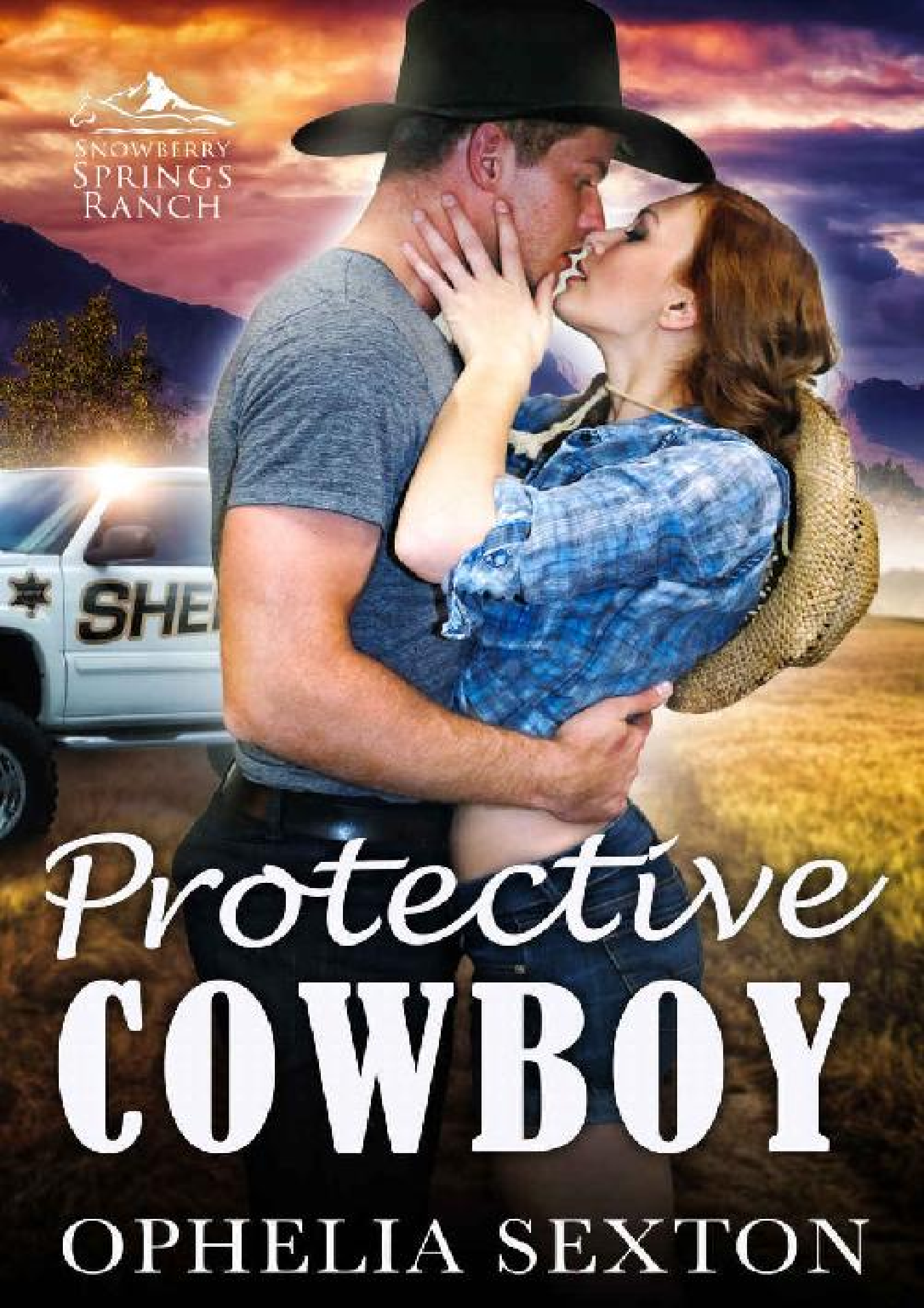




SNOWBERRY
SPRINGS
RANCH



Protective
COWBOY

OPHELIA SEXTON

Protective Cowboy

Snowberry Springs Ranch Book 3

Ophelia Sexton

Philtata Press,LLC

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Dedication

This book owes a lot to my dear friend and fellow author, Liv Brywood. Thank you so much for the many hours spent brainstorming and for your critique.

And for graciously hosting me and showing me around your beautiful corner of Montana for two summers in a row while I was researching this series.

You're amazing and a true friend!

Author's Notes and Content Warnings

This book's storyline turned out to be a little darker than the previous two books in this series (but not *too* dark, I promise!). I wrestled with the plot and Autumn's character arc for a while, trying to achieve the right balance of her finding happiness and security in Snowberry Springs while also dealing with her ex-husband's emotional abuse and stalking in a realistic and respectful way. I didn't want to make her a helpless victim, but I didn't want to downplay the seriousness of what Phillip tries to do to her, either.

I know that some events in this book may reflect Real Life a little too closely for some of you. If you think this storyline might upset you or trigger you, my apologies and gentle virtual hugs. Please feel free to skip this one and go straight to the final book in the Snowberry Springs Ranch series, which is [*Wounded Cowboy*](#).

Content warnings: emotional abuse, cheating by a former spouse, non-violent stalking, implied threats to a child

My promise to you as an author: plenty of the small-town warmth and humor you expect from a Snowberry Springs book; an HEA; no cheating on the good guys' parts; and the bad guy gets his just desserts (spoiler alert: they're *not* from Jenna's Java, LOL) in the end.

Chapter One

The Grinch Who Stole Christmas

Bozeman, Montana

Friday, November 17

Autumn Snowberry-Garthe's smile faded as she caught sight of the antique clock on a nearby bookshelf.

Phillip's going to be home soon.

And when he arrived, the Christmas tree had better be perfect. She reached out and straightened a red velvet bow on the nearest twig. Nerves twisted her stomach into knots as she lifted her phone to take a close-up shot.

She'd worked hard this afternoon to declutter their living room and create the perfect Christmas aesthetic for Phillip's holiday entertaining and her Instagram followers.

As she pulled out her phone and walked around the tree, taking shots from various angles, she already knew what tags she'd use when she posted the photos. **#blessed**, **#happylife** and **#christmascheer** (of course). She'd have to search for other tags with lots of posts.

Maybe she didn't have her own marketing firm anymore, but she still liked to stay in the social media game. Seeing her follower counts increase and reading the admiring comments they left on her posts made her feel less of a failure at life.

Most days now, she was the wife who couldn't quite do *anything* right, and constantly disappointed her husband.

Then the front door creaked open and Autumn almost dropped her phone. *He's home early today!*

She turned to see Phillip's imposing, silver-haired figure filling the entryway. His glacial, pale-blue eyes narrowed as he surveyed the open-plan living room.

"What's all this?" He gestured at the Christmas tree and festively decorated fireplace mantel.

Autumn's stomach clenched at his tone. "I just wanted get a head start on the holidays, since you invited your entire department over right after we get back from Thanksgiving in Snowberry Springs—"

Her voice wavered. She hated herself for it. Phillip didn't like drama queens or whiners. He'd told her that often enough.

"It's not even fucking Thanksgiving yet. And I thought we agreed, none of your lavish and out-of-control shit this year." Phillip's stern tone sliced through her excuse. "Especially after we just wasted all that money going to Seattle for your sister's wedding." He snorted. "Serves her right, getting jilted like that. Maybe now she won't act like such a big shot with that TV show of hers."

Autumn forced herself to bite her tongue at her husband's cruel—and unfair—criticism of Winnie's wedding fiasco last week.

She'd used her social media experience to do what she could to mitigate her sister's public humiliation. But it had still been bad. Winnie and her ex-fiancé Geoff were one of the most

popular couples on HomeRenoTV, and their show, *Restoring Seattle*, had been a monster hit for the streaming network.

