch. “The chocolates are just because they taste good, but you can share.” After wiggling her fingers in a cheery wave, she strolls back toward the office.

She never told me her name. But she wrote the book I’m holding.

So I wave and say, “It was nice to meet you, Ms. Cavanaugh.”

After whipping around, she shakes her head. “Don’t call me that. Tandy works just fine.”

Living out here isn’t boring. That’s for sure.

# CHAPTER 10



## ARCHER

While my body is tossing hay, my mind is thinking about Sunday night. Lettie and I played on that Minecraft server for nearly two hours. Her laughter is still echoing in my head days later. Since then, I've been reliving all the best memories from when we were together. But then the struggle of the last few years throws cold water on everything. That's the battle playing out in my head pretty much all the time.

I need to wrangle these runaway emotions. The excitement of seeing her again and spending time with her is at war with the lingering hurt. Is it possible to carve out a friendship but limit the risk of being hurt a second time?

Grayson walks up beside me and gives me a nudge. "Guess who I saw this morning."

"Daisy." My attempt to steer the conversation in a different direction probably won't work, but what's the harm in trying?

He flashes a lopsided grin. "She's the best thing about mornings. But that's not who I meant. Daisy and I went to Sweets and grabbed donuts. You'll never believe who was there."

"Lettie. Bumped into her the other day, and then she moved into the other side of my duplex."

"Whoa." Grayson glances around before speaking again. "Kent once told me that you only get one chance. That's not true. And he'd probably agree with me now considering the way things happened with Poppy. But you and Lettie should talk. She told me that she tried reaching out but you had her number blocked."

"I blocked her years ago. But she's not blocked anymore. That wouldn't

be very neighborly.”

“I’m not gonna pry any more than I already have, but if you want to talk, call me.” He pulls keys out of his pocket. “Y’all had something good once.”

Leave it to Grayson to drop a statement like that before walking away. He’s not wrong. But Lettie and I have both changed.

What hasn’t changed is her amazing laugh. And I’m hoping I can catch her tonight before she turns in. I like spending time with her, and we can’t very well get to know each other without a bit of conversation now and then.

\* \* \*

WITH AVA’S BLESSING, I grab an extra slice of pie as I slip out of the mess hall. Dessert gives me a reason to pop in at Lettie’s and maybe chat with her before she crawls in bed.

I rush home and instead of my normal routine, I skip the shower and knock at her door. After a minute without a response, I walk across the porch to my door. Maybe I didn’t catch her in time. Or she could be in the shower. That is a thought train I don’t need to ride right now.

Inside, I set the desserts on the counter and walk toward the shower. There’s no water running in the pipes, so that wasn’t why she didn’t answer.

After kicking off my boots, I yank off my shirt, then hear a knock.

As I’m pulling open the adjoining door, I remember that I don’t have a shirt on.

My shirt never comes off when I’m around people. Ever. When we have pool parties, I either don’t swim or I wear a shirt made for the water. And I’m fair enough that people assume it’s for sun protection. They don’t need to know about the scars on my back, the forever reminders of the worst day of my life.

Lettie blinks, her focus on my chest. Then her gaze snaps to mine. “Hi.”

“Hey. Come on in. I brought you dessert.” I walk toward my room, not even trying to hide my back. “I’m just going to grab a shirt that doesn’t stink.”

She’s one of the very few who have seen my scars. Trying to hide them now seems pointless.

Chuckling, she nods. “You do that.” She calls out, “Was it you who knocked a bit ago?”

“Yep. Figured we could enjoy pie before you had to sleep.” When I step into the living room, I stop.

Worry is etched in Lettie’s face.

“What’s wrong?”

She smiles, which is her attempt to dispel my concern. But it doesn’t work. “I’m fine.”

I make a sound like a buzzer. “Survey says there is zero chance of that.”

She sighs. “I thought I saw my mom in town today.”

Alarms are going off in my head. “You said she didn’t know where you moved. Was she here on the ranch?” I don’t hate Lettie’s mom, but I hate the way Lettie was sometimes treated.

Even if she isn’t my girlfriend, I will make sure no one treats her that way ever again.

Lettie wags her head back and forth. “When I was leaving work, I saw someone who looked like Mom in the parking lot of the apartment complex where I used to live. I don’t think she saw me. But I drove around for an hour before coming home just in case. But maybe I’m crazy and seeing things.”

I ignore the crazy comment. “She must’ve gotten your previous address from someone.” I nod to the table. “We can make a plan over pie.”

She eases into a chair. “It’s not that big a deal. I’ll lay low for a few days.”

“You didn’t answer your door, which tells me that it is a big deal, Lettie.”

“You’ve always knocked at the inside door. So I didn’t know it was you.” She picks up her fork. “I shouldn’t be eating pie.”

“Next time, I’ll bring you a salad and you can munch greens if that’s what makes you happy.”

“Next time?” This time, her smile is genuine.

“Hope so.” I take a deep breath before baring my soul. “I’ve missed you. I’m not ready for more than being friends. Might never be. But we’ve both changed. What’s it hurt to get reacquainted?”

“I like that idea.” She takes a bite of her pie. “This is amazing.”

“Ava. I bet she’ll give you the recipe. I can take you over there one day when you have time.”

“Maybe.”

Her noncommittal answer reminds me that she doesn’t know the ranch as family like I do. I may be one of the quiet ones, but here I never feel like an outsider. And Lettie isn’t used to having a family like that.

“For the time being, don’t answer your door. If people want to visit, they can come through my place. That work?”

“It only works if you’re home.” She waves her fork toward the door. “Your side has a bolt remember.”

Since the bug incident, I haven’t cared if my side is bolted. “I don’t keep it locked. But you better keep your side locked.”

“Okay.” She carries her empty plate to the sink. “Thanks, Archer.”

Conscious of the time, I stand. “I’d suggest we play for a bit, but you need to sleep, and I need a shower.”

She nods. “I do need to sleep. But thank you for this.”

“If you need me, just knock. Or come in.”

“I will. Good night.”

“Sweet dreams.” I swing the door closed but don’t lock it.

I want her to be able to get in if she needs me.

\* \* \*

A WEEK LATER, Lettie knocks as soon as I’m out of the shower.

I shout, “Come in!” as I dig through my laundry basket, trying to find a clean shirt. Typically, I get stuff put away as soon as I get home, but yesterday and today were extra busy on the ranch. And I can just as easily grab a shirt out of a basket as out of a drawer.

And it’s oddly comforting to have one person I don’t hide from.

The door opens, but she’s silent.

“What’s up?” I whip around and freeze.

Her jaw is set, and rage flares in her dark eyes. “My mom stopped by the donut shop today. She was showing my picture around. Thankfully, I’ve spent so much time hiding that not many people would recognize me. Layla and Tessa didn’t give even a hint that they knew me.”

“I’m sorry.” Falling into old habits, I open my arms, and she’s in them in a second. “She’s going to a lot of trouble to get you to move back home. What’s her game?”

Lettie huffs out an angry laugh. “Because she always has an angle. I wish I had a clue. I almost went out to face her, but then she started going on about how she suspected I’d run off with a cowboy and was worried about me.”

I rub her back. “Let me guess. She was showing my picture around too.”

“I never meant for this to happen, Archer. I didn’t.”

I step back and cradle her face. “I know. None of this is your fault. Your mom is doing the crazy stuff she always does. And we’ll figure it out. Like always. I’m just glad you aren’t still hiding from me. This way, I can protect you.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t have to do that. It’s not fair. None of this is fair to you.”

I’ve given up hating Lettie and wallowing in the hurt of the last few years. She’s important to me. But until I know what went wrong in our relationship, I can’t open the door to that again. I will, however, do whatever necessary to keep her safe.

“Listen to me. Life isn’t fair. We both learned that a long time ago. But if you think I’m going to stand by and be quiet while your mom wreaks havoc on your life or, even worse, tries to drag you back home, you are wrong. Very, very wrong.”

Nodding, she blinks, and I release her face.

“She mentioned something about needing me to sign over something. So it does sound like she’s cooking up something.”

“You need to lock down your credit.” I wouldn’t put anything beyond Lettie’s mom. And my brain is spinning, thinking of any and every way that woman could harm Lettie physically or financially. “You’re sure she didn’t see you?”

“Positive. I was parked behind the building like always, but she might’ve seen my car. It was so much easier hiding from someone who wasn’t looking for me.” She sighs. Then her eyes widen. “I’m sorry.”

“Why did you hide? Is that something you can tell me?” I hold my breath, hoping she’ll trust me with at least that.

“I was afraid that you’d react like you did in the donut shop. I know I hurt you, and I wish I could take it all back. A lot has changed, and I don’t have a time machine. But I shouldn’t have avoided you. I just . . .” She shrugs, regret etched on her face.

“You were just avoiding conflict.”

Lips pinched, she nods. “It’s like you know me.”

“And I won’t pressure you to tell me why you broke things off, but can you please tell me if it was something I did?”

She wags her head back and forth. “It wasn’t anything like that, and there wasn’t anyone else. Not while we were dating . . . or since.”



Nothing about this makes sense, but I said I wouldn't pressure, and I intend to keep my word.

There are several beats of quiet. I won't tell her that there's been no one else for me either. It's not like I didn't try, but striking up that conversation will probably lead to a conversation about chatting online. And I'm not ready to reveal that yet. Besides, she hasn't sent any messages since her deleted one. She clearly doesn't like Crocheting-Cowboy as much as she likes me, which is weird even thinking.

One of us has to break the silence. "Want to brew some tea while I go back to finding a shirt? I think there are a few cookies left. I haven't yet finished all six dozen."

Her gaze drops to my chest, and she smiles. "Tea. Yeah. I'll get right on that."

Her line about me being an incredibly hot man pops in my head, and I temper my grin as I dig through the laundry, hunting my favorite T-shirt.

Lettie does have a way of stroking my ego, and I can't say I mind much. Or at all.

# CHAPTER 11



## LETTIE

When I walk out my front door the next morning, Archer is waiting. He holds out a Styrofoam cup.

“When I moved over here, I got myself a small coffee pot. And at this time of the morning, coffee seems necessary.” He takes a sip of his. “I’m on my second cup.”

“Thanks. You really don’t have to drive me to work.” I taste my coffee and smile. It’s sweet. Leave it to Archer to remember how I like it.

“If your car isn’t there, your mom can’t see it.” He sets his cowboy hat on his head, and I manage to restrain my sigh.

Does he have any idea how good he looks? I might be biased—probably am—but to me, he’s the best-looking guy in the world. And last night when he didn’t have a shirt on, focusing on his face took determination. He’s filled out and is completely hot.

I’m trying not to get my hopes up about there ever being an us again. But at the same time, I’m relishing having him back in my life even just as a friend. It’s scary how easy it’s been to pick up where the friendship left off. When he didn’t rush to hide his scars, it gave me a tiny spark of hope. I thought I ruined everything with the breakup, but a small bit of trust remains, and I’m hoping to build on that.

He takes a step, and I touch his arm.

“Why are you doing this? Why, after I broke up with you and then hid from you, are you still even speaking to me?” I should just be grateful things are good and not ask this question, but I need to know.

Stalling, he sips his coffee. “Lettie, I’ve spent the last few years angry and hurt. And when I saw you in that donut shop, it all flooded over me—

years of it all in one moment. Then seeing you sobbing was just too much.” He sucks in a deep breath, then blows it out. “But you were there for me during the hardest part of my life. And seeing you again just proves that I can’t harbor that kind of resentment toward you. I just can’t. We’ll never be what we were before, but I care about you. And it’ll be a snow day in August before I let your mom hurt you again.” He marches to his truck.

I blink. I’m not sure if I want to cry because of the never part or hug him for being so protective.

He has the truck running by the time I climb in, and I wait until we’re on the main road before telling him about the messages my mom sent last night. I hadn’t planned to tell him, but after that little speech, I’m not keeping that information to myself. “So she sent more texts last night, and she called, but I didn’t answer. But when she left a voicemail, I heard her boyfriend Wes in the background, feeding her stuff to say.” I cross my arms, trying not to show that even talking about Wes bothers me. “And he’s bad news.”

Archer rubs the back of his neck, his tell for being anxious. “Call me if they show up again.”

“H—” I clamp down on my tongue, stopping the rest of his nickname from slipping out. And now I’m too flustered to argue. “Okay.”

And either he didn’t hear that part or he’s ignoring it. “What time do you get off work?”

“Nine. I only make the donuts. Layla and Tessa work the front counter.” I hate feeling like a burden to him. “But you don’t—”

“I know.” He turns into the parking lot, drives behind the building, and stops near the back door of the shop. “Mind if I walk in with you to check things?”

“That’s fine.” We get out, and I unlock the shop. “Tessa knows about the situation, so she’s going to have her cousin who is a deputy stop by in the mornings. He does anyway most of the time. Because he likes donuts. And his wife works at the lingerie store right there.” I point next door before stepping inside.

“Good.” Archer steps in behind me and checks the bathrooms and office. Then he walks back toward the exit. “Lock up behind me.”

“I always do.” I’m used to taking care of myself, so taking orders doesn’t come easy, which might’ve been reflected in my voice.

He rests a shoulder on the doorframe, gazing down at me. “I’m just worried about you, Lettie.”

“I know. And I appreciate that you’re looking out for me.” I love his protective side, but it makes me miss the rest of the package. The kisses and cuddles, the plans for our forever.

Smiling, he tips his hat and strides to the truck. After getting in, he stares until I close the door. Then I flip the bolt and set to work getting donuts ready.

I pull trays full of donut-shaped dough out of the refrigerator and set them on the counter to rise. While that happens, I prep the toppings and fillings. The morning routine is second nature now. And by the time Layla arrives just before opening, the donuts are ready to go into the display case.

“Good morning!” She tosses her purse under the counter and sets to work brewing the coffee, the second most important offering. “How are things with Archer? Has he kissed you yet?”

“I don’t expect he’ll ever kiss me again, unfortunately. But things are good. We’re friends again.”

“I’m just glad y’all are talking. Real people are so much better than that username you were messaging.” She taps the side of her head. “It was something weird, wasn’t it?”

“Not weird. Cute. Crocheting-Cowboy. And I haven’t messaged him since I sent that embarrassing word vomit of a message and then deleted it. He hasn’t messaged either.”

Her laugh rings out. “He probably saw what you sent. Now he’s jealous that you are hung up on your ex and he doesn’t have a chance.”

“No. I don’t think we were flirting or anything. I mean, we messaged a lot. And this is the longest stretch without talking since we started.” The reality sets in. “He totally read the message, and now things are weird. What should I do?”

She wipes the counters and fills the cream and sugar containers. “You have two options. One—ignore him and let it just fade away, or two—ask him for tips on how to win back your ex. When Nico and I first started hanging out, he asked Garrett, Tessa’s husband, for advice. And it totally worked. One hundred percent.” After surveying the room, she walks to the door. “Am I good to unlock it?”

“Yep.” Before I can dart into the kitchen, the bell jingles and a tall cowboy strides in.

“Morning, ladies, I’d like three dozen of whatever. Surprise me.” His gaze lands on me, and he smiles. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Anderson.”

Because I'm not rude, I shake his hand. "Hi, I'm—"

"She's Violet, but everyone calls her Lettie. She's Archer's *really* good friend. But if anyone comes up to you in town and asks if you know her, the answer is no. It's complicated. Don't ask."

After that introduction, I want to crawl to the back and never show my face again.

"Archer's friend?" His brow knits. "Oh. Oooh. You're his new neighbor."

I bob my head, stunned that this man knows where I live. "You know Archer?"

"Yep. We work together on Stargazer Springs Ranch. Good guy."

While he settles the bill with Layla, I pack up the rest of his donuts. "Here you go." I hold out the bag.

He tucks his wallet in his pocket, then grabs the bag. "I'm a bit fuzzy on the rules about knowing you, so can I tell Archer I met you? Or is that part of the complicated?"

Layla snorts. "That's totally complicated, but you can tell him. He's not trying to hurt her or anything."

I need Layla to be quiet. "Tell Archer I said hi."

"I will. Are you sure you're okay? I mean, it kinda sounds like someone is trying to hurt you."

"I'm fine. Just being careful."

He nods but doesn't look convinced. "Have a great day."

As soon as he walks out, I face Layla. "You make me sound crazy! And what was all the really-good-friend bit about?"

"First of all—you're welcome. I saved you from embarrassment because that man was going to ask you out. I could just tell." She rests her hands on her hips. "Plus, I didn't want him going around saying your name to everyone in case your mother dearest is still around town. I'm trying to protect you."

"I appreciate that you are trying to keep me safe. But he wasn't going to ask me out, Layla. Seriously."

Huffing, she shakes her head. "You think a few extra pounds make you invisible to men. News flash! They don't."

I can't even think of a worthy retort. "I'm going to go clean up and prep everything for tomorrow. I'll stay out of sight."

Layla can tell me a million times that a few extra pounds don't matter and that I'm pretty, and I'll still doubt that she's not just saying that because she's my friend. Besides, I don't care if guys find me attractive. Archer's opinion is

what matters, and other than a couple of hugs, he keeps his distance. I'm not sure if it's the hurt or the extra weight that's the reason. Either way, it's definitely my fault. Maybe I should hope it's the weight because a successful diet plan is slightly more possible than a time machine. Although a time machine might solve both issues.

Layla shoos me toward the kitchen. "Better hurry. I see a horde of firemen coming."

I duck into the back before the bell jingles. Hiding isn't the least bit fun anymore.

# CHAPTER 12





## ARCHER

*A*nderson strolls into the mess hall and sets boxes of donuts on the counter. “This is the breakfast dessert, Ms. Ava.”

She shakes her head. “Y’all will never get enough of those donuts, will you?”

“No, ma’am.” He fills his plate with eggs, bacon, and hash browns, then grabs his coffee. After a quick scan of the table, he sits next to me. “Guess who I met.”

With donuts on the counter and a lead-in like that, it’s not hard to tell that he’s talking about Lettie. “At the donut shop?”

“Yeah, and thanks to the other lady working there, I didn’t put my foot in my mouth.” He scrunches up his nose and gives me an apologetic look. “But, in my defense, you never told me what Lettie looked like, so I didn’t know. I bet you’re glad she showed up as your neighbor.”

“Foot in your mouth? What do you mean?” As the words leave my mouth, his meaning becomes clear. “You were going to ask her out?”