Now, though her heart still ached for Winnie's situation, she knew arguing with Phillip wouldn't change his mind. It would only make him angry.

Angrier.

She recognized the signs.

Something had upset her husband, and he was looking for an excuse to pick a fight with her. She'd have to tiptoe around him until it blew over... or he blew up and let off the steam.

"How much money did you spend on this nonsense, anyway?" Phillip demanded, lifting his chin to point at the tree.

"Nothing, except for the tree. We had all these decorations packed away in the basement," Autumn said truthfully. "And my followers—"

"Don't give a shit about your stupid decorations," Phillip cut her off ruthlessly. His lips thinned as he scanned the tree. "Your little social media hobby is getting out of hand. *Again.*" His phone chimed. He glanced down at it and said, "I'll be in my office. Call me when dinner's ready."

He spun on his heel and headed upstairs, leaving Autumn deflated amidst the glittering ornaments and swags of fresh fir branches carefully arranged on the mantel between the three stockings hung there.

She swallowed hard, pushing down the familiar ache of failure in her chest.

As Phillip's footsteps creaked in the second-floor hallway overhead, she allowed herself a deep, shuddering breath before moving to start dinner.

Jayden would be home from school soon. She didn't want to upset him by letting him glimpse her unhappiness.

Suck it up, buttercup, she told herself sternly. *This is the life you chose, isn't it?*

Then she wondered, not for the first time, *Would Matt have treated me like this?*

In their senior year of high school, she and Matt Parker had talked about getting married someday, after he graduated from the police academy and she got her degree in Business and Marketing.

But that was before she met Phillip, the charming older man who'd swept her off her feet as a college freshman and proposed to her in her senior year. She'd been so infatuated back then. He'd made her feel like the most beautiful and precious woman on earth.

But that was then.



An hour later, the rich aromas of roast chicken and baking biscuits filled the house. Autumn set three places at the table,

then called her husband and son down to dinner.

When Phillip reappeared, he was still focused on his phone. He took his place at the small dining table without looking up.

Autumn tried to read his mood. To her relief, he seemed calmer.

“So, how was your day?” she ventured warily.

“Busy.” His curt reply signaled an end to the conversation. Then he glanced up from his phone. “Where’s Jayden? Still playing that damn video game in his room?”

He didn’t wait for her reply before bellowing, “JAYDEN! Get your ass down here! Right now!”

Autumn winced at the anger in her husband’s tone. But she knew better than to protest. Phillip had never laid a finger on her, but his words could bruise as badly as fists.

Jayden flew down the stairs from his room, then hesitated.

Her chest contracted at the assessing glance he gave his father before slipping into his seat. Her first-grader was learning the same caution she’d learned.

“What did I tell you about playing those stupid games?” Phillip grunted, still scrolling through his phone. “Fucking waste of time. Don’t you have homework or something useful to do?”

He's in the first grade! He doesn't have that much homework yet!

Autumn swallowed her protest with difficulty. From experience, she knew it wouldn't help things. In fact, it would only make things worse. Phillip would explode if she dared to say anything to him in front of their son.

"Sorry, Daddy." Autumn hated how her son tried to make himself smaller in his chair.

Autumn rose, carved the chicken, and served up the dinner before resuming her seat. They ate in silence, the unspoken tension hanging between them. Her gaze drifted to the dazzling tree; its joyous glow now muted.

She thought of Christmases at her parent's house on the ranch, filled with laughter and warmth. A pang of longing caught in her throat.

What if I hadn't dumped Matt back then? What if I'd returned to Snowberry Springs after college?

She tried to shove down the traitorous thoughts, but they kept coming up.

"I'm leaving on a business trip first thing tomorrow morning," Phillip announced, looking up from his phone at last.

"You have to work on a weekend?" Autumn asked.

Phillip shrugged. "Boss wants me to attend some holiday shindig on the client's dime. They're a big ZenithMed

customer. I was supposed to wine and dine them last week, but we were in Seattle.” His mouth twisted. “This’ll have to do.”

Autumn nodded, and understood that this was somehow all *her* fault, because Winnie was her sister, and Autumn had wanted to attend her wedding.

Phillip worked as the VP of Sales for a major pharmaceutical firm based in New Jersey. He liked to boast about how successful he was at closing big deals, and how much the company’s top executives depended on him to bring in new business. Consequentially, he traveled almost constantly.

In the beginning, she had wondered why Phillip insisted on living so frugally if he was doing so well.

When she’d asked him about that a couple of years ago, Phillip had predictably reacted angrily at being questioned.

Then he explained, in the most condescending way possible, that he was investing his bonuses and extra pay for Jayden’s college and for their retirement.

“Managing the finances is *my* job,” he’d told her. “You worry about *your* job. The house is always a mess and you suck at cooking. Too bad you didn’t learn something from that snotty celebrity chef sister of yours.”



On Monday morning, the shrill ring of the house’s landline phone jolted Autumn awake in the predawn darkness.

She rolled over and squinted blearily at the Caller ID. It was FFPCU, the First Federated Pharmaceutical Credit Union where she and Phillip banked. She fumbled for the receiver.

“Hello?” she croaked.

“Good morning, is this Mrs. Snowberry-Garthe?”

“Yes, speaking.”

“Ma’am, this is Claire from FFPCU’s Fraud Department. I wanted to check with you regarding some recent unusual activity on your credit card account.”

Autumn sat up, suddenly wide awake. “What kind of activity?”

Phillip always handled bank stuff. But he was in New Jersey on his business trip. And he forbade Autumn to contact him on his cell during East Coast business hours unless it was a dire emergency.

“Did you or your husband pay a rental deposit on an apartment Saturday at Herrontown Woods Luxury Living in Princeton, New Jersey? We also have a charge from the Herrontown Lexus dealership for an SUV lease on Sunday. We wanted to verify these transactions with you.”

“New Jersey?” Autumn’s mind raced.

ZenithMed Solutions was headquartered in Princeton, but Phillip had never mentioned wanting to move there. In fact, just last week, they’d discussed enrolling Jayden in a private

school located here in Bozeman, so that he could bring his math skills up to snuff.

She took a breath to steady her voice. “No, I don’t know anything about those charges.” She opened her mouth to suggest that maybe the bank should contact Phillip instead, but then clamped down on the urge.

Something was definitely wrong. There was no way her husband was moving their family to the East Coast without at least warning her first.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Claire said. “We appreciate you taking the time to clarify. We’ll go ahead and mark those charges as fraudulent, then issue you and your husband new credit cards. You should receive your new cards in five business days.”

After the call ended, Autumn couldn’t stop thinking about the strangeness of it all. She got up and made herself coffee, then began preparing breakfast for Jayden.

All throughout breakfast, her brain wouldn’t stop asking, *What if those charges weren’t a mistake? What if he’s planning to leave me?*

The possibility should’ve horrified her. Especially after she’d tried so hard and for so long to make their marriage work.

Instead, all she felt was relief. And sneaking hope.

Autumn dropped Jayden off at school. As she headed back home, she couldn’t stop thinking about the locked filing cabinet in Phillip’s home office. The one containing financial documents he never allowed her to see.

Now, with ugly suspicions crowding her mind, she wondered if he was hiding something.

I should look.

Autumn wavered, chewing her thumbnail as she waited at a red light.

Breaking Phillip's rules went against everything she'd conditioned herself to do over the past eight years. She shuddered to think what would happen if he found out that she'd been snooping.

And yet... if Phillip had made a decision that affected her future, and Jayden's, she *had* to know.

I'll just have to make sure he never finds out what I did.

Decision made, she marched upstairs as soon as she got home.

First, she retrieved the filing cabinet keys from Phillip's not-so-secret hiding place in their bedroom. Then she tiptoed down the hall to his office.

The tiptoeing part was stupid because she was alone in the house. She knew Phillip wasn't supposed to return until Thanksgiving morning.

But she simply couldn't shake the guilty feeling that he'd suddenly pop up out of nowhere to confront her for breaking the rules.

With shaking hands, she unlocked the filing cabinet and opened the drawer labeled with the current year.

She sat in Phillip's leather office chair and began working her way through the neat bundles of bank statements, cellphone bills, and credit card bills. She was lucky that her husband still preferred paper statements to email.

Horror and anger rose steadily inside her at each new revelation. Hundreds of texts sent to and received from an unknown number. Receipts from Tiffany's for jewelry. Receipts for designer clothing, shoes, and purses from expensive Manhattan boutiques. Bills from restaurants with names she recognized from the FoodieTV shows she loved.

And worst of all, several bills from a women's health clinic in Princeton detailing various services... including a pregnancy test.

Autumn slumped in the chair. Bitter fury churned in her gut.

Here I am, always pinching pennies! And it's all because he's treating some other woman to the high life?

She felt as incredibly stupid as Phillip always told she was. She'd brushed aside a veritable parade of red flags, too blinded by her desire to believe in the illusion of their happy marriage to read the glaring signs.

Shouldn't I be sad? Crying? Utterly devastated? she asked herself. *Or at least angry?*

Instead, she felt utterly cold and numb.

How could I not have seen this coming? All those “business trips.” His insistence on being the family’s sole money manager. His insistence on handling our family cellphone bills?

And now here she sat, all alone in the perfectly decorated—but not too expensive—home he’d chosen for them. And the only emotion breaking through her numb shell was relief.

Relief that it was over... and it wasn’t *her* fault. She’d spent the last nine years trying to live up to Phillip’s impossible standards, and now she knew he was nothing but a fraud and a cheat.

She had zero interest in confronting him with her discovery. *Let that other woman have him. And good riddance.*

She was done with his lies, his bullying, his control-freak behavior.

She was going to take Jayden and leave before Phillip returned.

But where will I go?

The answer was easy. She’d go home to Snowberry Springs. Her parents would take her and Jayden in, no questions asked.

Home. The word used to fill Autumn with dread. She had been so desperate to escape her small-town roots and build a glamorous life for herself.

Now, home was the only place that made sense.

She carefully gathered all the bank statements with their paycheck deposit records. A divorce lawyer would want to see how much money Phillip really earned, so that they could work out alimony and child support.

Afterwards, she trudged back to the primary bedroom, feeling like she was wading through a chest-high pool of freezing water.

She began pulling her clothes and shoes from her side of the closet, throwing everything haphazardly onto the bed. Then she went into the bathroom to gather up her makeup and toiletries.

As she worked, she put together mental To-Do lists. This afternoon, she'd go to the bank and retrieve Jayden's birth certificate, their passports, social security cards, and other important papers from the safe deposit box.

Then she needed to find and hire a divorce lawyer. And call her parents and ask if she and Jayden could come early for the holidays. She dreaded confessing that her marriage was over. Maybe that part could wait until they were all face to face.

But before all of that, she needed to tell her son that they were moving to Grandma and Grandpa's ranch.



Parking in front of the school a few hours later, Autumn took a deep breath and braced herself for the difficult conversation ahead.

Jayden waved goodbye at a couple of boys, then opened the car door and hopped in.

“Hi Mommy!” he greeted her cheerfully. “Kenny and Ethan want to know if I can come over to their place on Saturday to play Minecraft.”

Guilt gnawed at her. How could she tell him they were leaving Bozeman and all of his friends?

Jayden frowned, apparently sensitive to her mood. “What’s wrong? You look sad.”

Autumn forced a smile. “Sweetie, I need to talk to you about something important.”

His blue eyes, so like her own, gazed at her curiously. “Did Dad come home early? Is he mad about something?” His tone was wary.

Autumn swallowed hard. “No, he isn’t home yet, and this doesn’t have anything to do with you.” She reached for his hand. “Your dad and I have been having some problems. So, I’ve decided that you and I are going to go stay with Grandma and Grandpa at the ranch for a while. Won’t that be fun?”

Jayden’s eyes widened. “Just us? Daddy’s not coming?”

Autumn nodded, bracing herself for a flood of protests and questions.

“Okay.” To her surprise, Jayden broke into a huge grin. “That’s awesome! I can’t wait to see Grandpa’s horses and the goats. Can I take riding lessons again?”

Autumn nodded. “Of course! I mean, if it’s okay with your grandpa and Uncle Spring,” she added hastily.

Minecraft with his friends apparently forgotten, Jayden spent the drive home chattering eagerly about his cousins and everything he wanted to do at the ranch.

The knot in Autumn’s chest loosened a little. She’d been worried about traumatizing her son with news of the separation and move, but he actually seemed to look forward to living on the ranch.



The next day, Autumn took a deep breath as she taped up the last box in preparation for the movers, who were arriving at 4:00 p.m.

Looking around the living room, now emptied of all her knickknacks and personal touches, regret stabbed her. This had been her home for nearly a decade. It was the place where Jayden had taken his first steps, said his first words. Where she and Phillip had shared laughter and tears, joy and heartbreak.

But it was also the place where Phillip’s harsh words had cut her down again and again. Where his lies and secrets had shattered her trust.

She closed her eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath.

Everything's going to be okay, she told herself. This is a chance to start over. And this time, I'll make sure things turn out differently.

Chapter Two

Baa-d Behavior: Snowberry Springs' Most Wanted

Snowberry Springs, Montana

August 8

“Baa.”

Is there a goat somewhere behind me? Deputy Sheriff Matt Parker paused, his brow furrowing.

Nah, that can't be right. He glanced toward the Children's Petting Zoo, located in a temporary corral at the edge of Town Square Park. And decided it must've been some kind of weird echo from the tall brick storefronts surrounding the park on three sides.

He turned his attention back to the opening ceremony for the Vintage Railroad Days Festival.

The morning sun beat down on his neck as he adjusted his uniform hat and surveyed the bustling crowd. He stood sentry at the back of the audience, scanning for troublemakers among the sea of cowboy hats and sundresses.

Tall trees cast welcome shade over the rows of folding chairs set up on the grass in front of the white gazebo band pavilion that served as a stage.

Behind the pavilion, the town's recently renovated nineteenth-century train station stood as a testament to both the past and the future of Snowberry Springs.

A cool breeze carried the smoky aroma of barbecued ribs and tri-tip to his nose. Matt's stomach rumbled in response, reminding him he'd skipped breakfast to help with the festival set-up.

Then Autumn Snowberry attracted his gaze like a moth drawn to a bright light.

She sat at the back of the pavilion, next to Mayor Jorge Gomez, Fire Chief Don Stinson, and other local dignitaries. A ray of sunlight illuminated Autumn's auburn hair, making it glow like embers. Her sleeveless dress' plunging V-neck showed off a tempting triangle of creamy skin.

As Matt watched, the handsome young CEO of the Livingston Vintage Railroad leaned over and said something to her.

She laughed in reply, her eyes sparkling.

Matt scowled at the tech-bro with his expensive sunglasses and perfectly groomed stubble.

Once, Autumn had smiled at *him* like that. Now, Matt was just another anonymous face in the crowd.

Never mind that he'd spent the past nine months trying to ignore her return to Snowberry Springs.

"Eyes front, deputy." Someone's elbow nudged him sharply.

Matt turned his scowl on his younger brother, who was also the newest officer in the town's tiny force.