“Well, not now. Obviously. Because I’m pretty sure dating your friend’s ex violates some cowboy code. Plus, you know where I live.” He flashes a smile. “I’m sure I’ll meet some other cute, curvy woman around here at some point.”

“Was she okay? Nothing weird at the shop?”

He drops his voice even lower. “Is she running from the mob or something? The other worker seemed really concerned about her safety. We could rally the guys, and all take shifts at the donut shop.”

“She isn’t running from the mob. Just her mom. It’s not the best situation. But don’t make a big deal out of it.”

He chuckles. “Someone needs to tell the other worker that.”

“Who was it? What did she look like?”

“Don’t know what she looked like. She had a ring on.”

“Could be Tessa or Layla, but that sounds more like Layla. She’s concerned for her friend.” I pick up my plate. “And yeah, I do like having Lettie as a neighbor.”

“Figured.” Anderson grins.

I’m thankful that the hum of conversation in the room kept others from hearing us, and I’m also glad that I opened up to Anderson about the situation when we chatted in the barn the other day. I’m still not ready to jump into a relationship with her again since I don’t know why the first one ended, but having someone cheering me on isn’t a bad thing.

On my way out, I grab a donut, which makes me think about Lettie even more.

Because I was up early, I’ve accomplished a big chunk of my list before breakfast, which means I’ll have time to pick up Lettie when she’s ready.

I scratch a few other tasks off my list, then head into town. After driving around the parking lot, making sure Lettie’s mom isn’t laying low in a car somewhere, I pull up in back. Before I shut off the engine, Kent calls.

“Hey, Kent. I ran into town real quick, but I’ll be back out there soon.”

“I’m calling to ask a favor. A week from Friday, I want to take Poppy to dinner, but Ava and Mad Dog have plans. Any chance you could let Mason hang out with you for the evening? I’m trying to make sure I have all my bases covered.”

“No problem. He’s a fun kid. I like spending time with him. We’ll hang out in the game room and play Xbox.”

“Awesome. Thank you so much.” He ends the call, which is another reminder that I’m part of a family now. It’s nice.

I text Lettie that I’m in the back, then make sure the truck is unlocked.

She hurries out and climbs in. “Hi. Everything was quiet today. And I met your friend Anderson.”

“I heard. He’s a good guy.”

“That’s exactly what he said about you.” She’s smiling, which I’m happy to see.

I pull out of the parking lot. “Anywhere you need to go before we head home?”

“Nope. I have a ton of design work waiting for me.”

The last few days, we've fallen into a routine, and Lettie and I spend time together nearly every day. Sometimes it's just a conversation over a cup of tea before she heads to bed. Other nights we crash on my couch and play Minecraft, which turns into an extended session of laughing and reminiscing.

I haven't had any messages from Regretful-Raccoon, and I'm not complaining because I don't feel like I'm hiding anything if we aren't actively sending messages back and forth.

Friday is becoming our Minecraft night, and I need to fill her in on the plan for next week. "Next Friday—a week from tomorrow—I'll be in the game room, watching my buddy's kid. So I can't hang out like normal."

The best word I can think of to describe the look she gives me is adoring.

"No problem. In fact, that's a good thing because I got a last-minute request for some designs, and the money is good." She touches my arm. "Thanks for telling me."

"How long have you been drawing and creating graphics?"

She shifts in her seat and turns to face me. "Went to school for it. Only an associate degree. But freelancing helps me pay the bills. And I like it."

"All that doodling in your notebook paid off."

Nodding, she smiles. "Yeah. It did. Looks like we both ended up doing what we love."

We did. And somehow, we ended up back in each other's lives. It would be so easy to slip on blinders and jump in headfirst. I'm just not sure I'll survive the pain if I hit bottom again.

When the relationship ended, I didn't have a support system. I was blindsided and had no one to vent to. My grandmother never understood. She only gave canned responses about how it was probably for the best and that I'd find the perfect someone someday. I learned quickly to keep my hurt bottled up in front of her. She loved me, but she was awful at giving helpful relationship advice.

But she's the only reason I didn't grow up in foster care after my parents died. And it wasn't easy raising a rowdy boy, but she did her best. I loved my grandmother, and when she died, I truly felt alone in the world.

Since then, I've opened my eyes to the family around me here on the ranch.

I glance at Lettie, wishing I knew what went wrong. That's the one thing holding me back from pulling her close and kissing her until the cows come home.

Loving Lettie is like those Wi-Fi networks in my phone. I only have to get close to one and the connection is there.

She slides out as soon as I stop in front of the house. “I think it’s so cool that you’re babysitting your friend’s kid. That’s really sweet.”

“I never call it babysitting in front of Mason. I think he’d be offended.” I imagine the look of indignation the kid would give me.

“Thanks for driving me home. Want to come over for dinner?”

“Sure. I’ll text when I’m wrapping up my chores.”

“Awesome.”

I might need to swap out my boots for cleats. Maybe those would stop me from sliding back into Lettie’s arms. Because going with the flow is leading me that direction. And I need to resist the slide.

\* \* \*

FRIDAY EVENING, I text Lettie before walking into my house. We’re still being cautious even though her mom hasn’t shown her face in town again.

And when I get inside, she’s standing in the safe zone, the magic doorway. “Dinner’s almost ready. Go shower; then we’ll eat.”

“Smells good. I’ll be quick.” I haven’t eaten dinner in the mess hall at all this week.

And every time I miss, Anderson texts me a happy face. I laugh when it pops up on cue, then hurry to my room.

Showered and smelling like a bar of soap, I walk out to the living room. Lettie has food set out on my table. Tonight it’s chicken of some sort and roasted vegetables. I’m eating just as good as I do in the mess hall, and I don’t spend dinner worrying if Lettie’s location has been discovered.

Lettie fills two glasses with tea, and then I pull out her chair.

Once I’m seated, she passes me a napkin. “How was your day?”

“Not too bad. We moved cattle and cleared along a fence line near Beau’s fishing cabin. I should take you over that way someday. It’s pretty out there.” I cut into my chicken. “And once this thing with your mom isn’t a worry anymore, you can come to dinner with me one night. You’d like it.”

“I wouldn’t want to impose on your ranch friends.”

“Are you kidding? I’m not sure they even know what that word means. Ava feeds everyone all the time.” After popping a bite in my mouth, I moan.

“Lettie, this is so good. Seriously.”

Her reaction reminds me of the way I feel when she stares at my chest.

A blush highlights the apples of her cheeks. “I’m glad you like it.”

“You mentioned starting a new project. How’s it going?”

For the next several minutes, she tells me about her newest graphic design project.

Our morning drive and dinnertime are my favorite parts of the day, and they have one thing in common.

“You still up for a wild night of mining and building?”

She stands and reaches for my empty plate. “Absolutely, I’m hoping I’ve dug down far enough in that new mine to reach diamonds.”

I take the dishes from her. “Go ahead and get things going. I’ll get the dishes tonight. You cooked. I’ll clean.”

That same adoring look is back, but I try to ignore it. Acknowledging it will worsen the slide.

\* \* \*

SUNDAY EVENING after we finish dinner, Lettie and I team up to clean the kitchen. And while I’m wiping down the table, she makes us tea. Prior to having her as a neighbor, I wasn’t a big tea drinker, but she likes it. And turns out, hot tea isn’t so bad. Good actually.

I like the minty kind best.

After draping the rag over the edge of the sink, I grab a blanket. The days are warming up, but the nights are still cool. I’m fine, but Lettie will be cold.

I push open the door, and she carries two mugs outside. The scent of mint tickles my nose. There is a sliver of light sinking behind the hills.

It’s quiet for a bit as we listen to the night-critters symphony.

“I’m glad you’re happy.” Her smile is visible in the fading light.

I sip my tea. “I am. Everyone here is great. But I haven’t exactly opened up about my past. Only Grayson knows how I lost my parents. It’s just not something you announce to people. And it hasn’t come up in conversation.”

“I get it. Layla knows a little about my mom, but Layla asks a lot of questions.” She laughs. “But I kind of needed someone like that, I think.”

“Someone you couldn’t avoid talking to.” When she shivers, I hand over the blanket. “I like Layla. She’s fun. And her husband is nice. I met him the

other day when I went to pick you up.”

“He’s great. Perfect for her.” She points as an owl swoops past the porch and lands in the tree.

We watch in comfortable silence until it moves on to other hunting grounds.

The question of us sits off in the corner, ignored, and we both pretend this is the way all friends behave. And as long as she’s in any sort of danger, I’ll go along with the delusion.

Rustling leaves draw our attention back to the tree. Lettie gasps as a large raccoon scrambles down the tree, then scurries along the grass.

“Oh, look. It’s a raccoon.” I’m a breath away from saying something about her username when she turns to look at me. And I stop myself in time.

She yawns, and I pick up my mug.

“Time for bed.” I help her out of the chair. “It’s nice out here.”

“It is. Thanks for getting these patio chairs.”

“I’m glad I did.” I might have to rethink my position on these romantic porch sits, but for now, I like them. Too much.

\* \* \*

MASON JUMPS up and down as he nears the end of the level. “I’m gonna beat it this time.” He’s dodging and ducking just like his character as he moves through the game.

My phone buzzes, and I check my messages.

Regretful-Raccoon: Hi. It’s me again. Sorry about the deleted message. Maybe you read it before I deleted it, but I guess it doesn’t matter. My ex and I are friends again, and that is more than I expected after the way our initial meeting went. I hope things are good with you. This will probably be my last message.

She can see that I’ve read it, so I send a thumbs-up. Since it’s her last message, I don’t feel like I have to admit that she’s been messaging me for months. I like how things are between us now.

Before I close the app, another message pops up.

Regretful-Raccoon: I really enjoyed chatting with you. You might not be my age or live anywhere close, but I did feel a connection. It seems weird to say that to someone I'll never meet in person, but it's true. But I'm not sure I'll ever be over my ex. I don't want to be over him. Maybe that's part of the problem. Bye for real this time.

After checking Mason's progress, I type out a message.

Crocheting-Cowboy: I felt the connection too.

It's not a lie. But neither is it the entire truth.

When Mason reaches the end of his level, he collapses into a recliner. "Finally. You take a turn. I'm going to get a drink."

"We could have dessert. Ms. Ava left us some chocolate cake."

He shakes his head. "I don't want cake. I'm just thirsty."

Never have I known Mason to turn down any kind of dessert. "You feeling okay?"

"Yeah." He wanders into the kitchen.

As I get my game queued up, I listen to make sure he's not finding trouble in the mess hall. Thankfully, he's a good kid and seems to avoid trouble.

My game has just started when he flops into a recliner.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Mason sits sideways in the chair, legs draped over one arm and his head tilted back over the other, looking at me upside down.

"I have a friend who is a girl." Unlike Dag, I'm not interested in getting relationship advice from Mason.

"Me too. Clementine. She tells everyone else to call her Minnie, but I like the name Clementine, so she lets me call her that. Plus it's her name." He sits up and slurps from his juice pouch. "I like her, but we don't kiss."

Ever since this kid saw Clint kissing Joji in the goat barn, kissing is a regular topic of conversation. And it's always funny. But he's being serious, so I bite back my chuckle.

He's quiet while I finish the level.

Then I hold out the controller. "Your turn."

"You play again. I'll watch." He stands up. "But can I sit in your lap?"

"Sure." I check the time. His parents will be back soon. "I'll turn on a show and we can watch that until your dad and mom get back."

“Okay.” He nestles into my lap, which is a first.

Before the first episode is over, he’s asleep. Poor kid.

A few minutes later, Poppy walks in and stops when she sees him in my lap. “What happened?”

“I think maybe he’s sick. He was playing like normal. But then he didn’t want cake and wanted to sit in my lap. And he’s kind of warm.”

“Oh, no.” She trails her fingers across his forehead. “Mason, honey, let’s get you home.”

Kent walks up beside her, his brow pinched.

Mason mutters, “I beat the level.”

“Great job.” Kent scoops up the kid.

I’m not sure Poppy could carry him anymore. He’s nearly as tall as she is.

When I stand, she gives me a hug. “Thank you so much for this. Are you sure we can’t pay you?”

“I’m sure. I had fun. Keep me posted about how he’s doing. It was crazy how fast he changed. One minute, he was bouncing around. Then he flopped in the chair.”

She nods and follows Kent out. I clean up the small mess we made, then head home. Lettie’s been asleep for hours, so I’m extra quiet when I slip inside and go to bed.

I need to sleep fast so that I can be up to take her to work. It’s been quiet, and there haven’t been any more sightings of her mom. Even the messages have stopped, which has me feeling uneasy.



# CHAPTER 13



## LETTIE

*M*y body clock doesn't care that the shop is closed on Mondays. And by six, I've made all the final adjustments to my big project.

Oddly, I've heard no peep from Archer's side, which is unusual. He's always up by now. The last couple of weeks have been great. After he babysat Friday evening, we spent all our free time during the weekend together. I made dinner again last night, a recipe I'd never made for him before. If there's any truth about the way to a man's heart being through his stomach, I might have a chance. I'm keeping my fingers crossed.

Last night, he seemed tired, but he works hard all day. He's tired at the end of every day.

But this is strange, so I shoot off a text to him.

**Me:** Sleeping in? Everything okay?

I get out eggs and breakfast sausage links, and while making enough breakfast for two, I keep tabs on my phone. When the food is ready, I plate it up and cover everything with foil. Then I knock on our adjoining door. "Archer?"

Ear pressed to the door, I listen. It's too quiet. There's no way he's awake. I push open the door a crack and listen some more. Something is wrong. Or maybe he left before I woke up. I'll only know if I check.

I step into his side of the duplex. "Archer, you overslept. I made breakfast. Would you like some?" It feels intrusive to walk into his bedroom, but I can't exactly check on him from here.

Hesitantly, I step down the hall. The guest room is empty, which isn't a huge surprise. The bedroom is partially open, and I suck in a deep breath before knocking again.

“Archer?”

A grunt is all I hear as a reply. But I take that as permission to walk in. He’s huddled in bed, curled up on his side, covers pulled up to his chin. I touch his forehead. He’s on fire.

After glancing around to see if there were any signs that he’s taken any medicine, I nudge his shoulder. “Hazy, sweetheart. You have a fever. Have you taken any medicine?”

I haven’t called him Hazy since the day he graduated from high school. He’s Archer Hayes to the world, but to me, he was always Hazy. It’s been hard not to use the name since seeing him again, but today, I don’t care.

I shake his shoulder with a little more force. “Wake up.”

“Lettie.” He sighs my name and rolls to his back. “Remember when we were on the porch?”

“I remember.” I’m remembering the raccoon scurrying across the ground and how I came close to telling Archer about my Reddit buddy. He’d probably find the whole thing funny.

He nods. “Your smile made me feel so brave. And then I . . .” His eyes are still closed, but he’s smiling.

It dawns on me that he’s talking about the first time we kissed. I lean in close and brush my fingers on his forehead. “I’ll never forget that day.”

His eyes flutter open, and his smile widens. “Same.” Then he sits up and presses his lips to mine.

I should push him away. He’s sick, and kissing him guarantees that I’ll get what he has. But then his arms tighten around me, and I melt. Getting sick will be worth it. This is what I’ve wanted for so long. He’s what I want. Cradling his face, I kiss him back.

But he’s burning up. He isn’t thinking clearly.

Now, kissing him feels wrong, so I break away. “I’ve missed that. But I’m not sure you really want to kiss me, Hazy.”

He shakes his head, still holding me close. “Nope. Not until I know why you left me. I can’t do that.”

That fever must be really high. It’s making him brutally honest.

“We need to bring that fever down. I’ll be right back.” I hurry to the bathroom, grab a washcloth, and dampen it with cool water.

He’s back under the covers, shivering.

Sitting beside him on the bed, I drape the cloth over his forehead. “I’m going to get you some medicine, okay?”

Rather than searching his apartment for something that will bring down his fever, I run to my side and snag a bottle from the bathroom cabinet. I'll have to set reminders in my phone so I know when to give him medicine. If he tries to kiss me again, I will lose all track of time.

With a glass of water in one hand and the pill bottle in the other, I walk back into his bedroom. "Hazy baby, can you sit up for me?"

Brow furrowed, he pushes into a sitting position but grabs for the blankets. "It's cold in here."

"Take these. It'll help." I hand over the pills, then give him the glass. "Are you hungry?"

That question seems to shake him back to reality, and he sets the glass on the bedside table and throws back the blankets. "I need to get to the mess hall. What time is it?"

I plant my hands on his chest. "Get back in bed. I'll let Lilith know you're sick. She can tell Beau."

"Chores still need to be done." He grips my hips. "I can't get up with you in front of me." Gently, he tries to shove me to the side.

But I'm using my extra pounds to my advantage and not budging. "I'm going to stay in your way. Once your fever is down, we can discuss doing chores. But right now, you have two choices. Stay in bed and sleep or stay in bed and eat."

Eyes squinted, he stares at me. "Food is in the mess hall. I'll go get it."

"No." My hands are still pressed against his bare chest. "I made you breakfast. And if you'll get back in bed, I'll grab it."

"I like scrambled eggs."

"Light and fluffy. Yes. I know how you like your eggs. And I made sausage."

"Patties or links?" He sits down on the bed. "Links means you love me."

The joke we used to make twists a knot around my heart, and the smug grin on his face says he knows what I made.

"Promise me you'll stay right here while I get the food." I tuck the blankets around him.

He crosses his heart, then tosses the covers back again.

"Don't get up!"

Head cocked, he smirks. "Should I pee here?"

I point to the bathroom. "Don't leave the house, okay?"

He blows me a kiss. "Yes, ma'am."

The fever seems to have wiped out his filter. And it's kind of nice engaging in the same old banter. I've missed it, but I hate seeing him sick.

Once I'm convinced he's not going to end up face-first on the floor, I run back to my side, load our plates onto a tray, and grab my phone. I need to call Lilith because everyone on the ranch is probably wondering why Archer didn't show up for breakfast.

But there's a text popup on my screen.

**Lilith:** We're worried about Archer. Mason had the flu, and now Kent and Poppy are sick. So is Parker. Archer didn't show up at breakfast. Could you check on him?

As I'm reading, another text pops up.