Gabe just grinned back at him. “Geez, just ask her out already. Before she starts dating someone else.”

“Not interested,” Matt growled. “She had her chance and dumped me for that prick.”

He still couldn’t understand what she’d seen in Phillip Garthe. The guy was at least twenty years older than she was.

Gabe rolled his eyes. “Whatever, dude. Just keep staring at her like a stalker, then.”

In the pavilion, an elegant silver-haired woman in a cornflower-blue chiffon dress stepped up to the microphone. It was the festival’s chief sponsor, Mrs. Abigail Snowberry. The audience fell silent as she cleared her throat and tapped the microphone.

“Baa!” The bleat definitely sounded closer this time.

Matt looked around again, but still couldn’t spot anything out of the ordinary.

“Thank you all for coming to Snowberry Springs’ first annual Vintage Railroad Days Festival!” Mrs. Snowberry began. “We’re here today to celebrate the resumption of train service to Gardiner and the North Entrance of Yellowstone after a break of nearly seventy-five years.”

Applause and scattered whoops interrupted her momentarily.

She smiled benignly over the rows of seated people, then continued. “Snowberry Springs has come a long way in the

past year, and so many people have helped us on that journey. I'd like to start by thanking The Renovation Channel and HomeRenoTV for putting us in the spotlight with *Reviving Snowberry Springs*."

More applause. Mrs. Snowberry waited until it died down before resuming. "And of course, special thanks go to Alex Montgomery for reopening the old Livingston-to-Gardiner rail line. His beautiful historic rail cars have been bringing tourists through Paradise Valley and to our town since the Fourth of July."

As the crowd clapped and cheered, the rich bastard sitting next to Autumn smiled and nodded and waved like a politician.

Matt scowled at Montgomery, then caught himself. Even if Montgomery *was* flirting with Autumn, why should Matt care?

"Next, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my granddaughter, Autumn Snowberry, who not only started our town's Tourism Board but also worked countless hours this summer organizing this festival!"

"That's my girl!" shouted Bob Snowberry. He and the rest of Autumn's family were sitting in the front row of the audience.

They whistled and whooped up a storm, and everyone quickly joined in.

Matt saw Autumn's blush all the way from his place behind the last row of seats.

Since her return to town last Thanksgiving, Autumn had made herself very popular. She'd used her marketing and social

media skills to help various local businesses cash in on the popularity of *Reviving Snowberry Springs*.

“Not only that, but Autumn provided jobs to dozens of local teens at this festival,” Mrs. Snowberry added. “And she’s recruited an army of social media-savvy young volunteers to provide continuing content for the Tourism Board’s social media feeds and website. Now, let me say a few words about the new Yellowstone rail service...”

As Mrs. Snowberry’s speech droned on, Matt’s gaze—and thoughts—returned to Autumn.

He remembered the way her curves pressed against him at their high school dances. The taste of her mouth. The sweet weight of her breasts filling his hands as they made out in his old pickup truck.

And the way she’d broken up with him—over the fucking phone—halfway through her second semester at Montana State.

His lips twisted at the bitter memory. He’d been planning to propose to her during spring break. Instead, she’d dumped him for an old guy.

A sudden commotion somewhere behind him jolted him back to reality.

He and Gabe both spun toward the noise. Something crashed in the distance, followed by the sounds of yelling.

Then Gabe snorted. “Uh-oh, bro, looks like Daisy’s escaped the petting zoo!”

Matt craned his neck and caught sight of the Snowberry family's pet goat. Fuzzy tail held high, she was prancing down Main Street like a queen on parade.

"Of *course* it's that fucking goat," Matt muttered under his breath.

He was well-acquainted with the little monster. She was a notorious escape artist. And *always* hungry.

The roasted corn-on-the-cob stand had been her first victim. Half-eaten cobs lay scattered like fallen soldiers around the metal catering tray she'd pulled from the stand's counter.

Unfazed by the corn vendor's exasperated shouts, Daisy then made her way over to the gourmet popcorn booth.

"Get outta here, you little monster! Shoo!" the red-faced popcorn vendor yelled, brandishing his broom like a weapon.

But his attempts to shoo Daisy away only seemed to encourage her naughty antics.

She dodged around him, reared up, and snatched a striped paper sack filled to the brim with seasoned popcorn. In doing so, she sent a half-dozen other bags sitting on the table flying to the ground in a fluffy white explosion.

Meanwhile, festival guests were snapping photos and recording videos. Their laughter mingled with the angry shouts of Daisy's victims.

“Go, Daisy, go!” the Stinson twins shouted, high-fiving each other as they captured the mayhem on their phones.

Gabe bent over, howling with laughter.

Matt clenched his fists, trying to suppress his own amusement. They were on duty, after all.

“Cut it out, Gabe,” he ordered. “We need to do something about that damn goat before things escalate any further.”

Gabe straightened up, still spluttering. “I guess you’re right,” he gasped. “Whaddya say I go around and cut her off at the end of the street? Then you herd her my way.”

It was a good plan. Matt nodded, and his brother took off, his long legs flashing in their khaki uniform pants. Like Matt, Gabe had been on the high school track and field team, and also like Matt, he’d stayed in shape after graduation.

Matt broke into a jog, heading towards the scene of the crime. *Who knew Snowberry Springs’ Most Wanted would be four-legged and fond of festival food?*

At least chasing an unruly goat down Main Street was better than staring at Autumn like a stalker and dealing with Gabe’s knowing smirks.

“Daisy! Stop, you little troublemaker,” he called out as he neared a shaved ice stand under siege.

“Baa!” He could swear the goat’s pale blue eyes shone with amusement as she glanced at him. She kicked up her heels and

took off again, dodging around a coffee stand and making a beeline for the Auntie May's Old-Fashioned Candy booth.

Matt sprinted through the crowd, trying to keep Daisy in sight. It was tough going, with knots of clueless or utterly oblivious festival-goers blocking his way.

He was so focused on the chase that he didn't notice Autumn until she appeared at his side. She held her phone high as she filmed the chase.

Up-close, she was even more beautiful than he remembered. Startled, he stumbled and staggered a couple of steps before regaining his rhythm.

"Sure this isn't an episode of *Cops*?" she asked, giggling. Then she sang, "Bad goats, bad goats, whatcha gonna do?"

Just like that, the years since their break-up dropped away. And Matt forgot about his long-standing vow to ignore his ex-girlfriend.

Panting, he shot back, "Yeah, I always thought I'd be chasing bad guys, not bad *goats*! Though she's a better burglar than some of the two-legged ones I've seen!"

Autumn, easily keeping pace with him in her ballet flats, turned her phone to herself. "You heard it here, folks! Daisy the Goat is giving Snowberry Springs a run for its money. And so is our local police department!"

Sunlight flashed off the screen and dazzled him as she turned the camera towards him.

“She may be fast, but I’ve got the badge!” he declared, playing along. He added, “Though it doesn’t seem to impress her much.”

Autumn grinned at him. “Let’s hope Daisy doesn’t have any accomplices back at the petting zoo waiting for their turn to raid the festival!”

Matt fought to keep his gaze on her face, and not the tempting jiggle south of her neckline as she jogged.

“Thanks for fueling my nightmares!” Matt’s pulse quickened at her nearness. “Now, are you gonna help me catch this little delinquent, or are you just here to just document my epic fail?”

Autumn’s laughter rang out. “Either way, it’s going viral!”

Despite himself, Matt grinned back at her. Her playfulness was contagious, just like it had always been.

It reminded him of long-ago summer afternoons cruising the area’s back roads, talking about everything and nothing.

A pang of nostalgia caught him off-guard, along with the sudden, vivid memory of Autumn’s legs wrapped around his hips, and her slick heat squeezing his cock...