**Lilith:** If you aren't there, don't worry about it. Ava will drive over to check on Archer.

**Me:** I'm here. He's sick. Mason is great at sharing apparently.

**Lilith:** Poor guy. Does he need anything?

**Me:** Right now, we're good. But I'll let you know. He's worried about getting chores done.

**Lilith:** Beau said to keep his germs at home. He has it handled.

**Me:** Thanks. I'll tell Archer.

When I get back to his room, Archer is sitting up in bed. The man still doesn't have a shirt on, and I'm enjoying the view.

"Here you go. Light and fluffy scrambled eggs with sausage links." I set the tray on his lap.

"Thanks." He rubs his face before picking up his fork. "I think I caught Mason's bug. When did you get here?"

"A bit ago."

He taps the bed next to him. "You can sit here. Or if you'd rather not get what I have, you can eat in the kitchen. My feelings won't be hurt."

I climb onto the bed and sit beside him without bothering to explain that it's a bit too late to avoid catching his bug. But since he doesn't seem to remember the kiss, I'm not going to bring it up.

"Lilith messaged me, asking if I'd check on you. They were worried when you didn't show up for breakfast."

"Crap. I didn't even think to call anyone." He reaches under his pillow and yanks out his phone. "I'll respond to all these messages after I eat."

"And Beau said he has the chores handled and that you need to keep your germs at home."

Shoveling food into his mouth, he nods. “Yeah. This is kinda awful. My head hurts and—” He pushes the tray toward me, then jumps out of bed.

The noises coming from the bathroom make it clear that breakfast was a bad choice.

I shoot off a text to Lilith.

**Me:** He could probably use some Gatorade or Powerade.

**Lilith:** Ava bought a few cases yesterday. I’ll have someone take some over.

**Me:** Thanks. You can just leave it on the porch.

Kneeling beside him, I rub his back while he empties his stomach.

I grab a clean rag and wipe his forehead. “I should’ve had better sense than to give you a full breakfast.”

“It tasted good going down.” Resting back on his heels, he leans against me. “I’m glad you’re my neighbor.”

“Me too.” I help him to his feet, then step out of the bathroom while he spends a moment of quality time with his toothbrush.

He groans as he crawls back in bed, then chuckles.

“What’s so funny?” I smooth his blankets.

“Hi, neighbor.” He pats his chest. “I would sound more convincing if I had a sweater. One with a zipper on the front.”

And now the Mr. Rogers theme song is playing in my head.

“You are really funny when you’re sick.”

“I think funny stuff all the time. I just don’t say it out loud to most people.” He touches my face. “But I used to say stuff to you all the time.”

“You did. And I love that you’re doing it now.”

There’s a knock at the door, and this stubborn man swings a leg out of the bed.

“Unless you are running to the bathroom, don’t get up.” I push on his chest. “I’ll get it.”

He grabs the hem of my shirt. “But it could be your mom.”

That thought hadn’t occurred to me. But I’m not changing my mind. “Lilith was sending someone to drop off sports drinks. To keep you hydrated.”

“Okay.” Instead of getting back under the covers, he stands. “But I’ll walk with you just in case.”

His eyes aren’t as glassy as they were earlier, and there’s sweat beading on his forehead. It didn’t take the medicine long to break that fever.

“I don’t deserve you, Archer.”

He drapes an arm around me as we walk to the door. “You know, that could be a compliment or an insult. Is it because I’m too good or too bad? And is being too anything a good thing?”

He’s cracking me up.

I steady him against the wall and step outside to pick up the drinks. “All clear.”

“Good. I’m going back to bed.” He takes a few steps, then changes course. “After I puke some more.”

The poor guy has it rough.

# CHAPTER 14





## ARCHER

*M*y head is pounding when I wake up. Stretched out on my stomach, I keep my face buried in the pillow. I'm not sure how long I've been asleep or when I ate last, but I'm hungry and exhausted even though I just woke up.

When I shift, cool fingers trail along my back. Lettie is here, calming me in the way she used to. Her fingers skim right over my scars, and the sensitive skin tingles at her touch.

I turn my head to look at her. "Hey."

"How are you feeling?" Her fingers continue their dance on my skin.

"A little better, I guess, but my head still hurts. Honestly, I don't remember much of what happened earlier today. Or . . . how long have I been sick?"

"This is the end of day two. You've been pretty out of it. Talkative on occasion, but you've slept a lot."

I stay still so that she'll keep brushing her fingers on my back because it feels really good. "Hopefully, I didn't say or do anything embarrassing."

How much did I say? Did I tell her that we were messaging each other for months? I've been thinking about it more after she messaged again. Was that dream I had about kissing her not a dream at all? If it did happen, should I pretend it didn't? Will she do the same?

"Nothing too embarrassing. Want some Jell-O? Or I have chicken soup on the stove if that sounds better. You kept Jell-O down earlier."

The "too" confirms that something happened. But I'm not prepared to find out what I did. At least not right now. I might never be ready for that.

"Soup sounds good." I roll to my side. "You didn't have to do this, Lettie."

You have a job. You don't need to stay here and babysit me."

"It's fine. Tessa covered for me." She slides off the bed. "Let me get you some soup."

"Hey. Doing all this means you might get sick, and this is not fun."

"I know. But we're neighbors." She winks and walks out of the room.

That is probably supposed to mean something, but I have no idea what. It seems that Lettie now has inside jokes with the loopy me, and I'm clueless.

Minutes later, she sets a tray in my lap. "For starters, here's a small bowl of soup, but there's a big pot. So if it settles well, I can bring you more."

"Thanks." I dig right in. The noodles are flavorful and there's chicken in every bite. "This is amazing. What brand is it? I'll have to buy this kind."

Shaking her head, she flashes a giddy smile. "I made it. From scratch. You were sleeping, so I threw together some dough, made the noodles, then cooked the soup."

"I'm impressed. This is incredible." I shovel down the rest of the bowl. "Aren't you going to eat?"

"Already did. Want more?"

"Yes, but I should make sure this will stay down." I still feel cruddy, but now that I'm awake, the walls are closing in. "I let the ranch know I was sick, right? Everything is a blur."

"They know and were understanding. You aren't the only one with the bug." She takes the tray and walks out of the room.

"The other guys must be slammed." I toss back the covers. "I should probably—"

She rushes in. "Get your butt back in bed. That's what you should probably do. Those guys don't want your germs. Are you trying to get the rest of them sick?" She touches my arm. "Tessa's husband, Garrett, messaged me this morning to check on you. He said they were doing okay."

Garrett helps run the ranch and will one day take over. His reassurance that things are running smoothly gives me permission to recuperate without feeling too guilty.

I stand and rub my face, wishing the room didn't feel like it was leaning. "Even if I did chores by myself away from everyone else, I'd likely end up hurting myself. It's like I'm in a fog."

Lettie plants herself in front of me and touches the back of her hand to my forehead and then my cheek. "You feel warm again. Please will you just get back in bed?"

“Lettie, I’m bored out of my skull. I’ve been in that bed two days.” With a hand on her shoulder to keep my balance, I point to the living room. “Let’s watch something.”

“Sure. I’ll walk you to the couch, then check your temperature.”

I drape an arm around her shoulders. “You’re the best, Lettie. I can’t tell you how thankful I am for your help.”

“I’m happy to do it. Lilith has been amazing. She had people send over Powerade, and then she dropped off groceries. I can see why you love the ranch.”

Before sitting down, I bump my forehead to the top of her head. “Living here makes you part of the family, you know.”

Tears glisten in her eyes. “Someone once asked me what my ideal life would be like, and I mentioned that I loved the idea of having a found family. But I didn’t know how to find that.”

Now I’m really wondering how much I said, but I play it cool. “It found you.” I drop onto the sofa.

She gets the thermometer. “Open up.”

I follow instructions, and she slips it under my tongue.

“Yep. It’s climbing again.” Off she goes to get my drink and something to bring the fever down.

When she returns, I take the pills, then tap the couch. “Sit.”

Back when we were dating, we’d crash on the couch to watch movies. She’d sit at one end, and I’d toss a throw pillow in her lap and stretch out. And Lettie would play with my hair while we watched the movie.

Even before we started dating, Lettie was always physically affectionate, something my grandmother wasn’t. My grandmother took me in, taught me to crochet, and encouraged me to follow my dream of working on a ranch. But she rarely did more than pat me on the head, and I can count on one hand the number of times she did that. While I never doubted that she loved me, she was very closed off.

Lettie is the opposite of that.

When something was bothering me, I sought out Lettie. Just being near her calmed me in ways I couldn’t explain if I tried.

Today, I’m craving that kind of comfort.

Sadly, I don’t have any throw pillows. But thankfully, she’s got some built in cushion now. As soon as she sits down, I stretch out and rest my head on her thigh. “Pick whatever.”

“No preference?” She rests a hand on my hair.

“Nope.”

She scrolls through the movies on the streaming service. “What about this one? They are messaging each other online but don’t know it. It’s a classic romcom. *You’ve Got Mail*.”

“Fine by me.” If I didn’t say anything about chatting with Regretful-Raccoon, this is an odd coincidence. But other than exchanging messages, our life has nothing in common with the movie. I’m not some wealthy guy in a suit, and she doesn’t own a bookstore.

During the opening scenes, she starts playing with my hair, and I close my eyes. I may regret letting my walls down, but right now, I don’t care. I’m hitting pause on real life, all the hurt and hesitation, and pretending the breakup never happened. When I’m well, I’ll explain that we probably shouldn’t act like we’re dating.

\* \* \*

AFTER FIVE DAYS of being sick, I’m finally feeling better. Fatigue is still an issue, but staying cooped up is not an option. And I can’t let the other guys keep picking up the slack.

I’m out of bed at the ungodly hour Lettie usually wakes up. The last three days, I’ve worried about her going to work and insisted she take my truck so that her car wasn’t there.

Today, I plan to drive her.

Wearing my pajama bottoms that I’d lived in for the last week, I walk out to the living room. The adjoining door is wide open, and I knock as I step into her side. “I’m up, Lettie, and feeling better. I’ll drive you in this morning.”

She doesn’t answer, and I peek down the hall.

“Lettie?”

A light comes on in her room. “Hey.”

After waiting a second for her to come out, I proceed to her room. She’s huddled under blankets, the afghan I made her pulled up to her chin and a bucket next to her bed.

“I got you sick.” Now I feel horrible.

“I’ll be okay. But I’m glad you’re feeling better.” She shifts. “I already let

Tessa know. No one wants me making donuts right now.”

“That’s for sure. You’d get the entire town sick.” I stand beside her bed and brush the hair off of her face. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“Have you taken anything?” I gather the tissues piled on the nightstand and toss them into the trashcan.

“A few hours ago. It’s probably time for more.” She swings her feet off the bed.

“Unless you’re headed to the bathroom, don’t get up. I’ll get what you need.” My mind is racing. How can I cover chores and take care of Lettie?

“They need you on the ranch. I’ll be fine.”

I get her medicine and grab a bottle of Gatorade out of her fridge. Thankfully, there’s still soup left over, so she won’t have to suffer with my cooking. Then when I get back to her room, I help her sit up in bed and give her the pills. “I don’t have to be anywhere for a few hours. But later, when I go to the ranch, I’ll let Lilith know you’re sick. And I’ll come check on you throughout the day.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Just like you didn’t have to take care of me. I know.” I get her tucked back under the covers and trail my hands on the crocheted blanket. “You still have it.”

Her head bobs. “You made it for me. I’ll never get rid of it.”

I kiss her forehead. “Go back to sleep. I’m going to go wash my stink off after being in bed for so long. Then I’ll come back and check on you.”

After giving a faint smile, she closes her eyes.

Seeing her all curled up, I acknowledge that I never stopped loving Lettie. The connection we have is special. I think we both recognize that.

But when she’s feeling better, we need to talk. I should never have let things between us get so comfortable because I’m not willing to get involved again. Not without knowing the truth. And I can’t tell her that’s why because it’ll make her feel pressured to tell me, and I promised I wouldn’t push for that.

But starting now, the forehead kisses have to stop. And I probably shouldn’t use her thigh as a pillow anymore.

# CHAPTER 15



## LETTIE

*I*t's hard to distinguish between dreams and reality when I'm waking up every few hours to a cowboy leaning over me. Occasionally, he's shirtless. The man has held my hair back as I've leaned over the toilet and put a straw to my lips, encouraging me to drink fluids.

I've been in a complete fog the last three days, but the nausea is finally gone. I push up into a sitting position. The house is quiet, so Archer must be working.

Before climbing out of bed, I take my temperature, then swallow down two pills. My fever hasn't returned, but this headache makes it hard to keep my eyes open.

When my phone beeps, I squint and check the messages.

**Archer:** Getting a few things done. I'll be home in about an hour. Need anything?

**Me:** I'm okay. Just woke up.

**Archer:** I'm bringing dinner.

A car door slams outside, and dragging my afghan with me, I walk to the living room. I've been lax about checking before opening, but without Archer here, I peek through the curtains. Layla gets out of her car, grocery bags in each hand.

My phone beeps.

**Layla:** I came to check on you, but please don't breathe on me. My wedding is in two weeks, and I don't want to spend one week of that in bed.

**Me:** I'll come out, and we can chat on the porch.

**Layla:** Far away from each other.

I open the door and pick up the bags she's set down where I could grab

them. “Thanks for bringing stuff.”

“I would’ve come sooner, but Tessa insisted that Archer was taking good care of you.”

“He’s been awesome.”

She rubs her hands together. “This whole flu bug was brilliant. I mean, look how much alone time y’all have had. Update me.” She waves her hands as if that will draw words out of me.

“I’m not sure anything’s changed. He’s let his guard down a bit, and there have been moments that reminded me of when we were dating. But I don’t think things will ever be like they were.” I choose not to tell her about his fever kiss. But I think about it multiple times a day. Even when I’m sleeping.

“Have you considered—hear me out—talking to him about it? Come clean. Tell him you’re still in love and want him back.” Standing just off the porch, she grins like she’s just proposed the winning idea.

“Coming clean would involve telling him why I broke things off, and I haven’t told anyone that. Besides, he may not be interested now. We’ve both changed.”

“I don’t get why you don’t just tell him. It can’t be that bad. And so help me, do not use your weight as an excuse to avoid love.”

“I’m not avoiding love, Layla. I’m avoiding getting hurt.” I cross my arms, the blanket clutched to my chest. “And I’m not telling him because the reason would hurt him. And I’ve done enough of that already.”

“You cheated?” Her tone changes, and accusations flare in her eyes.

My head hurts too much for this conversation. “No. It’s nothing like that. Please don’t ask about the reason.”

She huffs. “I can’t fix this for you if you won’t work with me.”

“The only reason I’m not hugging you right now is because I care about you. It’s sweet that you want to fix it, but you can’t. If there is a solution, Archer and I have to find it.”

Nodding, she checks her phone. “I get it, but I want you to be happy. And this guy makes you happy. Anyone can see that from a mile away.”

“If he brings it up, I’ll talk to him.”

She steps a tiny bit closer. “Lettie, do you know how awesome you are? Not only do you have amazing hair that looks good when you roll out of bed, but you’re gorgeous and funny. And what man doesn’t want a woman who can make donuts? I know we stumbled into being roommates, but that was one of the best things that ever happened to me.”



“I feel cruddy, and all this sweet talk is going to make me cry. And I hate crying.” I wipe my nose. “When you grow up like I did, blending in and not being noticed was easier, safer. Guilt by association kind of messed me up, I guess.” I’ve told Layla snippets about how my mom behaved, but it’s embarrassing admitting them, so I rarely bring it up.

“You aren’t in your hometown anymore. No one around here knows your mom or cares what she did.”

“Sometimes I need that reminder.”

“Now, hurry and get better, so you and Archer can come to my wedding. You’re bringing him, aren’t you? Because of the smaller venue we fell in love with, we didn’t invite as many people, but you get a plus one.”

“I haven’t asked yet. But I will. I promise.”

“Good. Go rest. And eat. I bought lots of snackies.”

“I appreciate it.” I lean on the doorframe until her car is out of sight.

Lilith waves from the front porch of the venue office, and I return the wave, amazed with how at home I feel here. And Layla is right. In this town, no one knows that I grew up with a mom who drank too much and wasn’t always on the right side of the law.

As much as it hurt to lose contact with my mom, it was healthy for me. That’s clear now that she’s trying to get me to move back.

I dig through the bags Layla dropped off and put away anything that needs to stay cold.

I pop a few chocolates in my mouth, and then, snuggled under my blanket on the couch, I flip through channels.

Another car door slams, but it doesn’t sound like Archer’s truck. I roll off the sofa to go see who it is. Maybe Layla came back for some reason.

When I peek out the window, I gasp.

Wes is walking toward the door. But there’s no sign of my mom.

I lock my door, then grab my phone and shoot off a text to Archer.

**Me:** Mom’s boyfriend is here.

**Archer:** Hide in my place. And bolt that door. I’m on my way.

Trying not to panic, I gather my blanket and slip through the adjoining door. I pull my side closed, hoping that if Wes manages to get inside, he won’t notice that it’s unlocked. Then I bolt Archer’s side, run to his bedroom, and huddle in the back of his closet.

Maybe Wes will go away when I don’t answer the door. Lilith might notice a stranger on my porch and send help. Maybe a screech owl will

swoop down and scare the man away.

I'm focusing on all the ways this won't turn into a bad situation.

But I still haven't figured out what he wants with me.

# CHAPTER 16



## ARCHER

*M*y thoughtlessness now has me in the horse barn and my truck at the main house. I run out to the corral and shout, “I need your keys. Lettie’s in trouble.”

Anderson drops the hose, shuts off the water, and marches toward me. “Let’s go. I’ll drive.”

I want to believe that Lettie’s mom wouldn’t hurt her daughter, but that might not be true for Wes. I don’t know the man, but Lettie said he was bad news.

Dust billows behind us as Anderson tears down the dirt road. “Did you let Lilith know? Have you called the sheriff?”

“I’ll do it now.” I dial Lilith’s number.

She answers, sounding chipper. “The Stargazer. This is Lilith. How may I help you?” She clearly has no idea that Lettie’s in trouble.

I grip the door handle as Anderson rounds a curve at high speed. “Someone was at Lettie’s door. And I’m worried he may try to hurt her or take her. Anderson and I are headed that way.”