Daisy bleated from somewhere up ahead, accompanied by more crashing sounds and angry exclamations. It jarred Matt back to reality and reminded him he needed to focus on the task at hand.

Getting lost in the past was dangerous, especially when it came to Autumn Snowberry.

“Gabe’s waiting to catch Daisy at the end of the street,” he explained as Autumn continued to run at his side.

“Spring was headed that way, too,” Autumn replied. “Great minds think alike!”

Spring was Autumn’s older brother. His real name was Zack, but no one ever called him that.

“Your mission, should you choose to accept it,” Matt informed her solemnly, “is to help me keep Daisy moving up the street. We need to make sure she doesn’t double back on us.”

“Of course, Deputy Parker,” she said, her phone held high to capture every second. “Happy to help!”

Without breaking stride, she turned the phone camera back on herself. “You guys might remember that Daisy is one of the goats my dad and brother use for brush control. It’s a green solution to the problem of wildfire management, especially on steep slopes. Daisy was a bottle-fed kid, and she really bonded to people. So, she’s always been more of a pet than the other goats on the ranch, though she does her fair share of work.”

Up ahead, one of the festival booths went down in a tangle of aluminum poles and canvas.

Bleating loudly, Daisy vanished beneath the collapsed awning. A tall stand with pretzels and circle-shaped churros hanging from hooks hit the pavement with a clang. Someone shrieked.

Matt winced and picked up the pace.

Autumn added, her phone held high to capture the collapsed booth, “She’s also a troublemaker, but we love her anyway.”

“Speak for yourself,” growled Matt under his breath as he poured on the speed, his boots pounding on the asphalt.

The falling canvas had trapped Daisy beneath it. If he could get to the little goat before she wriggled free, he could end her reign of terror at the festival.

He and Autumn were still fifteen feet away when Daisy’s furry face, topped by a pair of short, curving horns, appeared from beneath the green fabric printed with “El Churro Redondo.” Her shoulders followed almost immediately.

Shit! As Matt lunged forward desperately, Daisy scabbled free of the heavy fabric.

She charged for freedom, nearly bowling over a woman holding a tray of cheese samples.

Matt reacted quickly, catching the woman’s arm to stabilize her before the tray hit the ground.

He flashed her an apologetic grin and kept running after the taunting flick of Daisy’s bushy tail, held upright like a flag. The town’s lone traffic signal came into sight, marking the end of the festival’s temporary pedestrian zone.

To Matt’s relief, he spotted two tall figures standing guard there. One of them was Gabe in his tan uniform. The other was

Spring, wearing a fancy pearl-buttoned shirt and a straw cowboy hat. He held a coil of rope in one hand.

Driven relentlessly forward by Matt and Autumn's pursuit, Daisy's bleats sounded angry now, her gallop broken by annoyed bucks and kicks as her two pursuers chased her away from every tempting morsel.

"BAA!" She easily leaped the waist-high barricades marking the festival boundary, and landed in the middle of the intersection of Main and First.

Moving almost casually, Spring lifted his rope, twirled it, and flung it. A lasso settled over Daisy's head and slid down her neck. It tightened instantly.

"Gotcha, you little troublemaker!" he growled.

She skidded to an indignant stop. Then she planted all four hooves on the pavement, tossing her head as she tried to pull free. A long section of red licorice hanging from her jaw swung wildly.

When that failed, she threw herself down on the ground like a toddler having a tantrum. Bleating non-stop, she rolled onto her back and wriggled wildly, slender legs flailing.

Spring kept the rope taut as he moved forward. "Matt, help me out?"

He tossed Matt a harness and leash.

Daisy's bleats turned to angry shrieks of protest as Matt swiftly buckled the straps in place around her neck and torso. His parents owned Parker Farms, and he'd grown up dealing with livestock.

Autumn came up to them as he straightened up and handed the leash to Spring.

"All yours. And don't forget to pick up after your pet," Matt added with a grin as Daisy let loose with a stream of small dark pellets.

Spring just rolled his eyes.

"And Deputy Matt and his trusty sidekick Deputy Gabe save the day!" Autumn narrated dramatically. "Let's hear it for Snowberry Springs' finest. And my cowboy brother Spring, too, of course."

Gabe chuckled and touched the wide brim of his hat. "All in a day's work, ma'am," he said with mock seriousness. "But am I *really* just the sidekick?"

"Appears so." Spring's mouth quirked as he neatly reeled in Daisy's stout, wriggling body. She promptly snaked her head around began chewing on the thick, woven-nylon leash. "I'm gonna go put her back in the petting zoo. And try to figure out how she escaped in the first place."

He strode off, hauling a protesting Daisy in his wake.

As her indignant bleats faded in the distance, Autumn lowered her phone, tapped it a few times, then slid it into her dress pocket.

Matt's amusement faded as he suddenly realized how close Autumn was standing.

She looked up at him with beautiful bright blue eyes filled with mirth. For a moment, the noise and people surrounding them faded away and there was only her.

He recalled himself with an effort, all-too-aware Gabe was watching them.

"Well, now that I've made a damn fool of myself on camera, I guess it's back to work," Matt announced, stepping back.

He'd meant it as self-deprecating joke, but Autumn's smile faltered. "Oh gosh, Matt, you're not upset about me filming this, are you?"

Before he could answer, she went on, "I'm sorry! I know I should have asked first. But I just got caught up in the moment."

Matt blinked at her, surprised by her show of contrition.

The Autumn he'd known years ago would've laughed and agreed he'd made a fool of himself. But this new Autumn looked worried and genuinely apologetic.

She pulled her phone back out of her pocket. "Let me delete all this. I honestly didn't mean to embarrass you."

Matt reached out and caught her free hand before it could touch the phone screen. "It's okay. Really."

Her skin was as soft and warm as he remembered. The breeze wafted the scent of her hair to his nose, and he inhaled deeply. His cock stirred.

“Are you *sure*?” She gazed up at him, and the uncertainty in her expression made his chest tightened. She looked like she expected him to kick her puppy.

What the hell did her ex-husband do to her? Anger rose, leaving a steely taste in his mouth. With an effort of will, he pushed it down and forced himself to smile down at her.

“I’m sure. If that video makes folks smile, then it was worth it.” Her relief was palpable. He couldn’t help adding wryly, “Besides, we caught our suspect, didn’t we?”

She smiled back, and to his relief, the sparkle returned to her deep blue eyes. “For the record, if you ever decide to leave law enforcement, come work for Mom and Dad at the ranch. You’ve got a promising future in goat herding.”

Matt laughed out loud. “What can I say? I’m just naturally talented, I guess.”

Her eyes twinkled. “I can’t argue with that.”

As Autumn left to rejoin her son and family, he realized chasing Daisy had been the most fun he’d had in a long while.

○○○○○○

Maybe Matt's finally decided to stop giving me the cold shoulder, Autumn thought as she headed back to the town square. Jayden and the rest of her family were waiting there for her.

Matt had been avoiding her since she returned to town last winter, and she hadn't pushed the issue. After all, *she* was the one who'd broken things off.

Now she was struck by how quickly they'd fallen back into their old banter. And how sexy he still was.

He'd always been tall and fit, with a great sense of humor. These days, a buzz cut tamed his once-curly brown hair under his wide-brimmed felt cowboy hat.

That hat shaded a face marked by strong features, a slightly beaky nose, and warm hazel eyes that seemed to look right through her. He exuded good-natured confidence and command, even while chasing a mischievous goat down Main Street.

Phillip wouldn't have dealt with the situation so gracefully, she thought. *He would've been enraged at Daisy's antics, and blown his stack if I'd dared to film him doing anything he considered undignified, like trying to catch a runaway goat.*

But it hadn't bothered Matt at all.