The friendly chipper voice is replaced with a determined one. “Lettie isn’t leaving this place unless she wants to. I’ll make sure of that.” She says something I can’t make out to someone else in the room. “See you soon.”

I end that call and dial the sheriff. Handling this on my own wouldn’t be wise. Besides, if this Wes guy does break into Lettie’s place, I want him arrested.

The dispatcher takes my information and assures me that a deputy is en route and not far away.

Trying to ease my panic, I close my eyes. “I should never have left her. If

anything happens . . .”

“This isn’t your fault, and blaming yourself does nothing to help the situation. Hang on. This is a sharp turn.”

“Where did you learn to drive like this?”

“Raced a bit in high school. And after, but that all stopped when my parents died and I got custody of my sister.” He takes another corner.

Lights flash up ahead, and I breathe a little easier. The dispatcher was right. There was a deputy close.

A crowd is gathered near our porch, and I’m scanning for Lettie. She isn’t there. But there is a man on the ground, and Miss Tandy is sitting on his back.

She stands as the deputy gets out of his car.

Anderson laughs as he skids to a stop. “Did you see how she had him pinned? This is a loveable bunch out here, isn’t it?”

“The best.” I launch out of the truck. “Where’s Lettie?”

Lilith shakes her head. “I looked all over her apartment but can’t find her.”

I want to pound the boyfriend, but not before finding Lettie. I walk to my side, then unlock my door. “I know where she is.”

I motion for everyone to wait outside.

The bolt is flipped, so she’s in here. “Lettie, it’s me.”

My bedroom is in the back, so I head there first. The closet is closed, and I rarely close that door.

Pulling it open, I call out, “It’s Hazy.”

Tears streaming down her face, she uncovers her ears and rushes toward me. I wrap my arms around her and hold her until the sobs quiet.

“You okay?”

She nods. “He kept calling my name and saying that we’d have a little fun before he dragged me home. I didn’t want to listen anymore.” She steps back and looks around. “Did he leave?”

“I’m not sure who got to him first, but Tandy was sitting on him when we pulled up. And someone from the sheriff’s office is here.”

With an arm around her shoulders, I lead her outside.

She stays near the door. “I don’t want to get anyone else sick.”

Wes tries to tug free of the deputy. “Your mother deserves better than you. All those years she spent raising you, and you won’t help her. You don’t deserve that money.”

Lettie shakes her head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Lilith hands me some papers and Lettie’s purse. “He had these in his hand when he came out.”

Glaring at Wes, Tandy puts one hand on her hip, then holds out her phone. “And I recorded the nasty things you were saying.”

The deputy flashes her a warning look.

And Lilith puts a hand on Tandy’s shoulder, probably to keep her from lunging at Wes. He’s in handcuffs, and I’m pretty sure he’d lose in a fight with Tandy. Anyone would.

During the next half hour while deputies are writing their report and Lilith is talking to someone about fixing the broken doorknob, Lettie is fading. She clearly doesn’t feel well.

A deputy, whose badge reads Gallagher, pulls me aside. “I think I have everything I need from your friend. She can go in and lie down. It’s obvious she’s unwell.”

“Thanks. Will you keep me posted?” I glance over my shoulder to make sure Lettie isn’t close enough to hear. “He mentioned money, but we have no idea what that’s about or why he came to drag her back to our hometown. She left for a reason.”

He pats my shoulder, then hands me a card. “My name’s Eli. The card has my info. And I’ll let y’all know what we find out.”

“Thanks so much.” I make my way back to Lettie. “Let’s get you inside, and then I’ll go scrounge us up some dinner.”

“Okay. I really need to go sleep again.” She leans into me when I wrap an arm around her. “I don’t know what money he’s talking about.”

“Don’t worry about that right now.”

I lead her inside. “Bed or couch?”

“Couch. I want to be able to hear if someone is outside.”

Since her doorknob is broken, I guide her to my couch. Here, she won’t be bothered while the repair happens, and I won’t worry as much about leaving her. But I’d rather not be away from her at all right now. “Instead of leaving, I’ll see if someone can—”

She pats my chest. “You can go. I’m okay.”

I drape a blanket over her. “I won’t be long. And I’ll lock up everything.”

As soon as I step outside, I remember that my truck is sitting in front of the main house. And everyone cleared out after the excitement died down. I’ll just have to take Lettie’s car.

I go back inside, and she's asleep, curled up on her side.

All the craziness wore her out. It has me questioning everything. When I got that text from her, I didn't panic because a friend was in trouble. I was terrified of losing her. Again. But I'm equally afraid of trusting her with my heart.

And that doesn't even make sense because she sort of has it already.

As I reach for the door, someone knocks. Still rattled, I peek out the window. Anderson holds up two plates covered in foil.

I pull open the door. "You brought food."

"I did. Ava also sent dessert. That's still in my truck. I didn't want to risk dropping it." He sets the food on the counter, then drops his voice to a lower volume. "If you give me your keys, I'll make sure your truck makes it over here."

After handing over my keys, I rub the back of my neck. "Thanks for everything today."

"Any time. And if y'all need anything, you have my number." He runs to the truck and comes back with a small box. "Pie. I'll text when we're headed back with your truck."

"I can go later and get it if it's a hassle."

"Not a hassle, and I think someone needs you right now." He swings the keys around his finger. "Have a good one."

\* \* \*

LETTIE SETS her plate on the coffee table and leans her head back. "Ava is a good cook."

"She is. I used to say she was the best, but then I tasted your food."

"Everyone has been so nice." She wraps the afghan around her, then glances at my lap.

I grab one of her throw pillows and set it on my leg. "Cuddle up."

I hesitate to ask her more about Wes and how things were at home before she left, but there's stuff she's not telling me.

Lettie's phone lights up, and the word Mom flashes on the screen.

"I think we should see what she wants."

Lettie nods, so I swipe to answer, and she says, "Hello."

"You set him up and had him arrested? You're awful. Your father left me

with nothing. Nothing! And I sacrificed to take care of you. But your grandparents couldn't be bothered to help. But now, they leave money for you. That's not right. I deserve it. So get your tail back home and sign whatever papers are needed so that I get the money." Her words are slurred, and she practically spews the entire rant in one breath.

"What grandparents?" Lettie sits up. "You said my grandparents died right after dad did."

There is silence for nearly a full second.

"Mom, why would you lie about something like that?" Lettie is tearing up.

"They weren't nice people. I did you a favor. Now come home and do this for me."

I reach to end the call, but Lettie shakes her head. "You sent Wes to bring me home so that . . . what? How were you planning to get me to sign everything over?"

"We had a plan. But you messed it up by getting him arrested."

Lettie taps the screen and ends the call. "I'm not sure I want to know what her plan was." She lies back down, her head in my lap. "I moved out because Wes kept walking into my room unannounced if I didn't have the door locked. Then one day I came home and my knob had been changed to one without a lock. When I told Mom that he made me uncomfortable, she screamed at me for trying to steal her boyfriend and told me to move out. So I did. That's when I moved here."

I run my fingers through her dark hair, wishing I could erase all the yuck from her past.

"The saddest part is that my mom wasn't like this when Dad was alive. She was wonderful, loving. I was only seven, but I remember. Even before the funeral, she started drinking. And it turned her into someone awful."

Staying quiet, I keep my fingers moving through her hair, letting her vent.

"I barely remember my dad's parents. Their house had a porch that wrapped all the way around. It was on some land, I think."

"Where did they live?"

"I don't remember. It was a long drive from where we were. I'll have to search and see what I can figure out. But it sounds like it's too late to see them again."

"Clearly, they never forgot about you."

"I'm surprised. It's been nearly twenty years since I've seen them." She



wipes her face. "I can't believe they left me money."

"I can't believe your mother went to such lengths to steal it from you."

"Sadly, I'm not all that surprised. Thankfully, Lilith, Mindy, and Tandy stopped Wes before he ran off with my social security card and ID. That would've been a mess." She rolls to her back and looks up at me. "How did they stop him? Did you find out?"

"I'm sketchy on most of the details, but from what I gather, Lilith dropped a diamond earring near his car. It was left at the venue, and they've been holding it until it gets picked up. The diamond is large and noticeable. When he went to leave, he noticed it, of course, and bent down to pick it up. And when he did, Lilith whacked him with a piece of lumber. Then Tandy pounced and kept him on the ground until the deputy arrived."

"That was Tessa's cousin. He comes in for donuts a lot. Nice guy."

"I'm sorry I wasn't here. I'm sorry you had to hide in my closet and hear Wes say those things."

"I knew you'd come."

As soon as she's well, I need to pull back. It's not fair to make it seem like we're an item if I won't let that happen. She deserves someone who will make her happy. Who will always show up when she needs someone. If things were different, that person would be me.

But hurt is a powerful motivator. And it's motivating me to back off and keep myself from getting blindsided again.

I pick up the remote and stop stroking her hair. "How about a movie?"

She snuggles closer. "Whatever you want."

I want to know why she ended the relationship, but I won't tell her that.

Also, I want her doorknob to be fixed before it's time for bed. Because if she sleeps in mine, my sheets will smell like her. I don't need that right now.

# CHAPTER 17



## LETTIE

I'm out of bed and showered when Archer gets back from work.

I lean on the frame of the adjoining door, which hasn't been closed since Wes was here. "Hey there. I think I've finally kicked this thing."

He's pulling off his shirt as he walks through the living room. "Awesome. Let me shower real quick, and I'll get us some dinner."

"I cooked. It'll be done in a few minutes."

Just before disappearing into his room, he says, "I'll be fast. Thanks."

Layla has texted me more than a dozen times today, reminding me to ask about the wedding.

Why am I nervous about inviting Archer? He's been nothing but sweet while I've been sick, but after the whole break-in episode, he's been different. Distant.

There could be a hundred explanations for it. Maybe the whole thing with my mom reminds him how messed up my family is and he's pulling away. Or it could be that he was overwhelmed with my sobbing when he found me in the closet. I didn't mean to be clingy in that moment, but maybe I was.

The other possibility is the most likely. After he spent days seeing me at my worst, he's turned off. I probably shouldn't have cuddled my chubby self up against him.

But I promised Layla I would ask, so I will. And I won't cry if he says no. Going to a wedding alone isn't a big deal.

As soon as the shower shuts off, I ready the table and plate up dinner. I shouldn't be nervous. The guy takes his shirt off around me all the time. Going to a wedding with me won't be that big a deal. That's what I keep telling myself as I get the table set.

He sighs as he drops into a chair. “Smells great. Thanks for cooking.”

“It felt good to be productive.” I set a plate in front of him.

We eat in silence for a few minutes.

I clear my throat and force words out. “My friend Layla is having her wedding a week from tomorrow. Technically it’s a celebration since they’re already married, but people will still be all dressed up. There will be cake and dancing. And Nico will get the moment of seeing Layla walk up the aisle.”

“Cool.” Archer nods and continues eating.

“Anyway, I was wondering if you wanted to go with me. As a friend.” I stare at my plate, my avoidance alarms going off in my head.

For a second, the only sound is forks clinking against plates.

But he finally says, “Umm. Things have been pretty busy just because so many of us were sick. So I should probably stick around the ranch and get stuff done. Thanks for the invite though.” His tone is friendly, but the words are no less crushing.

“No worries. I get it. I bet there is a ton to do.” I carry my plate into the kitchen, then call out, “Want seconds?”

“I’m good.” He sets his plate on the counter. “Since you’re feeling better, I’m going to go to crochet night with the ladies. I’m supposed to be teaching them a new stitch tonight.”

“Sure. Yeah. Have fun.”

He taps the doorframe. “You can come if you want.”

“No thanks. I have lots to catch up on around here.” And I want time to cry alone while he isn’t eavesdropping from the other side of the wall. “I’ll see you later. And now that the whole mom mess is over, I don’t need a ride to work tomorrow.”

“Good. Okay.” Gazing at me, he opens his mouth, then snaps it closed.

I can’t be mad at him. This is only a taste of how he felt when I broke things off, which only makes me feel more awful.

But it looks like I’m going to the wedding alone. Oh joy.

\* \* \*

LAYLA WALTZES INTO THE SHOP, way too happy for this time of the morning. “I’m glad you’re feeling better. How are things with Archer? Have you invited him?”

“He’s busy with the ranch and can’t go.” I keep my focus on the glass case as I load it full of donuts.

The news must be shocking because it’s rendered Layla silent. That lasts less than a minute. “But he’s been so sweet to you. I thought—you know—boyfriend trap.”

“Nope.” I trudge back to the kitchen to get another tray.

The bell jingles, and Layla’s warm “Good morning” rings out.

“Yeah. I’d like a coffee and a half dozen. Just surprise me with the flavors.” Anderson has been coming in a lot, and he never specifies what donuts he wants.

Layla laughs. “You are all about surprises, aren’t you?”

“I like them, I guess. But with donuts, it’s just easier. I don’t have to decide. Sometimes it’s just nice when someone else makes the decision.”

My friend grins at me as I slide the last tray into the case. “I have an idea.”

“Morning, Anderson. Sounds like y’all are really busy at the ranch.” I wipe my hands on my apron.

He shrugs. “No more than normal.”

I refuse to cry.

Layla drapes an arm around my shoulders, which makes me concerned about what she’s planning to say. “My bestie doesn’t have a date for my wedding, and since you are single and things aren’t busy on the ranch, I was thinking that maybe you could be her date. Just friends, you know. Nothing weird. But I’d hate for her to spend the whole evening sitting by herself. That’s no fun.”

I have no words. This must be a bad dream.

Anderson rubs his beard. “Is Archer not going with you?”

As I shake my head, Layla throws out the whole truth. “He can’t go because things are so busy at the ranch right now.”

Anderson winces, then nods. “Sure. I’ll accompany you to the wedding.” He tips his head and fixes his gaze on me. “If that’s what you want.”

I can try turning down this pity date, but Layla will make me wish I hadn’t, so I swallow my pride. “That would be nice.”

“Great. I’ll text you later, and you can send me the details.” He picks up his box.

“Okay.” I smile. “You didn’t get very many donuts this time.”

“Not taking them to the ranch this morning.” He takes a sip of his coffee.

“These are for me and my sister. She finally made time in her schedule to see her big brother.”

“What a great brother.” Layla waves.

“I try.” He strides out of the shop.

And Layla slaps my arm. “If things don’t work out with Archer, you should date Anderson. He’s kind of swoony. Not like Nico—”

“Layla, stop. I don’t want to talk about it.” I retreat to the back and prep for tomorrow.

Archer made up an excuse to avoid spending time with me. I’m not sure which part bothers me more—that he couldn’t tell me the truth or that he doesn’t want to spend time with me.

When I get home, I flop on the sofa and pull out my phone. It’s been a while since I messaged Crocheting-Cowboy, and what happened today seems like a good excuse to send another message.

Regretful-Raccoon: Hi! I miss chatting with you. How are things going?

He may not answer for a while, so I push off the couch and pull out cleaning supplies. Keeping busy is my only hope of not sobbing into my pillow. And I’ll do anything to avoid a crying fit. Even clean.

# CHAPTER 18



## ARCHER

*I*'m out repairing a fence when Anderson rides up. It's unusual to see him riding horses out this way.

"What's up?" I look up in acknowledgment, then get back to work.

After getting off the horse, he shoves his hands in his pockets. "I have something to tell you, but it'd be best if you put those pliers down first."

"I can work and talk. What's going on?"

"Remember when I said I wouldn't ask Lettie out?"

Tool hanging by my side, I stare at him. "You didn't."

"That's correct. *I* didn't. *But*. And this part is important. Her friend, the one with the wedding ring, is getting married. Or something like that because she already has a ring, so I don't know what that's about—"

"It's a celebration. What about it?"

"Anyway, when I was getting donuts this morning on the way to meet up with my sister. She says Hi by the way. I told her about you. And she's glad I'm making friends."

"You're stalling."

"That lady—"

"Layla."

"Yes. That's her name. She asked me to go to the wedding with Lettie, and Lettie said she'd like that, so I'm accompanying her. *As a friend*. It's not like a date or anything. But since you are so *busy* on the ranch and can't make it, she was trying to find someone else." He shifts his stance. "I'll be a perfect gentleman. And when we dance, I'll keep my hands in friendly places. Obviously. I'd do that anyway, but I'm just making that clear because of the situation."



Friendly places? I hate the idea of Lettie and Anderson going together, but it's not like I have a say. I'm the one who turned down her invitation. "Things *are* busy."

"Phooey. They aren't any busier than normal. Why don't you want to go with her?" His gaze falls to the tool in my hand as he steps closer. "What happened?"

"The scare with that guy rattled me, but I can't rekindle anything without knowing what went wrong. And she won't tell me."

"Does it really matter?"

"To me it does. Imagine you have a puzzle and one piece is missing. That's the way I feel. I want to trust her. But there is one piece missing, and it messes up everything. So I'm pulling back. I'm still friendly with her, but a whole night of dancing? I don't think that's a good idea." I can't resist giving Anderson a bit of a hard time even though I don't blame him for saying yes. "And I still know where you live."

"I could move." He flashes a grin. "But it's no fun going solo to a wedding. You want her to have fun, right?"

Nodding, I resume work on the fence. "Yeah. But it bothers me that she'll be having fun with someone else. And that's dumb because I'm the one who said no."

"I'm glad you aren't mad at me. Also, I need her number."

I slide my phone out of my pocket and toss it over. "It's in my contacts."

"There's a popup saying that you have a message from Regretful-Raccoon. Are you chatting about wildlife or is this someone special?" He laughs.

"It's nothing." That is a complete lie.

Why is she messaging me?

He cocks his head. "The tone in your voice tells me it's the opposite of nothing. But if you're serious about finding someone new, I hope it works out."

Choosing to ignore that last part, I wipe the beads of sweat off my neck. "When you were at the donut shop, did Lettie say anything about me?"

"Yep." He scrunches up his face. "She made a comment about things being busy at the ranch, and I said that they were no busier than normal. Then when I asked why you weren't going with her to the wedding thing, she said because you had too much to do on the ranch. That's all she said about you."

"Dang it. She knows I'm making up excuses."

And that's why she's messaging Crocheting-Cowboy. She's reaching out because I hurt her. What the heck am I supposed to do now? I need to come clean about the messages, but I'm not even sure how to bring it up. And maybe Crocheting-Cowboy can put a smile on her face. Is that so wrong?