As she retraced her steps up Main Street, she saw that most of the booths had already been restored to their pre-Daisy state.

Even the collapsed El Churro Redondo stand was rapidly rising from the dead. The festival was now in full swing, with

live music coming from the town square.

Autumn couldn't help feeling a swell of gratitude and pride at the sight of all the smiling faces crowding Main Street.

Grandma Abigail had given her a lot of credit today. But Autumn knew her grandmother was the real force behind all the positive changes to their town over the past year.

She was the one who'd convinced Autumn's younger sister Summer to rescue the town's oldest eatery, The Yummy Cowboy Diner.

And Grandma Abigail was also the one who'd campaigned for Winnie to work with noted historical preservationist Nick Evans to restore the town's neglected historic hotel, paving the way for Winnie and Nick's hit TV series, *Reviving Snowberry Springs*.

Sure, Autumn's marketing expertise had amplified those efforts through social media. But even a genius marketer couldn't have done much for the town without Summer and Brock's amazing food and Winnie and Nick's sizzling on-screen chemistry.

Autumn was just happy she could play a supporting role. Helping Grandma Abigail on her mission to save their town had given her a sense of purpose through a bleak winter and spring spent filing for separation, then launching divorce proceedings.

When she arrived back at the town square, she found her parents and the rest of her family still seated where she'd left them.

“That goat causes more trouble than all the rest of the animals put together,” Grandma Abigail was saying as Autumn walked up.

“Yeah, but at least her mischief is entertaining,” Mom replied. “And thanks to Autumn’s videos going viral, we had twice as many visitors booking our cottages this summer.”

“All I did is film her,” Autumn pointed out. “Daisy does all the hard work. People *love* her. She’s such great PR for our ranch and the town.”

“That’s all well and fine, but she’s supposed to be a working animal, not a pet,” Dad said with an exasperated huff, but Autumn could see the laughter lurking in his eyes.

As exasperating as Daisy could be, even he couldn’t deny that she’d become the ranch’s greatest asset since a video of her chasing a young black bear out of the goat paddock had gone viral last March.

Autumn looked around. “Where’s Jayden?”

Just before she dashed off, she’d told him to go sit with Grandma and Grandpa.

Mom frowned. “I thought he was with you.”

Chapter Three

Unexpected Reunion

Autumn's stomach clenched in sudden worry.

"We haven't seen him since you left, honey." Dad looked around. "Maybe he followed you. Or went over to the petting zoo. He sure loves those dang goats."

"I'll check there first. If he's not there, I'll start looking around the food tents. He probably made it as far as the ice cream truck and got distracted," she said, trying to convince herself as much as her parents.

You're a terrible mother, running off to do social media stuff and flirt with your old boyfriend. Funny how her internal voice sounded just like Phillip. What if someone snatched Jayden because you were busy filming Matt and Daisy?

In a small town like this, stranger danger was rarely a worry. But the festival had brought in so many unfamiliar faces...

Bile rose in Autumn's throat as worst-case scenarios flooded her imagination.

I have to find him. Now.

"Let's split up and look for him," Mom suggested, taking charge of the situation. "I'll go check the petting zoo; you go back to Main Street and see if he's at any of the food booths. Bob, why don't you go over to the games area and look around? If we can't find him in the next ten minutes, we'll call

911, then make an announcement.” She tilted her head toward the bandstand with its PA system.

“All right,” Autumn agreed.

She wouldn’t feel better until they found Jayden, but at least they had a plan. And she wouldn’t have to search for him all by herself.

As she retraced her steps down Main Street, Autumn tried to shove away the fear gnawing at the edges of her mind.

This was Snowberry Springs, after all. She knew everyone. And everyone knew Jayden. But she couldn’t help thinking about the hundreds of strangers surrounding her.

“Jayden!” she called out, her voice nearly drowned out by the sounds of people laughing and shouting to be heard over the music.

She reached the end of Main Street, asking all the vendors along the way if they’d seen a little boy with short brown hair and a bright blue Superman t-shirt with matching shorts. No one had seen him.

She felt sick to her stomach with worry.

Hoping against hope that Jayden might be with Summer or Winnie, she pulled out her phone and frantically texted the Snowberry family chat group.

Has anyone seen Jayden? Did he decide to hang out with Kegan? Or April and Abby?

Jayden and his new cousin Kegan Evans were nearly the same age, and Spring's girls were six and four, respectively.

One by one, Summer, Winnie, and Spring each reported they hadn't seen Jayden either.

"Damn it," Autumn muttered under her breath. Icy tendrils of dread coiled around her chest and stomach, squeezing the breath out of her.

It wasn't like her son to wander off without telling anyone.

Navigating through the sea of people on her way back to Town Square Park, Autumn stopped everyone she recognized, asking them if they'd seen Jayden. No one had.

No help for it, then. She swallowed hard and dialed the police department. To her relief, Amy Wittenmeyer, the town's longtime police and fire dispatcher, answered immediately.

"Hey, Amy, it's Autumn. I don't know if this is an actual emergency," Autumn began, her fears for Jayden competing with her years of being pressured to never make a fuss. "But Jayden's gone missing at the festival, and no one's seen him. I can't find him anywhere." Her voice cracked on the last word.

"Oh, honey, I can only imagine how freaked out you must be right now," Amy said in a soothing tone. "Especially with all these people in town for the weekend. I'll put out the word right away. I just need some information from you. What was Jayden wearing today?"

Autumn answered all Amy's questions. In the back of her mind, she was a little surprised that Amy wasn't mocking her for being so concerned, even though Jayden had only been missing for a short time.

Phillip would have been calling Autumn a drama queen—or worse—for calling the police after twenty minutes.

Instead, Amy assured her she'd alert all the first responders in the area to keep an eye out for Jayden.

Once she ended the call, Autumn headed for the bandstand to make the announcement over the PA system.

That was when she spotted a familiar blue Superman t-shirt across the street from Town Square Park.

It was Jayden, sitting at a table in front of Jenna's Java.

Relief crashed over her, followed by shock as she registered who sat across from him.

Phillip. Here in Snowberry Springs. Autumn froze. What the hell is he doing here?

She hadn't seen or heard from her ex-husband since last winter.

Right after she and Jayden moved home, he'd bombarded her with texts and voicemail messages, alternately raging at her and begging her to come back. She'd responded by blocking him on her new phone and all her social media, then communicated with him only through their lawyers.

The last she'd heard, he'd moved to New Jersey, presumably to share that luxury apartment with Ms. Theresa Botticelli and her baby daughter. He'd relinquished custody of Jayden without a fight.

Predictably, he quickly fell behind on his alimony and child support payments, probably because he was paying for yet more designer shoes and purses.

Autumn had hoped never to see his lying, cheating face again.

And yet, here he was, looking as cool and confident as ever.

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she marched over to Jenna's. The knot in her stomach tightened as each step took her closer to the man she'd spent most of her twenties trying to please.

"Jayden!" she called out as she approached the table, trying to keep her voice light and cheerful for her son's sake. "I've been looking all over for you! What's going on?"

An old-fashioned glass ice cream bowl on the table in front of her son held a half-eaten banana split sundae.

Phillip had opted for an iced coffee and one of Jenna's divine chocolate chip cookies.

"Hi, Mommy!" Jayden shot her a guilty look. "Daddy said he wanted to buy me ice cream and catch up. That's okay, right?"

“Of *course*, it’s okay,” Phillip growled before Autumn could say anything. “He’s my damn son.”

Jayden’s anguished expression as his gaze bounced between his parents made her heart ache.