"Pretty sure she put that together. I guess this means that things are complicated again."

"For sure." I trim off the end of a wire. "If I could make myself not care about why we broke up, that would solve everything."

"It makes sense why you can't let that go. A puzzle with one piece missing would bug me too. But she may have a good reason for not telling you."

"Maybe. But it's the only thing keeping us apart at this point. If I make a big deal out of that, then she'll feel pressured to tell me. And I'd feel like a jerk for doing that."

He hands back my phone. "If you change your mind, just say the word, and you can go as her date."

"Thanks, Anderson."

He swings up onto his horse, then taps away on his phone. Does it bother me that he's texting Lettie? Absolutely.

When I get home that evening, the adjoining door is closed. I trudge back to take a shower, glad I ate at the mess hall before coming back here. As I undress, I find myself listening for any signs of life on the other side of the wall.

But Lettie is quiet.

After my shower, I flop onto the bed and stare at the message on Reddit. She finished with a question. Ignoring it would be rude, but I'm not ready to admit that we've been chatting for months.

I tap out a quick answer and hit send before I can question it too much.

Crocheting-Cowboy: I'm okay.

I don't add a question at the end.

This is the new normal with Lettie, and I don't like it one bit.

\* \* \*

I'M AWAKE SUPER EARLY. After taking Lettie to work for so long, my brain

shifted to a new schedule. But I stay in bed, listening while she gets ready. I haven't seen her since Anderson asked me for her number. And that's not for lack of trying. I've gone out to the porch in the evenings. Last night, I knocked, but she didn't answer. I ended up eating both slices of pie by myself.

This isn't going to change unless I do something. So I slide out of bed and get dressed.

Quietly, I slip out to the front porch and wait.

At three thirty, she steps outside, her purse tucked under her arm, and locks her door.

I walk up beside her. "Morning."

Startled, she yelps and drops her purse. "Archer, what in the world? You scared the goobers out of me."

"You don't much need goobers, but I'm sorry about scaring you. Just wanted to say hi, and you couldn't avoid me if you didn't know I'd be here." I nod to my truck. "Want a ride to work?"

She shrugs, then after picking up her purse, she walks to my truck.

I open her door. "It's my turn to say that I don't want you to hate me."

Gazing at me, she blinks. "Don't ever lie to me. I don't like it."

"I apologize. It was a jerk move." I run around and slide in behind the wheel. "After we were both sick and all the cuddling, I . . ." I'm working really hard not to put my foot in my mouth.

"You needed space. I get it. You've been clear about not dating again. I respect that. I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable." She turns to face me. "Truce?"

I hold out my hand. "Friends again?"

She shakes my hand and nods.

We ride in silence until we get to the shop. Then as she gets out, she says, "I'm not mad that you aren't going to the wedding. Anderson seems really cool. I think it'll be fun."

"Totally." I'm not sure if she's trying to make me feel better or attempting to turn me into a seething green monster. "I hope you have fun."

Just not too much fun.

\* \* \*

It's the day of the wedding, and I keep checking the time. I've burned through my list of chores, but I don't want to be at the house when Anderson shows up at Lettie's door. I can't bear to see her all dressed up and on his arm.

Choosing Dag's method of killing time and stewing over feelings, I drive out to the pasture and toss the barrel for the bull. Fetch brings it right back. Over and over, I play this silly game with the beast.

"I'll toss it a couple more times. Then I have to go. I have plans." I must look like a complete dork talking to a bull. "I'm meeting Mason in the game room. He'll keep me distracted while Lettie and Anderson are at the wedding. Hopefully, he doesn't decide to talk about kissing tonight."

The bull knocks the barrel back to me.

When my phone buzzes, I answer without looking to see who it is. "Hello."

Anderson sounds upset. "I need your help."

"What's wrong?"

"My sister called me. Someone ran a light and smashed her car. Police aren't even on the scene yet. So I need you to either help a sobbing eighteen-year-old fill out an accident report and file an insurance claim or go with Lettie to the wedding."

"Since you're in your truck, I think you've already made your choice. And I don't handle sobbing well."

"That makes two of us. But all joking aside, I don't even know how injured my sister is. She swears she's fine, but I'll believe it when I see it. And it's not fair to cancel on Lettie at the last minute, but my sister needs me. *Please*. I promise you this is not a ruse to get you to spend time with your ex."

"And if I say no?"

"I'll call Lettie, explain what happened, and she'll be all alone at the wedding. But, who knows, maybe Dag will have some friends there. Hopefully they keep their hands in friendly places too." The man is very persuasive.

"Where do I need to be and when?"

His relief is audible. "I'm supposed to pick her up in forty-five minutes. Do you own a suit?"

"Yeah. The same one I wear to all the weddings around here. I need to run. I'm currently playing fetch with a bull, and I stink to high heaven."

Anderson laughs, then ends the call.

I never asked if he was going to let Lettie know the change of plans.

While I drive home, I call Kent. I hate to cancel on Mason, but hopefully, the kid understands.

The phone rings twice before Kent answers. “What’s up, Archer?”

“I was supposed to meet Mason in the game room—”

“Oh really?” Kent didn’t even give me time to explain. “Hang on.” He calls to Mason.

There’s a bit of shuffling, and the kid comes on the line. “Hey, Archer. I can’t play tonight. Clementine invited me to go to one of those jumping places. I forgot to call you. I’m sorry.”

I laugh. “Have fun, buddy.”

“Yeah. You too. Maybe you can see if your friend that’s a girl wants to hang out or something. Does she like to play video games?”

“Great idea. And she does like video games.”

“Very cool. Gotta go!” He ends the call as I near the venue.

Instead of ditching the kid to spend the evening with Lettie, he dropped me in favor of Clementine. That’s funny.

# CHAPTER 19



## LETTIE

Staring at the mirror, I barely recognize the woman looking back at me. I spent hours at Layla's, and makeup artists made us all look beautiful. I should've paid more attention so that I can do my makeup like this again. The photographer snapped pictures while we got all dolled up and took a few of us together in our dresses.

Next to Layla and her sister, I feel giant. Not just because of my weight, but even height wise. They are both short. I have at least six inches on both of them.

I glance at the adjoining door. Is it wrong that I want Archer to see me before the makeup gets messed up? He left early this morning, and I haven't heard anything from that side all day.

Anderson is supposed to be here in half an hour, so I need to get into my dress. I wasn't about to drive across town in that thing. It's very fitted, and I'm not sure the seams would've handled a thirty-minute car ride.

Thankfully, the wedding is being held at the winery close to here, so it'll only be a few minutes' drive to get there. I can hold my breath most of the way.

I wiggle into my dress, then slip on the coordinating heels.

Panic was my first reaction when Layla showed me the deep plum dress she wanted me to wear. It shows off my shoulders, hugs my curves, and has a slit that goes up past my knee. But once I tried it on, she convinced me.

And Layla isn't a twig, but her curves are toned and in all the right places. Mine only look that way because of the shapewear underneath.

My phone rings, and I snatch it up when I see Anderson's name on the screen. "Hello?"

The signal isn't good, and I can only make out disjointed words. ". . .sorry. But . . . disappoint you." Everything goes quiet, and I glance at the screen to see if the call is still connected. Then he's back. "I hope you understand." And the call drops.

I didn't understand the reason why, but it sounds to me like Anderson will not be at my door in twenty minutes.

Almost like the world has to rub salt in my wounds, the shower comes on next door. Archer is getting cleaned up to spend a quiet night busy with chores.

Crocheting-Cowboy has only been sending short replies when I message, and maybe he's tired of me. But that doesn't stop me from opening the app. Ignoring all the brain cells screaming that it's a horrible idea to send a picture and not caring how desperate for a compliment it makes me look, I take a photo in the mirror. After covering my head with a happy face, I send the photo to him.

Regretful-Raccoon: My best friend is getting married, and I'm all dressed up, which is kind of fun. I hope things get better for you and you are more than just okay soon.

Aside from moving here, sending him my picture might be the bravest or stupidest thing I've ever done. And I toss my phone on the table so that I don't delete it. The worst that can happen is he'll ignore it completely.

Since I'm not waiting on anyone, I should probably just drive over early. But that'll be five more minutes of Layla asking why Anderson didn't come.

And I don't have any answers.

At the designated pickup time, I hook my purse on my arm and walk out the front door. Then I stop because my phone is still where I left it, and I want it with me.

I unlock my door and go back to my bedroom. My phone lights up as I approach, and I smile at the message.

Crocheting-Cowboy: Stunning. I wish the happy face wasn't blocking the view.

Regretful-Raccoon: Then anonymity would be wiped out.

There's a knock at my front door, and I focus on not twisting my ankle as I walk. It's been a while since I've worn heels this tall. Perhaps my



assumptions about Anderson's call were wrong. I guess he was warning me he'd be late instead of apologizing for not showing.

The door swings open, and my heart does a little dance, then stops.

Archer is at the door, dressed in a dark suit. "I got my chores done early, and Anderson's sister was in an accident. Did he call you?"

Nodding, I admire my cowboy, or more accurately the man I wish were mine. "The connection was bad, and I didn't understand anything he said."

"You look stunning, Lettie. Simply incredible." He holds out his hand. "I'd like to be your date for the evening if that's okay with you."

As much as I want Archer to be my date, knowing he's only doing it because Anderson can't be here makes me want to decline his offer. But the man is in a suit. And he smells like leather and moonlight. Until this moment, I never considered the scent of moonlight, but this is it.

"I don't . . . if you don't want . . ."

He steps closer and links his fingers with mine. "I want to. We're friends. I shouldn't have said no to begin with."

Friends. I was so happy with that word only weeks ago. But now it's a rain shower on my hope parade.

"Okay." I squeeze his hand. "Thanks for saving me from being alone tonight. I owe you one."

"No. You don't owe me anything, Lettie." He keeps hold of my hand until we're to his truck. "I didn't have time to run it through a car wash, so be careful not to brush against it."

Archer doesn't let go of my hand until I'm in the seat.

While he walks around to the driver's side, I shift, trying to figure out how I can sit without showing off my entire leg.

He climbs behind the wheel. "Where are we headed? Anderson didn't tell me that part."

"The winery across the road from the goat farm." That description would sound crazy to someone not familiar with the area, but he nods as he shifts into gear.

\* \* \*

LAYLA PULLS ME ASIDE. "Archer came! This is what I was hoping would happen." She glances over her shoulder and waves at Nico.

“You didn’t arrange to have someone smash into Anderson’s sister, did you?” I know she didn’t, but I can’t resist the tease.

“What? No! Accident?”

“That’s why he didn’t come. He drove into San Antonio to go help his sister. And she’s okay. Not injured, but her car is a mess.”

“I didn’t want that. I was hoping jealousy would wake up your cowboy.” She rolls her eyes. “He needed to see you in that dress. What did he say?”

“He said I was stunning.” Having both guys use the same word feels like an odd but validating coincidence.

“You are! I’m going to go dance with my husband now. And I better see y’all on that dance floor.” She points at me. “I mean it.”

I nod, but I’m not asking Archer to dance. If he offers, I will launch into his arms, but I won’t bring it up.

He’s waiting for me at the table, watching as the dance floor fills with people. “What was that about?”

“I was telling Layla about what happened to Anderson’s sister.” I ease into the chair beside him, careful of my slit.

“What do you say? Should we get out there? It’s been a while, but I bet we’ll remember what to do.”

I remember the nights Archer and I practiced dance steps in my kitchen. It took us awhile before it looked like we were dancing and not wrestling. Mostly because I’m not great at letting anyone else lead.

He presses a hand to the small of my back, his thumb touching my skin. A bow across the back covers the middle, but now I’m conscious of the parts the bow doesn’t cover.

When we get onto the dance floor, I slide my hand into his and rest the other on his shoulder. “Earlier when I opened my front door and saw you standing there, I was silent for a second.”

“I surprised you, huh?”

“That wasn’t it, Archer. Seeing you all dressed up is a treat. I was savoring the moment.”

There’s heat in his gaze as he stares down at me. He opens his mouth but then closes it again.

I’m the reason he’s drawn the line at friends. And thanks to that fever, I know why. It’s hard to imagine loving anyone else.

We circle the dance floor, song after song, and memories flood back as I follow his lead.

The deejay plays a slow song, and Archer tugs me closer.

After knowing him so long, it's easy to see that he's at war with himself.

I won't give up the possibility of happiness to shield him from what his grandmother said to me. If he ends up agreeing with her or hating me for telling him, I won't end up any worse off than I am now. If not knowing the reason is the only thing holding him back, I'll change that. I've hid the reason for too long.

Inching even closer, I ask, "Later, when this is over, can we talk about what happened with us? It's time you know the truth."

His arm tightens around me. "Absolutely."

"Here isn't a great place to talk." I squeeze his hand. "I'd rather have the conversation when we're alone."

He smiles down at me, then presses a quick kiss to my forehead. "I can wait until we get home."

Is it too much to hope that one conversation will bring us back together?

\* \* \*

ARCHER LOOSENS his tie as we walk off the dance floor. His suit coat is draped over his chair, and we've danced for hours. It's taken great restraint not to pull him to my lips and kiss him like he kissed me when he was sick.

I sit down at the table, and he strides off to get us something to drink. A rumble catches my attention, and I look at the weather on my phone. I didn't know there were storms in the forecast.

Dag waves from the other side of the room, then gives me a thumbs-up. I wasn't really thinking about how Archer and I had an audience.

Archer hands me a bottle of water. "I need to go soon. Clint texted. They are taking care of a few things before the storm hits. It wasn't supposed to be a big deal, but now the weather guys are changing their tune. Dag is the groom's cousin, and Anderson is still in San Antonio, so they need my help." He brushes a finger on my bare shoulder. "But I shouldn't be too long. Then we can talk when I get back."

Leaning close, I whisper, "Please change before you go. I don't want anything happening to that suit."

"Like it, do you?"

I like who's in it. "I do. A lot."

His smile has my insides all aflutter.

After drinking my water, I touch his arm. “Let me say goodbye to Nico and Layla; then we can go.”

“I’ll walk over with you.” His hand touches my back as soon as we stand. And this time all those callused fingers are touching skin.

I weave my way through the crowd, with Archer by my side. And Layla grins as we approach.

“Everything was perfect.” I give her a hug. “Archer and I are going to head out. He has to take care of a few things before the ranch gets pummeled.”

“I’m upset with the meteorologists. The rain wasn’t supposed to be here until tomorrow.”

Archer says, “I thought rain on a wedding day was good luck or something.”

Layla wraps her arm around Nico’s when he eases up beside her. “I don’t need luck. I have this guy.”

Nico shakes Archer’s hand. “Thanks for celebrating with us. And I hope for y’all’s sake that it’s a quiet night. Steady rain but nothing more.”

“That would be great. We can use the rain. The rest, not so much.” Archer tucks an arm around my waist. “Have a great night.”

Layla grins. “We will.”

Archer leads me out to the truck.

When he opens my door, I rest a hand on his chest before climbing in. “Tonight has been amazing.”

“Yeah.” His gaze drops to my lips, then snaps back up. “I’m glad I came.”

“Me too.” I hold his hand and settle into my seat.

There is an air of anticipation between us, and I’m a bit miffed at the storm that I have to wait even longer to tell him.

On the drive home, we chat about the evening. When lightning streaks across the sky, his grasp on the steering wheel tightens. Since losing his parents, storms always make him nervous. He was eleven when high winds knocked a tree into a power line, which started a fire. His dad got Archer out of the house first then went back in for his wife. Neither of Archer’s parents survived.

I’m impressed that he can shove it aside and work on the ranch with the lightning and thunder constantly reminding him of that awful night.

“I admire that you aren’t locking yourself at home right now.”

He shoots me a side glance. “Fear won’t bring them back. I try not to think about it and just do what needs doing.”

“You’re brave, Archer.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” He pulls up in front of the house. “I’ll get out of this suit you like so much, then drive over. I’ll be back as quick as I can.”

I slide out and catch Archer’s hand as we walk to the porch. “Please be careful.”

“Always.” Outside my front door, he wraps me in a hug. His breath tickles my neck when he whispers, “I like this dress.” He trails a finger along the space under the bow. “A lot.”

I press a quick kiss to his cheek, and it’s all I can do not to continue dotting kisses on his face until I get to his mouth. “Thank you. But you need to go.”

He nods, then walks to his door. “See you in a bit.”

How am I going to contain myself until he gets back? This feels like a big deal, like a pivot point for us.

My happily ever after might be one admission away.

# CHAPTER 20



## ARCHER

*I*t's never fun when cattle get loose, but with a storm brewing, it's worse. Grayson and I are herding cows off the road, trying to get them corralled before the rain gets here.

Lightning streaks across the sky, and a loud thunderclap startles us both.

Grayson shakes his head. "I don't like being out here."

"Lightning is getting close."

The cows don't like the lightning either. The ringleader darts across the road and hurries back onto the ranch. Where she goes the other cows follow. And when we finally have them all back inside the fence, I breathe a sigh of relief.

"I'll do a patch job on this stretch of fence. Once the cows make it through the other gate, you can head on home." I want to get back to Lettie, but Grayson has been out here longer.

"Appreciate it. Daisy is blowing up my phone." He grins. "She worries about me."

"Because she loves you." I wasn't sure Grayson would ever talk to a woman long enough to fall in love, but he did. And Daisy makes him happy.

"Hey, how did tonight go? I heard you went to the wedding with Lettie."

"Good. I'm glad I went." Dancing with Lettie was everything I'd hoped it would be, but also painful. Until she told me she wanted to talk.

"She loves you, Archer." He waves and follows the cows to the gate.

I drive to the tool barn, get what I need for a patch job, and hurry back out to the broken fence. As I nail boards into place, I try to think of every possible thing Lettie could give as the reason. It wasn't something I did, and it wasn't cheating. Beyond that, I can't fathom what it could be.

Maybe her mom threatened her. That's entirely possible. But to what end?

The phone buzzes in my pocket, and I slide it out.

There are two notifications on the screen. A message from Lettie and one from Regretful-Raccoon.

**Lettie:** I've been watching the weather, and the red band is now purple. Please be careful.

Regretful-Raccoon: This will likely be my last message. I've decided that I should tell my ex the secret I've been hiding. It's not like a secret baby or anything. Nothing that big. Just something someone said. But I'm nervous. It's storming here, and I hope that's not an omen for how the night will end. I'm messaging because I wanted to thank you for our chats and for the compliment earlier. I hope you get everything you want out of life.