“Yes, it’s okay, sweetie,” she assured him. “I was just a little worried when I couldn’t find you.” She forced a smile.

Then she turned her attention to Phillip and let her smile drop away. “Can I talk to you a moment? In private?”

“Sure.” He rose from his chair and straightened his stylish linen blazer. It was a pale blue that matched his eyes. “I’ll be back in a minute, J,” he told their son. “Save my seat, will ya?”

As Phillip followed her to the corner, out of Jayden’s earshot, she wondered why she’d ever found him attractive.

Sure, she and her friends had all considered him a “silver fox,” but once she’d gotten pregnant with Jayden, she discovered that his handsome features and effortless charm hid an ugly side.

“What the hell are you doing here, Phillip?” she demanded.

“Nice to see you too, babycakes,” he replied with a smug smirk. She’d always *hated* that nickname. “Is it so hard to believe that I’d want to spend time with my son?”

“Considering your track record? Yeah, it is,” she retorted. Her hands clenched into fists, and she felt her short nails dig into

her palms.

His brows rose. “Why, Autumn, are you *jealous?*” His tone was mocking.

Autumn rolled her eyes as she recognized one of his favorite tactics. When backed into a corner, he attacked.

“Cut the crap, Phillip. What are you doing here?”

He looked at her with feigned innocence. “Like I said, I’m just here to see my son and spend some time with him.”

“That’s really touching,” she said sarcastically. She crossed her arms over her chest. “I thought you had your hands full with your *other* family in New Jersey.” She couldn’t prevent the bitterness that seeped into her voice.

Phillip noticed, of course. “Well, since you brought it up, I thought it’s time for Jayden to meet his baby sister. I want him to fly back to Princeton with me.”

“Over my dead body,” Autumn spat. “You don’t get to waltz back into our lives after everything you’ve done and expect me to play nice.”

Her voice rose, attracting curious glances from passersby. But she didn’t care. A mixture of fury and panic choked her.

Phillip wants to take my son away! She had to stop him. No matter the cost. Her voice rose. “He’s not going *anywhere* with you. I have full custody, remember?”

“Autumn, stop making a scene!” Phillip hissed. “I just want to be a part of my son’s life. Is that so wrong?”

“Being a part of his life means being honest and trustworthy,” Autumn shot back, her voice shaking with suppressed emotion. “Two things you’re not.”

She wondered why he was suddenly so interested in Jayden. Had something happened between him and Theresa?

If so, Theresa ditched him faster than I did. She’s probably smarter.

“Ever stop to consider that if you hadn’t been so demanding, I wouldn’t have needed to look elsewhere for comfort?” Phillip retorted. “All you ever did was criticize and complain. When you weren’t ignoring me because you were dicking around on your stupid Instagram and TikTok and God knows what else.”

“Really? *Really?*” Autumn asked, incredulous. “You cheated on me, lied to me *and* to Theresa, and then abandoned Jayden without a second thought. And now you’re trying to play the victim here?”

“Autumn, please,” Phillip pleaded. “Look, I know I messed up. Now, I just want to make things right between us.” His expression and voice both softened. “When I was with Theresa, all I could think about was *you*, baby girl. I still love you. Give me a chance to prove it.”

Yeah, Theresa definitely dumped him, Autumn thought.

A series of terrible thoughts followed her instant of satisfaction. *What if that means Phillip isn’t going back to*

New Jersey? What if he stays here? What if he wants to take Jayden away from me?

Oh, no.

He'd always hated Snowberry Springs when they'd visited for the holidays, calling it a "hick town in the middle of fucking nowhere."

"Too late for that," she replied coldly, meeting his pleading gaze with steely determination. "You made your choice when you cheated on me and got Theresa pregnant. Now you have to live with it."

"But what if I've changed?" Phillip challenged her. He spread his hands and stepped closer, his broad-shouldered frame looming over her, just like he always did when he wanted something. "What if I told you I missed Jayden? And missed you, too?"

Autumn stared up into Phillip's eyes. He exuded sincerity and hurt vulnerability.

Her heart pounded crazily as she struggled to maintain her composure.

Maybe this time, he really means it, came the sneaking thought.

She quelled it firmly. How often had he behaved cruelly to her, then turned around and showered her with love and apologies until she forgave him? Only to revert to his old ways as soon as she let down her guard?

“I’d tell you I didn’t believe you,” she said through gritted teeth. “And if you’re telling the truth, why didn’t you let us know you were coming? Why sneak Jayden away and scare everyone half to death?”

“Because I know you, babycakes,” Phillip retorted. “If I’d asked, would you have said yes?”

“So you figured it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission?”

Phillip’s contrite expression vanished. His voice hard now, he said, “Well, I shouldn’t need a fucking written invitation to see my *son*. Besides, from what I can see, you’ve been way too busy playing social media star today to pay much attention to Jayden.”

That’s not fair! Autumn thought, her cheeks burning with indignation at his words.

The Old Autumn would have cowered and apologized for her shortcomings.

The New Autumn straightened and glared up at him. “My social media management gigs feed and clothe Jayden and me, since you’re always late with your alimony and child support payments,” she pointed out. “*I’m* the one who makes sure he’s safe and cared for.”

“Like just now?” Phillip sneered, leaning forward, further invading her personal space. “Anything could have happened to him while you were busy trying to look good on Instagram. He’s lucky I was there.”

Long-suppressed rage surged through her like a tidal wave. “You have some nerve, Phillip,” she snapped. “I’m a better parent than you’ll ever be!”

Phillip’s expression darkened, his eyes narrowing as he glared at Autumn. “Yeah, but you were a total failure as a wife!” he spat. “At least Theresa understood what I needed in a relationship.”

Autumn felt her breath catch in her throat. *Is he serious?*

“Excuse me?” she choked out, her voice barely more than a whisper. “I did *everything* for you, Phillip. I gave up my dreams to support yours, but it was never enough. You always wanted more.”

“Ah, and there it is. The martyr act. I was wondering when you’d pull that out.” Phillip’s glacial eyes swept over her from head to toe, as if searching out every imperfection. “Acting like you’re so noble when all you ever did was hold me back. You’re responsible for everything that went wrong between us.”

Autumn felt tears prickling at the corners of her eyes. She wiped angrily at them, hating that she was giving Phillip the satisfaction of knowing how much his words hurt her.

“Mommy?” Jayden’s trembling voice cut through the tension like a knife. Both Autumn and Phillip turned to look at their son, who’d crept up behind her. He was staring at them with wide, frightened eyes.

“I’m sorry I made you cry,” he whispered, his lower lip quivering. “Daddy told me to sneak away as a prank. He said

it would be funny to scare you a little, and then we'd all eat ice cream together."

Autumn swallowed hard as her protective instincts surged to the forefront.

She kneeled down in front of Jayden, wrapping him in a tight hug. "It's not your fault, sweetie," she murmured into his hair. "I'm not mad at you, okay? I just... I was just worried about you, that's all."

Jayden nodded against her chest, sniffing softly. As Autumn held him close, she couldn't help but think about how unfair it was for Phillip to waltz back into their lives and cause so much pain and turmoil.

"I'm glad to see you found Jayden. Is everything all right here?"

Autumn shuddered with relief at hearing Matt's deep voice. She turned her head and saw him striding toward them.

"Everything's fine, Officer," Phillip replied smoothly, plastering on a smile that made Autumn's stomach churn. "We're just having ourselves a family reunion. I haven't seen my kid in *months*, ya know?" He sighed deeply and shook his head with convincing melancholy. "I've really missed my little man."

Just like usual, Phillip wanted to convince everyone that Autumn was the villain here.

But Matt didn't seem impressed. His hazel eyes studied Autumn, and she saw concern and dawning anger there. "Are

you okay, Autumn?"