I shove the phone back in my pocket, then yank it back out to reply to Lettie's text.

**Me:** Cows are out of the road and back where they belong. I'm fixing a fence and then making sure the tool barn is closed up. I'll head home after that.

She likes the message, and I finish the temporary repair on the fence. I just need it to hold until tomorrow.

Rain drops start pelting the truck as soon as I climb in. Thankfully, everything I need to do is just about wrapped up.

As I'm driving toward the tool barn, my phone buzzes. I swipe to answer and put it on speaker. "Hey, Anderson. How's your sister?"

"No injuries, but I'm guessing her car is totaled. The guy has insurance, so it'll work out okay. But listen, I left my horse out in the pasture for the night, and I'm seeing the weather reports. When I raced off, I wasn't even thinking about my horse. I called Parker, but he didn't answer."

"No worries. I'm guessing he brought in all the horses, but I'll drive by there and make sure. You staying in San Antonio tonight?"

"Probably not. But I'll let this blow over before I drive home. Thanks, Archer. And how'd it go tonight?"

"Good. I'll have more of an update after I get back. Lettie wants to talk. So I might finally learn why she broke up with me."

"Then you'll have no reason to stay broken up. But, just because I'm curious, is there anything she can say that would change how you feel about



her?”

“Have you been reading relationship advice columns or something? What sort of a question is that?”

He laughs. “Just think about it. You act like not knowing why changes the way you feel about her. Does it?”

I veer left and head toward the horse barn. “After I know the reason, that question won’t matter. And right now, I’m thinking about locating your horse.”

“Much appreciated. Be safe.” He ends the call.

After a survey of the pastures, I slide open the door. Parker’s truck isn’t here, but this place has been buttoned up. And Anderson’s horse is in its stall. I snap a quick picture and send it off in a text to him.

Then I slosh through the mud, get back in the truck, and drive over to the tool barn. Doors are still open, and one is swinging back and forth. Too much of that and it’ll come off its hinges. I return the tools, turn off the lights, and close all the doors.

Now finally, I can go home.

As I drive past the main house, Beau flags me down.

I roll down my window. “What’s up?”

“Keep your eyes open while you head back. The lightning is bad tonight. If you see anything on fire, let us know.”

“Will do.” I raise the window and bump down the wet road.

I hope with everything in me that I don’t see anything on fire. Storms are hard enough with all the memories they dredge up, but fire takes it to a whole other level.

The roads are empty because everyone with any sense is safe at home. And in a couple of minutes, I’ll also be home. Where Lettie is.

After making a left onto the road that leads to the venue, I notice an eerie orange glow. Something near the venue is on fire. I press down on the accelerator, and lean forward, scanning the area.

Even before turning into the venue, I call Beau. “Hey, something is definitely on fire at the venue. I’m almost to the gate. Then I’ll know more.”

“Garrett stepped outside and saw the flames from his place. He called it in. I’m yanking on my boots now. Be there soon.” Beau sounds calm, even though I know he isn’t. “Don’t do anything dumb. Wait for us to get there.”

“I’m not risking myself to save a building, Beau. I lost my parents in a fire.”

He's quiet for a second. "I didn't know."

This whole night with Lettie has me opening up to everyone.

I turn and pull through the gate, prepared to give Beau an update.

"Oh, no! Hurry! It's not the venue on fire. It's our house."

Flames lick the sky above my side of the duplex. But there's no sign of Lettie.

Beau is no longer calm. "Don't go inside."

"I'm worried about Lettie." I skid to a stop far away from the house and don't bother hanging up before racing toward the door. Mud slows me down, but nothing will stop me from getting inside, not even memories.

"Lettie!" I touch her door before shoving it open, making sure that I won't be met with a wall of flames. The rain is still coming down, but it's not stopping the fire.

Inside, I blink, my eyes burning from the smoke. Her purse is lying on the table near the door, and I hook it over my shoulder. "Where are you, Lettie?"

Then I pray that she answers.

# CHAPTER 21



## LETTIE

What is Archer doing in here?

“Go outside and wait for me!” I shout. The fact that he stepped into a burning building shocks me.

On my butt, I scoot down the hall. Getting out would be much easier if I hadn’t messed up my leg. But in spite of the fact that I can’t put weight on it, I’m doing my best to get out of here. Once I’m away from the fire, I can worry about my leg.

Being on the floor helps avoid the smoke. Look at me channeling Layla’s positivity and finding the bright side while trying to escape a burning building.

I’m at the end of the hall when boots appear in front of me.

Archer reaches down. “Come on. Let’s get out of here. Are you hurt?”

“Yes. I’m going as fast as I can.” I motion for him to go. “Just please leave me and get out of here.” This fire must be dredging up so many bad memories, and I don’t want him hurt.

He gets on one knee and is inches from my face. “We get out *together*, or we don’t.” Then he leans down and slides his arms under me.

“You can’t, Hazy. I’m too heavy.”

“Hang on to me.” He lifts, proving me wrong.

I hug his neck, overwhelmed that he’d rush into a burning building for me.

With long strides, he makes his way to the front door and then outside. He keeps walking, taking us farther from the duplex.

The swirling clouds above part, giving me a glimpse of the moon. And I’ve never been so happy to be outside.

“You saved me.” I bury my face in the curve of his neck. He smells like smoke and mud and only a little bit like moonlight. “But you didn’t listen when I told you to leave me.”

He stops when he gets to the back of his truck and nods to the tailgate. “Open that, please.”

I lift the latch, and the tailgate drops open. Archer sets me down, and his gaze sweeps over me. “Did you get burned?” His focus is fixed on my leg, which is bent funny in one spot. “What happened?”

“No burns. But the sound when the lightning hit scared me. I jumped, then fell, and the dresser tipped onto my leg.” Now that I’m safely away from the fire, I’m more aware of the pain. “I can’t stand on it.”

“Definitely broken.” He tosses my purse into the bed of the truck, then steps back. “Help should be here soon.”

He glances at the fire. And pain flickers in his features.

I touch his arm. “Are you okay?”

He gives a shrug. “You’re alive. I’m focusing on that.”

Grasping his shirt, I tug him closer. “You could’ve hurt yourself carrying me like that. And why did you go into a burning building. If you’d have gotten hurt, I never would’ve forgiven myself.”

Moonlight reflects in his eyes, and surprisingly, he smiles. “Lettie, I’m no longer the lanky guy you loved in high school. Did you doubt this incredibly hot man could get you to safety?”

His words bounce around in my head, all of them exploding into realization at once. All those months of chatting, I was talking to Archer. And I sent the picture . . . to Archer. “It was you.”

“Yep. I’m your crocheting cowboy, Lettie.” His lips meet mine, and his fingers tangle in my hair. Years of pent-up desire have us clinging to each other as we kiss.

Behind me, everything I own is probably being reduced to ash. My bridesmaid dress and his well-fitted suit are going up in flames. The afghan Archer made for me in high school that I’ve treasured so long is gone. But right now as his arms wrap around me, it’s hard to care about those things. Because the only thing not replaceable isn’t a thing at all. He’s my personal hero, and his kiss is making my toes curl, which is actually quite painful on that one leg. But that doesn’t dissuade me from continuing our lip tango.

Sirens draw closer and tires slosh on the muddy ground, but his mouth continues to devour mine. I tighten my grasp on his shirt, wanting him near

me forever.

Even footsteps don't deter Archer.

But when Beau clears his throat, Archer breaks our kiss. He releases me but grasps my hand. Then he turns to face Beau. "Hey."

Beau's gaze bounces between Archer, the fire, and my leg. "What happened?"

"There was a roach, and it started flying." I feel compelled to lighten the mood.

If Beau's amused by my joke, he doesn't show it. But Archer smiles and squeezes my hand.

Roaches, bad boyfriends, fire. The man comes to my rescue in many different ways.

Beau turns and focuses on Archer. "You went in, didn't you?"

We all jump as the roof collapses on Archer's side of the house.

I shudder, thankful that I'm not still on the floor, trying to scoot my way to safety.

Archer brushes a tear off my cheek. "Yes, sir. Just needed to grab something important. Now we're both safe. That's what matters."

"Very true." He rests a hand on Archer's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"I will be." Archer turns as fire trucks make their way up the gravel road that leads to our house.

Beau looks at me. "Other than the leg, are you hurt anywhere else?"

"No, sir. Just the leg."

"I'll make sure there's an ambulance on the way." Beau walks over to the fire trucks as volunteer firefighters climb out.

I tug Archer closer. "You're brave. You lost your mom and dad that way, but you still ran in to save me."

"I'm not brave, Lettie." He's staring at the fire.

I rub his arm. "Someone once told me that bravery isn't fighting dragons. Sometimes it's just picking up the phone. And I'll add that sometimes bravery is just showing up."

"As long as it's in my power, I will always show up for you, Lettie. Always." He cradles my face. "My grandmother hated my mom for taking her son away. I remember her crying that he shouldn't have gone back in. I was a kid, and I didn't really get it. Obviously, I didn't hate my mom. But now, I completely understand why my dad ran back into the flames." Archer brushes his lips on mine, more tenderly than moments ago. "Nothing you can

say will change how I feel about you, Lettie. I was stupid to think so. I don't need to know the reason. Even without that piece, what we have is beautiful, and I'd be stupid to throw it away. I love you."

I hug his neck. "Oh, Hazy, I love you too. I never stopped."

Waiting for an ambulance, we do a little more making up for lost time. Archer probably needs the distraction, and I just need him.

When the ambulance arrives, he pulls back. "That leg needs medical attention."

"Yeah. It's starting to throb pretty bad." Maybe I needed the distraction too.

He waves the guys over, then kisses my forehead. "I love you, Violet Delgado. With all my heart. Please don't ever hide from me again."

I spent so much of my life hiding in plain sight and not wanting to be seen because of the mess my mom was, but Archer has always been safe. "I should never have broken up with you."

He squeezes my hand as the medics walk up. "We'll just pretend you didn't."

I wish it were that easy.

\* \* \*

I OPEN my eyes and blink at the bright lights.

Rough fingers brush along my hairline. "Hey, gorgeous. How are you feeling? Any pain?"

"Nothing hurts." The fuzzy fog in my head starts to clear, and I lift it from the pillow. "Did they fix it?"

Archer nods. "They did. No cast until the swelling goes down, but the doctor said the surgery went well. He also told me to bracket large pieces of furniture to the wall. And as soon as we get a new place, I'll do that."

There is a blanket draped over the chair next to the bed, and not surprisingly, Archer is wearing the same clothes as last night.

"You stayed all night?" I shift and feel a twinge of discomfort.

"I did. Layla will be by in a bit. She was getting you some clothes."

I glance at my hospital gown. "This gown isn't exactly my style."

"You look fabulous."

"What time is it? I didn't call Tessa." I sit up and wince.

“Tessa knows where you are. I’ve been giving people updates. They got you in for surgery first thing this morning, but I wanted you to have time to wake up after, so I told people not to come until later.” He rubs my shoulder.

“I can see why you love your found family.”

“*Our* found family.” His smile is tender, loving. “You can’t go home today, but doctor said maybe tomorrow.”

The word *home* brings tears to my eyes. The reality of losing everything and having no place to go hits me.

With his thumb, he brushes away my tears. “Beau and Lilith have invited us to stay in their guest rooms. She feels horrible, as if she has any control over lightning. But I told them we’d stay there temporarily.” He adjusts my covers. “You’ll have lots of people close while you recover, and I’ll be on the other side of the wall, just like before.” He yawns and slaps a hand over his mouth. “Sorry about that.”

“You can go back to the ranch and sleep. I’ll be fine.”

His head wags back and forth. “Not a chance.”

“Then at least sleep in the chair. You’re exhausted.”

“I have an idea.” He drags the chair close so that it’s facing the bed. Then he sits and leans forward, resting his head on my good leg.

I run my fingers through his hair, and he sighs. Soon, his breathing changes, and he’s asleep.

Keeping one hand on his head, I close my eyes.

The medicine makes it easy to sleep, but having Archer close makes it easy to relax. I fall into a restful sleep.

My nap ends when my phone beeps. It’s on the rolling table beside the bed, which surprises me. It must’ve been in my pocket when he carried me out of the house, but so much of last night is a blur. I mostly remember the kissing. And I’m trying to forget the fire.

I read the message twice to ensure that I’m not having a medicine-induced hallucination.

**Mom:** Archer told me that I almost lost you. In more ways than one, I think. I’m sorry. Wes is in jail, and I’m checking into rehab. Hopefully for the last time. I’m forwarding you a name and number. He’s the man to contact about that inheritance.

I stare at the message, wondering why Archer called her and what magic words he said to make her care.

Then another message pops up.



**Mom:** I love you, Violet, but I've done a crap job as your mom, and I'm sorry.

**Me:** I love you too.

Forgiving her might take me some time, but she's my mom, and I love her in spite of all the bad stuff.

I'm still staring at my phone when there's a soft knock and the door swings open.

Anderson steps in, carrying a duffel bag, a pizza box, and a small white bag. He whispers, "Hey there."

Archer doesn't stir.

I smile. "Hi. How's your sister?"

"She's good." He sets the box and bag on the rolling table and drops the duffel on the floor. "I wasn't sure what y'all liked on pizza, so I went with pepperoni. And Tessa sent some donuts."

"Tell her I said thanks."

"When I heard about what happened, I stopped at a 24-hour store on the way back from my sister's place. I browsed through the men's department, looking for stuff for Archer because he's gonna smell if he can't change clothes. As I'm looking at the tags on jeans, trying to guess his size, Dallas taps me on the shoulder. He had the same idea. But he called Ava, who told us what size to get. We might've gone a bit overboard. But in our defense, it was very late, and we were worried about our friends."

I want to hug Anderson, but it would disturb Archer's much-needed nap. "I know he'll appreciate that."

"It was even funnier when Dallas and I wandered into the ladies' department. We wanted to get you stuff, but I'm not good at guessing sizes. And I'm not sure Dallas had even been in that section of the store before. Then Garrett and Tessa walked up, pushing a very full cart. She and Layla had talked and said they had you covered." He keeps his voice low as he talks. "Then this morning at breakfast, we drew straws to choose who would get to come up to the hospital. I won." He leans closer and puts a hand to the side of his mouth. "Because I cheated, but please don't repeat that."

I tap a finger to my lips. "I'm overwhelmed with y'all's kindness."

"Family takes care of family." He glances at my hand as I play with Archer's hair. "It looks like y'all worked things out. My sister will be happy to know there was a silver lining to her accident."

I nod. "It was an eventful night."

“Well, I should get going. Parker messaged as I was walking into the building, saying something about babysitting his niece. I should get back so I can take care of the horses. But y’all call if you need anything.” He steps toward the door, then turns back. “And Beau said that he and Lilith will be by later. He’s bringing dinner since he knows how hospital food tastes.”

“Thanks.”

Archer lifts his head and sniffs the air. “Pizza?”

Anderson chuckles. “Yep. And like I told Lettie, if you need anything at all, call. I mean it.”

Archer walks around the bed and bear-hugs Anderson. “You were right.”

“Words I love to hear. But I’ll let y’all eat. I need to get back to the ranch.” He waves as he steps out the door.

“Ready to eat?” Archer lifts the lid of the pizza box.

Nodding, I push up to a sitting position. “I’m starved.”

# CHAPTER 22



## ARCHER

*I* wake up when the nurse walks in.

“I’m just checking her vitals.” She wheels her little machine close to the bed. After a quick glance at my hand, she asks, “Is she your fiancée?”

“Not yet.” Amazingly, Lettie is still asleep, and I make sure of that before adding, “But I hope that changes soon.”

Not that the idea of my proposing should surprise her. When I said forever, I meant it.

“Well, I think it’s very sweet that you’re staying here with her.” She takes the blood pressure cuff off Lettie’s arm and records the data.

“She’s my person. It took me longer than it should’ve to acknowledge that. Plus, I want to be here if she needs me.”

“That’s wonderful. I’ll turn out the light on my way out.”

“Thanks.” I settle back into my chair, but I don’t close my eyes.

Lettie looks so peaceful snuggled into her pillow. She’s somehow managed to maneuver onto her side. Her dark hair is a tangled mess, and her hands are tucked under her cheek like always. I drink in the sight of her, quenching the thirst I’ve had for years. I’ve missed her.

Apart from her, I exist fairly happily, but with her, I’m alive.

She shivers, and I lean over, pulling the covers up over her shoulders.

“I love you, Lettie. So much. And I’ve missed us.” I press a kiss to her temple, eager for her to be released from the hospital. I need to make a trip to my hometown, but I won’t leave until she’s settled at Beau’s.

Even then, it’ll be hard to leave her.

Getting what I need might be tricky. What seemed like a good idea years ago makes the situation a bit more complicated now.

The door opens again, and the nurse rolls in a big chair. “It reclines. I stole it from another room. No one was using it there. Get some sleep.”

“Thank you. This little chair isn’t made for sleeping.”

She waves and walks out.

I settle into the recliner, drape the blanket over me, and close my eyes. I’ll be better equipped to help Lettie if I sleep.

I doze, but my brain plays out scenarios in my head, some memories of real events and some nightmares, where I’m screaming Lettie’s name over and over as both sides of the house go up in flames.

The fire has dredged up a lot of grief, but I’m beyond thankful that I have the love of my life still with me. I walked into a burning building to carry her out, and I’d do it again, over and over. And it doesn’t make sense that I kept myself walled off from her for these past few months. Did it even matter that she wouldn’t tell me why she broke up? Aside from cheating or murder, neither of which Lettie is capable of, nothing she could say would change how I feel about her.

If I’m willing to risk my life for her, that’s enough. I don’t need explanations.

\* \* \*

THE OVERWHELMING GENEROSITY of our friends means I have lots to carry out to the truck. Arms loaded with bags, I blow a kiss to Lettie. “I’ll message when I’m at the front.”

Lettie nods. “Okay. I’m ready to get out of here.” She turns to the nurse. “No offense.”

“None taken. Home is much more relaxing than this place.” The nurse smiles.

Clearly, this lady hasn’t heard about the fire, but I’m not going to bring it up. And honestly, in the last two days, I’ve learned a lot about home. Wherever Lettie is, that’s home for me. And the folks on the ranch are family. Some I haven’t even known a year, but no one would guess that.

When I get to the truck, I fish keys out of my pocket and unlock the door. After dropping all our new stuff into the back seat, I pull up to the double doors in front and message Lettie.

In a matter of minutes, Lettie, in a wheelchair, rolls outside, pushed by

the nurse. Using her crutches, Lettie works her way into the passenger seat, and I give her a kiss before running around to the driver's side.

There aren't many cars on the roads leading back to the ranch, and I'm careful of potholes so that I don't jostle her too much. "How are you feeling?"

"Everything considered, not too bad. I feel awful that Tessa will be getting up so early. But as soon as I can put weight on this leg, I'm going back to work."

"Not sure if you're ready to go by the house. Beau said that your side is mostly smoke damage. Lightning jumped from the tree to my side, and there's not much left there."

"I'm so sorry, Hazy."

"I'll live." I reach over and give her hand a squeeze.

"I wonder if the afghan you made survived. I love that thing." She swipes at tears.

I hate that I can't kiss them away, but doing that while driving could be problematic. "I'll make you a new one. Big enough so that we can snuggle under it together."

"I like that idea."

"Also, I should probably mention that I called your mom. You were pretty out of it after pain meds, and they were asking about medical history. I didn't want you to have an allergic reaction to a medicine or anything, so I called. She yelled at me at first. Then I told her that you were in the hospital and I needed medical information. It was like a switch flipped. She wanted to drive down here, but I tried talking her out of it. I guess it worked because she didn't show up." I knew Lettie's mom was under the influence of something when we talked, and I didn't want her on the roads. "Has she called you? I didn't want to ask earlier."

"She texted me. Said that she's going to rehab." Tears brim in her eyes, but she's smiling. "I hope for her sake that it works. I want her to be happy. Like I am."

I pull her hand to my lips and kiss her fingers. "You aren't mad at me for staying quiet about our online connection?"

"No. You surprised me for sure. How long have you known?"

"Since the cookies. Emotions were running high, and I was so proud of myself for moving on and talking to someone else. I wasn't ready to admit that my heart will find you no matter what, so I didn't bring it up."

A wide smile lights up her whole face. “That’s pretty romantic when you put it that way.”

“Good. I thought about it a lot while you were sleeping. And I figured framing it that way might help me avoid the doghouse.” I wink at her. “Doesn’t make it less true.”

She nods, then tilts her head back and closes her eyes. “When the nurse said that about going home, I was glad you didn’t mention the fire. But it made me realize that the ranch feels like home. Mostly because of you, but . . .” She glances into the back seat at the pile of stuff. “Lilith said there is more waiting for us at the house.”

“When I started at the ranch, I only knew Grayson. You remember him, right?”

“Yeah. I remember him. I actually bumped into him the day he realized Daisy was the one, so I called him a goober head and told him to go after her. He comes into the shop every so often.”

“It wasn’t until my grandmother died and I felt so alone that I realized what I had here at the ranch. Grandmother kept people at arm’s length, and I think maybe I learned to do that from her. You were the only person inside those walls for a long time, Lettie.”

“Thanks for letting me back in.”

I pull into the ranch and take the road to the main house.

Lettie lets out a low whistle. “Nice place.”

“Yep. Mess hall and game room are around the back. I’ll finally get to sit next to you at dinner.” I walk around and open her door. “Want me to carry you?”

Her head starts shaking before I finish the question. “Nope. I have crutches.” But then she tugs me close and gives me a quick kiss. “But thank you for asking.”

I will never tire of kissing this woman.

\* \* \*

I CRAWLED into bed an hour ago. It’s not all that late. I should be exhausted, but I’m awake and reaching for my phone. I plan to leave on my errand in the morning before breakfast. I just have to tell Lettie I’m leaving and somehow avoid spoiling the surprise.

Since sleeping isn't working, I'll just send her a text and leave tonight. I slide out of bed and shove clothes in a bag. The guys did a pretty good job shopping. Most everything fits. Although, I'm not sure I'll ever wear the tie-dyed T-shirt with the happy face plastered on the front. It's not really my style. I'm not sure whose bright idea that was.

Once I'm packed, I hop into the shower.

When I get out, there is a message notification from Regretful-Raccoon. I'm not the only one awake.

Regretful-Raccoon: Your grandmother said that if I loved you, I'd let you go because you didn't need a houseful of little brown kids keeping you from following your dream or a girl like me pulling you into a life of crime. And because I loved you more than anything and I knew how much you loved your grandmother, I broke up with you but didn't explain why. I'm sorry.

My mind was made up before reading this message, but now I'm in a hurry to leave. I send back a short message. The only words that are truly important.

Crocheting-Cowboy: I love you.

After hitting send, I knock on her bedroom door.

"Come in."

"Hey there. I'm going to make a quick road trip. I was going to leave first thing in the morning but decided to go ahead and leave tonight. Lilith said she'll be around to help you. So if you need anything at all, just call her. And I should be back late tomorrow." I sit on the edge of the bed. "Will you be okay without me?"

She shakes her head. "I won't have to find out because I'm going with you."

Telling her she isn't invited will land me in the doghouse, I think. "That won't be comfortable with your leg all bandaged."

"It's not like you're dragging me on a hike, Archer. I'll be sitting if I stay and sitting if I go. I want to go."

"All right, but no questions. Okay?"

Her eyes narrow. "Should I be worried?"

"That's a question. I'll grab a bag. Tell me what to pack." If she wants to go, of course, I'm going to take her with me, but I'm really hoping I can keep



a lid on my secret until the last minute.

# CHAPTER 23



## LETTIE

Archer hasn't said a word about the message. But I know he saw it because he responded. The radio is playing, and he's been quiet for the last two hours.

Based on the direction we're headed, I'm guessing he's going to our hometown, but I don't ask why because I promised. But I have so many questions.

Did my message prompt this trip? If so, why? What does he need to do? And why in the world does it involve tools? We stopped by the tool barn as we left, and I swear I saw Archer toss a shovel into the back of the truck.

Initially, I came along to be with Archer. Now, I'm just hoping I can keep him out of trouble.

Around the midway point, he pulls into a truck stop. "Potty break. And we'll get snacks."

I stare at him, hoping he'll drop a tiny morsel of information.

But he only grins. "Thanks for not asking any questions."

So much for getting information.

"I'm worried about you, Hazy."

Laughing, he runs around to my side and opens the door. "Don't be. I know we need to talk about your message. And we will. Later. But you don't need to worry about me."

I pull him in for a kiss. If I can't get answers, at least I can get this. "I'll believe you, but if that changes, please tell me when I need to start worrying."

"Sure thing."

Once we're back on the road, I close my eyes. Archer is holding my hand,

and I'm choosing to believe he hasn't lost his mind. But I still can't think of a reason he'd need to bring a shovel on the trip.

I might as well sleep for a while.

Sometime later, I yawn as the truck rolls to a stop. I wonder how long I've been asleep. But when I open my eyes, the relaxed feeling immediately evaporates. "What are we doing at the cemetery? And do not tell me no questions."

"I won't say it then. Want to wait here? I shouldn't be too long."

I grab his arm. "Hazy, it's been a rough few days. Emotional. Stressful. And my message was probably hard for you to take after everything else, but you cannot dig up your grandmother." Words are tumbling out of my mouth, and I don't even care if they make sense at this point. I'm just trying to keep him from dragging out the shovel. "Please. Let's just go back to the ranch."

He pushes a button to keep the interior light from coming on when he opens the door. "So what's the answer, are you staying here or going in with me? Company would be nice. Plus, you can be my lookout. I think Mr. Hoover still works security here. He'll make his rounds at some point."

"What are we going to tell him if he finds us in the cemetery in the middle of the night? Have you thought about that?"

"We'll just start kissing."

I blink and pray this man is messing with me. "You're serious?"

"Totally. How about this? I'll carry you, and you can carry the shovel. Then we only have to make one trip."

I've always heard the phrase "crazy about him" but tonight, I'm crazy for him because I nod and swing my legs out of the truck. "I'll be your lookout." And I have no idea what he's digging up.

He hands me the shovel, then lifts me out of my seat. He carries me like he did the night of the fire. His clenched jaw makes it clear that I'm a strain on his manly muscles, but he has the courtesy not to grunt as he hurries through the dark cemetery.

Under a huge oak, he sets me down. Then hunched down, he scans the area. We've been here before. His parents are buried under the shade of this tree.

He reaches for the shovel. "Thanks for coming with me. And, Lettie, I am not planning to dig up my grandmother. She's buried over by the fountain, next to my grandfather. But it says a lot that even though you were worried that was the reason I drove to the cemetery, you're still here with me." After

a quick kiss, he walks to his mom's grave.

I hold my breath, wondering if coming was a mistake.

He closes his eyes and heads toward the tree, touching his heel to the toe of the other foot with each step. And he counts as he goes. After seven paces, he plunges the shovel into the dirt. "Here's hoping my foot length hasn't changed much since I graduated."

Now he's giving me tidbits of info, but I'm still as confused as ever.

He digs a minute, then stops. "What seemed like such a great idea back then now seems dumb. I'm sorry for dragging you out here, and if this does get us in trouble, I'll swear it wasn't your idea."

"Let's just hope we don't get into trouble."

After the hole is easily a foot deep, he stops and drops to his knees. "Why isn't it here? Do I have the wrong spot?" In the moonlight, his concern is evident.

In the distance, a flashlight moves.

"Hazy, someone's coming." I slap the ground beside me. "Hurry."

He drops down next to me, then kisses me. This is both humorous and horrifying. No one is going to believe that two adults snuck into the cemetery to kiss. If you want to be alone, there are better places for that. And even if someone fell for that whopper of a tale, how would we explain the shovel or the gaping hole in the ground?

Hopefully, I'll be able to put my foot up in jail.

Archer whispers, "You okay?"

"No. I just got you back and now you're going to jail, and I don't even know why." I'm still wrapped in his arms, and we're whispering in each other's ear. "But no matter what happens, I love you."

"Mr. Hayes, is that you?" Mr. Hoover shines the light right at us.

Archer kisses my cheek, then stands. "Yes, sir. I came back to get something important. Something I stored here right after I graduated. I'm sorry for digging the hole, and I'll put the dirt back, good as new."

Mr. Hoover grabs Archer's hand and gives it a shake. "Good to see you again." Then he swings the light down toward me. "Hello, Miss Delgado. I should've known you'd be here too."

"Hello, Mr. Hoover." I feel like a kid who's been sent to the principal's office.

Mr. Hoover pats Archer's shoulder. "You didn't find that important thing, am I right?"

“No, sir. I was so sure about where it would be, but I won’t dig up the whole area. I promise.” Archer sounds resigned, sad.

“You’d be surprised how many people come digging around in here. I have to chase people off from time to time. And I didn’t want your important thing to get stolen, so when you left after burying it that night, I dug it back up.” He taps his pocket. “And tonight, when I saw a shadow digging under this tree, I had a feeling it might be you.” He holds out a small box. “Here you go.”

Archer clasps the box, then hugs the man. “Thank you. You don’t know what this means.”

“I think I do, son. And I’ll be on my way so that y’all can be alone. But I do expect that hole to be filled.”

Archer and I answer at the same time, bobbing our heads. “Absolutely.”

Whistling, Mr. Hoover strolls away, and I stare after him.

No more of this no-asking-questions bit. I turn to ask Archer about what’s in the box.

He’s on one knee.

“The cemetery might be the worst place on earth to do this, but I’m not waiting.” His chin quivers, and he pinches his lips, his gaze fixed on my face the whole time. “My mother had a pair of earrings she loved. There wasn’t much that survived the fire, but those did. And I kept them as a reminder. But then midway through our senior year, I took them to a jeweler and ask him to use the stones and work them into a ring.”

I swipe at my cheek, but tears just keep coming.

He opens the box. “Violet Delgado, I love you. Even when we were far apart, my heart found you. We were made for each other. I’d walk through fire for you and do anything to keep you safe. Please make me the happiest man alive and marry me. Will you?”

I throw my arms around him and sob into his shoulder.

“Lettie, sweetie, is that a yes?”

Nodding, I try to catch my breath. “Yes, and I’m so sorry.”

He cradles my face. “I want you. I want a houseful of kids who look just like their mama.” He lifts the ring out of the box and slides it on my finger. And amazingly it fits. If he’d given it to me the day after graduation, it would’ve fallen off my finger, but not now. “We’ll find a place to stay the rest of the night. There’s a new hotel right down the street. Then we can talk about what my grandmother said and plan our wedding. Anything you want

is fine with me.”

“Good idea.”

“But first, I have to clean up my mess.”

“Wait. Let’s take a selfie. I want to send it to Layla.”

Archer leans in close. “Will this work? It’s dark.”

“The moon is pretty bright. I’ll send her a picture of the ring later. But I want to remember this. Forever.” I capture the memory, then kiss his cheek. “Now go put the dirt back in the hole.”

Archer uses the shovel to push dirt back into the hole, then stomps it down with his boot. Once he’s finished, he hands me the shovel and lifts me off the ground.

We stop at the double headstone, marking his parents’ grave.

Archer clears his throat. “Y’all never got to meet Lettie, but I know you’d love her.” His voice cracks, and I wrap an arm around his neck. “I miss y’all. Love you both.”

I kiss the tears off the cheek closest to me as he carries me back to the truck. This has been the craziest and most memorable night of my life, and I’ll never look at a cemetery the same way.

\* \* \*

ARCHER THROWS a pillow on the floor, then stretches out beside the bed.

I’m at the edge, lying on my side and looking down at him. “Remember when my mom worked nights and I was scared of staying by myself?”

“I remember. I spent a lot of nights sleeping on the floor back then.” He tucks his hand behind his head. “It was worth it though.”

“My bed back then was not very big, but this one is huge. Please don’t sleep on the floor.”

He sits up. “You sure?”

“I’m sure. It’ll be easier to talk.”

“Sounds like reason enough.” He climbs up and holds out his arm. “Come snuggle while we talk.”

“I guess we have a lot to talk about, don’t we?”

“Yep.” He kisses my forehead.

“First, I want to say that I know I’ve put on a lot of weight, but I can start exercising more, or at all, and cut back on my calorie intake. I’ll probably

never get back to how I looked in high school, but . . .” I’m trying to figure out how to finish the sentence when he touches a finger to my lips.

“I need you to know that I love you for more than how you look. If you had been burned or disfigured in that fire, it wouldn’t have changed how I feel about you.”

I smile, thankful that he loves me even though I’m fat.

His finger moves from my lips over to my shoulder, then trails down my arm. “You should also know that seeing you again pegged my attraction meter.” His finger continues its journey over my hip. “I want you healthy, so I won’t tell you not to exercise, but I like what I see, Lettie. So very much. You have no idea.”

“You aren’t just saying that to make me feel better?”

Mischief twinkles in his eyes. “Are you going to make me swear on my parents’ grave? We can go back to the cemetery.”

“No. I believe you.” I laugh, then shift so I can look at him. “About my message, I understand why your grandmother said what she did. My mom’s troubles were gossiped about all over town. Your grandmother thought I was like my mom. But I’m not. I get that my mom was trying to cope with pain and grief, but that’s not an excuse for all the stuff that’s happened. Your grandmother wanted you to pursue your dreams, and you did.”

He hugs me to his chest. “It was hard to read. I won’t lie. And in that town, some people were more open with their prejudice, but I never heard a whisper of it from my grandmother. It’s like I never knew her at all.” Rubbing my back, he’s quiet for a bit. “What changed your mind, Lettie? What made you decide to move to Stadtburg?”

“Your grandmother’s funeral. You wouldn’t even look at me. I knew that you were doing what you loved, and I wanted to see what your life was like. I wanted to see you happy. Then I saw that you were still single. And every time I caught a glimpse of you or heard people mention your name, I wanted more. But I was afraid that telling you what your grandmother said would hurt you. So I hid instead. I didn’t say it made sense.”

“I get it.” He covers a yawn.

“Sleep, Hazy. We’ll talk about the wedding on the drive back.” I move to roll away.

He holds me close. “Just a little longer. I haven’t really been able to sleep much since the fire.”

I pat his chest. “I have a better idea. Take off your shirt and flip onto your



stomach.”

He does as told.

Snuggled beside him, I trail my fingers along his back, and within a few minutes, he’s asleep.

But I keep my fingers moving for a long while, knowing that soothes the bad dreams. Plus, even in the dimly lit hotel room, I can make out the muscles on his back. And they’re nice to look at.

He’s mine. He’s all I’ve ever wanted, and tonight feels like Christmas.

I press a kiss to his shoulder before closing my eyes. “Good night, Hazy.”

# CHAPTER 24



## ARCHER

I wake up to Lettie snuggled against my back, so I stay still, letting her sleep. The proposal was nothing like I'd imagined when I first had the ring designed, and waiting would've given me time to pick a romantic spot and surprise her, but honestly, proposing with a shovel in a cemetery is pretty memorable.

The important thing is that she said yes.

She stirs, then presses a kiss to my shoulder. "You said you buried it after graduation. Does that mean you were going to propose?"

"Good morning to you too." I roll to my back and meet her gaze. "Yep. It was in my pocket when you broke up with me. I buried it that night, once it got dark."

"Did your grandmother know you ordered the ring?"

"I didn't mention it to her. She never showed any interest in our relationship. Now I know why." I slide out of bed. "I'll change, then go find us some breakfast tacos or something. Then we'll start the drive back."

"You'll be sick of talking about our wedding by the time we get back to the ranch."

I shake my head. "Not a chance."

She twirls her hair around her finger. "Honestly, I'm not sure what I want."

"Then it's a good thing we have hours to talk about it." I pull on my shoes. "Potato, egg, and cheese?"

"Yes. Two please."

"Be back soon." I stop before opening the door and walk back to the bed.

Lettie's brow knits. "Forget something?"

“This.” I press my lips to her smile.

Waiting until her leg is healed will require great patience, but I’ll happily do whatever she wants. However, I’m eager to start every morning by rolling over and kissing Lettie.

I want to marry her.

Our favorite taco place is still open, and I get two of her favorite and three of mine. Then I swing by a new coffee stand on the way back to the hotel.

My phone buzzes as I pull into the lot.

**Anderson:** You tell me you’re leaving town to get a ring. I hear from Lilith that Lettie went with you, but then nothing. No updates. Are you going to make me beg?

**Me:** She said yes. I’ll tell you the rest when I see you.

**Anderson:** Can’t wait to hear. Congrats.

Before getting out of the truck, I text Grayson. He’s always been encouraging and wanting me to mend things with Lettie.

**Me:** You were right. Lettie loves me, and she said yes to my proposal.

**Grayson:** Awesome. I’m truly happy to hear that.

I reach for the handle, then remember Dag. His early-morning donut run kicked this off, so I want him to hear the news from me and not through the grapevine.

**Me:** I proposed to Lettie last night, and she said yes.

**Dag:** Dang. You didn’t waste any time. Congrats!

**Dag:** Also, can I tell people, or do I have to keep more secrets? I’m not so good with the secrets.

**Me:** Not a secret.

Lettie already texted Layla and Tessa. Word is spreading, I’m sure. But after the way she and I danced at the wedding, most people aren’t going to be surprised that we’re an item. The quick engagement might shock them, but I have no doubt about this decision.

With the food bag cradled in one arm and a coffee cup in each hand, I make my way to our door. That’s when my lack of planning becomes evident. The keycard is in my back pocket.

I’m not going to make Lettie get up. So I take the coffee in my right hand and tuck it beside the food bag, pinning the cup to my chest with my left arm. Praying that the lid doesn’t pop off and add more burns to my body, I slide the keycard out of my back pocket.

And as I reach for the handle, the door opens.

A pained smile flashes on Lettie's tear-stained face. "You should've knocked."

"I didn't want to make you get out of bed." I set breakfast on the table as Lettie hobbles back to the bed on her crutches. Instead of divvying out food, I sit beside her on the bed. "What's wrong?"

She hands me her phone, and I read the message on the screen.

**Mom:** I checked out of rehab this morning because I don't really need it. I can quit drinking whenever I want to. I met someone, and he's great. Not mean like Wes. And we're moving to Florida. Tell that boy of yours that I said he better treat you right. Talk soon. Love you.

Lettie hasn't responded, and I can't blame her.

I drop the phone on the bed and hug Lettie. Minutes tick by as we hold each other.

Then she pulls back. "Let's eat. I'm starved."

"You okay?" I thread my fingers through her hair.

"Yeah. You're here, so I am. Hazy, with you, I'm good." Her phone buzzes, and she glances at the screen.

The laugh that bubbles out of her warms my heart, and I look over to see.

**Layla:** OMG! THE BOYFRIEND TRAP WORKED! But the fire was a bit extreme.

The wink at the end makes it clear she's teasing. It's easy to see what Lettie likes about Layla.

I walk over to the bag and pull out our tacos. "Tell me more about this boyfriend trap."

Lettie laughs again. "That explanation will involve watching a movie. And currently, neither of us have a couch."

"I can probably chase everyone out of the game room one night." I hand her tacos and coffee. "Or maybe, if it's kid-friendly, we'll invite Mason to join us. You'll like that kid."

"Definitely kid-friendly. And I can't wait to meet him. Dag says he gives great relationship advice."

"He does. For sure."

\* \* \*

LETTIE IS quiet as I turn out of the hotel parking lot. I hate not being able to

fix everything for her, but it's been this way the whole time I've known her. Lettie lost more than her dad when he died, and in many ways, she had it rougher than I did.

For all her faults, my grandmother was stable. She didn't drink herself into a stupor every night. Or ever. I'm thankful for the stability, but it'll take some work to forgive her.

If my grandmother had based her comment on Lettie's mom and the trouble she seemed to end up in all the time, I'd be more understanding. But making it about Lettie's skin color stirs a rage inside me. How could she find fault with something I love about Lettie?

When we're a few miles out of town, Lettie reaches for my hand. "I thought I'd be choosing a wedding date based on when my mom got out of rehab. Because it felt wrong to exclude her if she was trying to get better." She looks out the window and sighs. "But she isn't trying to get better. So, there's no reason to wait."

"Do you want a big party, like Nico and Layla's celebration?"

"Neither of us have family. Maybe we should just go to the courthouse."

"Tyler tried that, sneaking off to get married. We surprised them and packed the courthouse. And you know as well as I do that we have family." I brush my thumb along the edge of her finger. "Do you want a big wedding or a small one?"

"Just big enough for all our friends." She flashes a wide and genuine smile. "Sooner rather than later."

"I am fully on board with that."

We spend the next couple of hours discussing the wedding and where we want to live. I'm happy with whatever she wants. Being her husband is my idea of happily ever after.

I know it isn't going to be all rainbows and roses from here on out. We'll have to go back to the house and see the damage. Her leg needs time to heal. But the feeling of being alone is gone. I have my person, and I no longer have to pretend that I'm not crazy in love with her.

When I drive through the gate at the ranch, she grabs my arm. "I thought of someone else we need to invite."

"Who?"

"Mr. Hoover." She holds up her hand and wiggles her ring finger. "We owe him at least that."

"Agreed." I park outside the main house and point at the clock. "We

timed that well. It's lunchtime."

She laughs. "I can tell because of all the trucks parked around here."

I help her out, and we walk around back to the mess hall.

As we round the corner, someone inside shushes the room.

Lettie stops and leans into me. "Did you plan this?"

"I did not. If we're walking into a surprise engagement party, it's not my doing."

She grins and starts moving again. "I love this ranch almost as much as I love you."

When we step through the doorway, everyone—including Layla and Nico—cheers and hollers.

Ava walks up with her arms spread wide. "Give me a hug, y'all! This makes me so happy." She points to a huge cake on the counter. "I went with chocolate. I hope that's okay. Tandy said you were a fan of chocolate. But first, lunch. I made chicken strips, mashed potatoes, and corn."

Stunned, I turn to Lettie.

She laughs. "Tandy texted, asking me about your favorite food. I didn't know about the rest of this."

After hugs and congratulations, Lettie and I find a seat, and I grab us plates of food. "Here you go."

Lettie whispers, "I like Ava."

"Figured you would. She's awesome. And y'all have that same taking-care-of-people-with-food gene."

"I was hoping the old saying was true that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

"It worked." I cut into my chicken and drag a bite through the mashed potatoes.

She rubs my arm. "Maybe on Tuesday, I'll join your crochet circle and try learning."

"I'd like that. Then we'll both have something to do when we're old and in rocking chairs. Because I meant what I said about forever."

# CHAPTER 25





## LETTIE

*I*t's been the longest six weeks of my life. But I can walk down the aisle without crutches, which makes the wait worth it.

Layla adjusts my veil. "You're a total hottie, Lettie. Archer is going to fall over when he sees you."

"I can't wait to walk up the aisle. I've dreamed of marrying him for a very long time. And the years when I thought there was no hope of that dream coming true were the saddest of my life." I fan my face, willing tears not to fall. "How much longer?"

She peeks into the hall, then grins. "They're ready."

I count to three, pulling in slow breaths, hoping the butterflies in my stomach stop their fluttering. "Let's go."

Lilith hugs me when I step into the hall. Music fills the house, and a low murmur of voices echoes down the hall. "Layla, you go first."

My friend winks before disappearing into Beau and Lilith's living room. A hush falls over the house.

Beau steps up and holds out his arm. "I never thought I'd get to do this. It's kind of choking me up."

"Please don't cry. Because if you do, I will too." I loop my arm around his. "Hold it together at least until after pictures." I'm saying it to him, but I'm really pleading with myself.

"You look beautiful, Lettie." He blows a kiss to Lilith. "And so do you, sweetheart."

I hope that thirty years from now, Archer and I are as in love as Beau and Lilith.

The music changes, and Beau leads me around the corner and into the

living room.

Archer blows out a breath and wipes his eyes.

So much for not crying until after pictures.

The living room is filled with friends who love us. It's perfect.

Ava is dabbing her eyes, other hand on her chest. Tessa is leaning on Garrett and wiping tears off her cheeks. Layla looks like she's about to break into a cheer.

When we get to the front, Beau shakes Archer's hand and says, "Treat her right." Then he walks to the side where Lilith is waiting for him.

"Wow, Lettie. Just wow." Archer clasps both of my hands in his. "You're more than stunning."

Mad Dog, Ava's husband, clears his throat and opens his little book. "Let's get y'all married."

Archer's gaze rarely leaves my face during the ceremony, and when Mad Dog says to kiss the bride, Archer lifts my veil.

One hand on my waist and one on my cheek, he leans in. "I love you, Violet Hayes."

His lips meet mine, and for nearly a minute, I forget the rest of the world exists.

The lanky guy I loved in high school is now a hunky cowboy, and he's mine. Forever.

# EPILOGUE



ANDERSON

*M*y phone buzzes repeatedly as I drive back from San Antonio. After having donuts with Brooke, I hightailed it back to the ranch. Beau and Lilith are hosting a pool party, and for two very special reasons, I don't want to miss it.

After changing faster than models working the runway, I'm in my swim trunks and headed to the main house.

I park and finally take time to check my texts.

**Primrose:** Parker invited me and Bailey to the pool party. Will you be there? You're her new favorite person.

**Parker:** My sister and niece are here.

**Archer:** Lettie's pregnant, but we aren't announcing it yet.

This is turning out to be quite the day. Archer's news is unexpected as they've only been married a short time, but I couldn't be happier for them.

But I answer Primrose first because she is one of the special reasons I'm at this party. I'd probably be here anyway, but still.

**Me:** Just pulled up. And is there any chance I could become your favorite person?

Primrose likes the message but doesn't reply. As I tuck my phone away, it vibrates again, and I check for new messages.

She changed the like to a love.

I practically skip around the house.

When I step onto the patio, Bailey screams, "DeeDee!"

Wet hair plastered to her head, she races toward me, and her flippers slap against the pebbled concrete as she runs.

She's always happy to see me, but this reaction is turned up to eleven.

With goggles on her face and floaties on her arms, she launches into my arms when I lean down. “Uncle Parker said you were coming.” She presses her hands to each side of my face. “Mommy isn’t going to swim. Will you swim with me?”

“Sure thing, Munchkin.”

She wriggles until I put her down. “You can eat first.” After giving me permission to nourish myself, she runs to the edge of the pool and jumps in.

I scan the people gathered near the pool until I spot Primrose. Her arms are crossed like a shield, and her gaze is fixed on Bailey, who very clearly loves the water. Primrose must sense my stare. She meets my gaze.

I lift an eyebrow, and her lips curve into a smile.

We’ve been on two dates, but I’m still not sure if this woman even likes me. She’s guarded, but I don’t yet know why. What I do know is that dating her brother’s coworker makes her uneasy.

I’m trying my best to wipe away that uneasiness.

Parker nudges me. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to be the fun uncle with you around?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

He puts up a hand. “I’m joking. Completely.” He watches Bailey climb out of the pool. “It’s good to see her so happy. I’m glad they moved here.”

Me too. But I’m still careful about what I say to Parker.

“She’s a sweet kid.”

“She is.” He glances toward the large barbecue pit. “I’m glad you aren’t upset about the you-know-what.”

“The cactus? I hardly think about it.” I rub my backside. “Only a few times a minute. It doesn’t hurt anymore, so that’s good.” I play it cool as Primrose makes her way over. “Worth it though.”

Parker shakes his head, chuckling. “I could’ve just introduced you to my sister, Anderson.”

“That would’ve been too easy.”

Primrose stops beside me. “What’s too easy?”

Parker walks away, leaving me all alone as I try to figure out how to answer without putting my foot in my mouth.

“Remember what I said about my best asset? You just tell me when you’re ready for me to rip this shirt off.” Distracting her with muscles is my only hope.

She rolls her eyes, then grins. “You can eat first.”

“Like mother like daughter.”

Primrose bumps her shoulder against my side, which in my book counts as flirting. “You wish.”

“I absolutely do.” I lean down so that only she can hear me. “Do I get to see you in a swimsuit?”

“Not today, cowboy.” She pats my arm, then walks away.

It’s not the first time she’s given me that answer. And I’m very pleased she didn’t respond with never. That means there’s still hope.

Archer waves and taps the table beside him.

I fill my plate with a burger and two hot dogs, then drop down beside him. “This is quite the shindig.”

“Yep. They throw a party every year. And later, most of us drive over to the county park where they do a fireworks display. You going?”

“I plan on it.”

He leans closer. “What did she call you?”

I’m acutely aware that Bailey’s nickname for me sounds similar to daddy. “DeeDee. When I told her my name was Anderson, she told me that my name was kind of long. So I said she could call me Andy, but instead, she calls me DeeDee.”

“It’s sweet watching y’all interact.”

“She’s a cute kid.” In truth, my heart melts when Bailey acts like I’m her favorite person in the world, and I’m not sure what I did to deserve it. I pull out my phone and send Archer a quick text.

**Me:** CONGRATULATIONS!

He beams and shows Lettie the text. Her smile is even brighter than his.

That’ll be one lucky kid because they’ll be great parents.

I finish my lunch, and it isn’t long before Bailey is tapping my arm.

She swipes at the wet strands of hair covering her goggles. “Are you ready to swim?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I walk over to where Primrose is sitting and make eye contact with her before slowly removing my shirt.

The only reaction I get is an eyebrow twitch. I must’ve really impressed her.

# BONUS EPILOGUE



## ARCHER

*I*'m stretched out on the living room floor, preparing for impact. Lettie rubs her very pregnant belly and laughs as Mateo—named after her father—throws himself onto my stomach.

Wrestling is his favorite pastime. And thanks to Lettie's cooking, I have extra cushion around my middle now.

"Oof." I wrap myself around him and tickle his sides.

He squeals, "Daddy, stop. I want to jump on you again." For a three-year-old, he's very opinionated. Or maybe they're all that way, and parents keep it a secret from non-parents so that the world continues to be populated.

"One more time, but then we have to get cleaned up for brunch. Grandma's coming."

Lettie ties on her apron. "I think I hear a car."

Mateo takes another flying leap, landing on my gut. Then he springs to his feet and runs to the bathroom. "I want to sit by Grandma."

Grunting, I maneuver to my feet, then hug my wife. "I think I'm glad this next one is a girl. But who knows? Maybe she'll like wrestling too."

"She might." Lettie rubs my back. "It was kind of Lilith to push dinner back an hour. I want to have dinner over there, but . . ."

"Lettie, having your mom here on Thanksgiving makes the day even more special. I'm thankful she faced the pain of rehab for the reward of being a grandma." I brush a tear off her cheek. "And whatever you made for brunch smells incredible. I'm going to be so stuffed by the end of the day."

Lettie's mom has been sober nearly a full year. And two months ago, she moved to San Antonio to be closer to us. For the first six months after she got out of rehab, every visit brought with it a string of apologies, but we've



finally moved on from that.

Now, she's just Grandma, and our kid loves her. The secret candy stash in her purse helps, but I don't care about a little extra sugar. Lettie is getting something she never dreamed possible, and seeing her happy is why I get up every morning.

Well, that and the three-year-old prying my eyelids open.

I rub Lettie's belly. "Hey, little one, if you can stay put at least until the end of the day, Daddy would be grateful. I really want to meet you, but I have my heart set on eating Thanksgiving dinner."

Lettie tugs me to her lips. "Of course you do."

\* \* \*

I YAWN, emotionally drained from the last few hours. But it's Lettie who's done all the work.

She motions me toward the bed, then reaches into my pocket.

"Oh, hello!" I wink at her.

Laughing, she pulls out her scrunchie. "Calm down, cowboy. I need to get my hair out of my face. I look like a train hit me."

"You've never looked more beautiful, Lettie. Seriously. I look at you, and my heart feels like it's going to explode into a million tiny heart-shaped pieces."

"You're just saying that because we make cute kids." She pats my hip.

"We really do, but that's not the reason." I stare down at my baby girl—who decided to start her grand entrance before Thanksgiving dinner was served—and my heart swells. "Lettie, she's perfect. And she looks just like you, olive skin, loads of dark hair."

Rubbing my leg, she smiles up at me. "I'm sorry you didn't get turkey. Ava said that she'd save some leftovers for you."

"Are you kidding? This little muffin is way better than all that." I nestle little Tillie—named after my mom Matilda—into Lettie's arms. "Speaking of food, what can I get you? Tell me what you want, and I'll get it, even if it's halfway across the state."

"I don't want you driving halfway across the state, Hazy. Anything is fine." She tears her gaze away from our daughter and glances up at me. "Have you checked in with my mom?"

“Mateo is sound asleep, and I think maybe she now understands sugar highs in a different way.” I pull the chair close to the bed. “She’s staying overnight, and Lilith will go over in the morning and stay with Mateo so that your mom can go to work.”

Lettie clasps my hand. “Remember when we were chatting on Reddit, and you told me to think about the life I wanted? This is it.”

I press a kiss to her forehead. “Yeah. It’s chaotic, messy, busy, and absolutely perfect.”

“And I love that the kids are getting to grow up on the ranch. All the other kids are like cousins. And I hadn’t even thought about that before.”

We’re both staring at our baby as we talk.

I brush my thumb along the back of Lettie’s hand. “When I pictured my happily ever after, I could only see part of the picture. *You*. Everything else is just rainbows and unicorns.”

That smile I love spreads across her face. “I love you, Hazy.”

## A NOTE TO READERS

Thank you for reading!

Did you love Archer's story?

Some parts of this book are near and dear to my heart, like Archer loving Lettie just as she is. Other parts, like the lightning strike, are drawn from my life. Thanks to our power being out and my husband's quick work with the hose, our house didn't catch fire that night. But lightning still makes me skittish.

If you've read the Never Say Never series, you might remember Lettie from One Whopper of a Love Story. She's Layla's roommate in that book.

And, y'all, I'm already loving Anderson. His story is next.

Be sure to check out my website for updates about the series and for information about my other books. You can also subscribe and get exclusive epilogues and stories.

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\* \* \*

Pamela Humphrey, who writes as Remi Carrington, also releases books under her own name. Visit [PhreyPress.com](http://PhreyPress.com) for more information about her books.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Remi Carrington is a figment of Pamela Humphrey's imagination. She loves romance & chocolate, enjoys disappearing into a delicious book, and considers people-watching a sport. She was born in the pages of the novel Just You and then grew into an alter ego.

She writes sweet romance and romantic comedies set in Texas. Her books are part of the Phrey Press imprint.