Chapter Four

Fauxmance

Matt approached Jenna's Java, his eyes scanning the crowded street for Jayden.

The rich scents of baking cookies mingled with freshly brewed coffee. His stomach rumbled again, reminding him it was nearly lunchtime, and he'd only had a cup of coffee for breakfast.

A pair of raised voices caught his attention. He stopped dead in his tracks as he spotted Autumn kneeling on the sidewalk in front of Jenna's Java, Jayden in her arms.

The boy's safe! Matt let out a sigh of relief and radioed in the good news.

Then his senses went on high alert as he took in the tableau.

A big silver-haired man loomed over mother and son, a disgruntled expression on his face. He wore a crumpled blue linen blazer over a button-down shirt and expensive pants with polished leather shoes. His clothes made him stand out in a crowd of festival goers wearing jeans, shorts, and t-shirts.

Matt took an instant dislike to the stranger. He was standing way too close to Autumn, clearly trying to intimidate her.

Something was clearly wrong here. Her body language was tense. Her expression wavered between fear and anger as she glared up at him.

Did this SOB try to kidnap Jayden? Matt's protective instincts surged to the fore.

He strode over.

"I'm glad to see you found Jayden. Is everything all right here?" he asked, scanning Jayden with a professional eye.

He was happy to see the boy appeared upset but unhurt.

Autumn glanced up at Matt. The vulnerability and relief in her expression ignited a fierce protectiveness in him.

"Everything's fine, Officer," the stranger said before she could answer. His smile looked as fake as a three-dollar bill. "We're just having ourselves a family reunion. I haven't seen my kid in *months*, ya know? I've really missed my little man."

Family? What the hell's that supposed to mean?

"Are *you* okay, Autumn?" Matt asked, pointedly addressing her.

He saw the stranger's scowl out of the corner of his eye.

"Didn't you hear me? I said everything's *fine*," the other man repeated, his arrogant tone grating.

Yep. Asshole. Matt knew the type—older, entitled, and a bully.

A spurt of rage shot through him as he noticed Autumn's eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

“Hey, Matt...” Autumn rose to her feet. “I... It’s just—Phillip and I were having a discussion.”

This is Phillip Garthe? The realization sent an unpleasant jolt through Matt.

Thanks to the local grapevine, he’d heard a *lot* of stories about Autumn’s ex-husband over the years. None of them good.

Matt’s jaw tightened as he looked back and forth between them.

“Looks a little more intense than a discussion,” he pointed out, trying to keep his tone even. His gaze lingered on Jayden, who clung to his mother’s waist. “Jayden, buddy, how are you doing? Everyone’s worried about you.”

“I’m fine, Deputy Matt,” the boy whispered.

Matt didn’t miss the nervous glance he shot in his father’s direction.

“See, everything’s okay and under control. Now, if you’ll excuse us,” Phillip snapped. “I’m in the middle of a private conversation with my wife.”

“*Ex-wife*,” she snapped. “And I can speak for myself, thank you very much. We’re *divorced*, remember?”

“Maybe *you* gave up on us, but I never did!” Phillip retorted, his eyes narrowing at Autumn.

He then turned his pale stare to Matt. “You can move along now, Officer. We’re all fine. As you can see.” His tone oozed with condescension.

“And our discussion is over,” she added. Matt didn’t miss how she edged fractionally closer to him. “Leave us alone, Phillip. I’m done with you.”

Phillip’s mouth thinned even further. “We’re not done until *I* say we’re done.” He crossed his arms. “You can’t keep my son from me, babycakes.”

Babycakes? Matt thought incredulously.

Judging by her expression, Autumn didn’t like the nickname any more than he did.

“Actually,” Matt drawled, crossing his arms over his broad chest, “I think I’ll stick around. You know, just in case there’s any more trouble.”

Phillip scoffed, his nostrils flaring in annoyance. “What kind of trouble would that be, Officer? Or is it illegal now for a man to treat his son to ice cream?”

“You know you triggered a missing child alert, don’t you?” Matt asked coldly.

“*Seriously?*” Phillip’s expression twisted. He turned to Autumn. “Jeez. You always were a drama queen, but you called the cops on me? Seriously?”

Autumn’s glance darted uncertainly between the two men.

Matt remembered the laughing, confident woman of just a short while ago, and his annoyance at Phillip's bluster coalesced into genuine anger at seeing her like this now.

"Matt, I appreciate your concern," Autumn said, her voice wavering. "But I can handle this."

"Are you sure?" Matt asked, his protectiveness warring with his desire to respect her wishes.

Autumn hesitated for a moment before nodding. "Yes, I'm sure. Thank you, though. Really."

"You know, Mr. Garthe," Matt said, his words clipped, "you could've saved everyone a lot of trouble if you'd just let the Snowberry family know you wanted to see Jayden. As it was, your irresponsible actions sent the entire town on high alert."

"Excuse me?" Phillip snapped, his eyes flashing with anger. "I'm not *irresponsible*, just a dad who wanted to see the son she's kept from me for *months*."

"Oh, *please!*" Autumn exclaimed. "You're the one who moved to New Jersey last winter to be with your other woman and child! And you're the one who didn't want custody or visitation."

Matt had heard that Autumn's husband had cheated on her. But the revelation that he had a second child with his mistress took Matt aback.

Phillip Garthe is one slimy bastard, all right.

“Seems to me, Mr. Garthe,” Matt pointed out, fighting to keep his tone calm, “that you’re more interested in scoring points against Autumn here, maybe even scaring her, than doing the right thing.”

“Oh yeah? Well, let me tell you something, Officer,” Phillip barked, incensed. “As usual, Autumn was too busy messing around on social media to keep an eye on our son! *Anything* could’ve happened to him while she was acting like an empty-headed little poser!”

The insult, coupled with the hurt in Autumn’s eyes, made Matt’s protective instincts kick into high gear. He clenched his fists, struggling to keep his temper in check.

“She’s smart and anything *but* a poser,” he growled, taking a step closer to Phillip. “Autumn’s worked miracles as head of our town’s publicity and tourism. If it wasn’t for her, we wouldn’t be holding this festival or seeing all these visitors.”

As he spoke, Phillip’s face slowly turned brick red with rage.

“Enough!” Autumn interjected. The quaver in her voice broke Matt’s tenuous hold on his anger. She put her hand on his arm. “*Please*, Matt. I know you mean well, but you’re not helping.”

“Got that right!” Phillip glared at Matt, his lips pressed into a thin line. “Who the hell do you think you are, anyway?”

Matt’s gaze locked with Phillip’s. An idea struck him like a bolt of lightning, and before he could think it through, the words tumbled out of his mouth.

“I’m her boyfriend.” The moment the words left his lips, he mentally kicked himself. *What the hell am I saying?*

Phillip’s eyes widened in disbelief. He looked like Matt had just punched him in the face. All his arrogance and bluster vanished, leaving behind only surprise and bewilderment.

Well, that just blew the tires on his truck. Matt felt savage satisfaction at the other man’s expression.

“Autumn, what’s going on here?” Phillip began.

She threw Matt a panicked look, and he braced himself for her angry denial. *Fuck, what was I thinking?*

Then, to his astonishment, she smiled coyly. “Sweetie, I thought we agreed to keep our relationship under wraps for now?” she said, playing along, much to his amazement. “For Jayden’s sake.”

Then she wrapped her arms around Matt and leaned into his chest.

His body instantly responded to the sensation of her soft breasts pressing against him and the scent of her auburn hair. He wrapped around his arms around her, shielding her from Phillip. Her back felt rigid under his hand, every muscle tensed.

She spoke again. “You see, Phillip, Matt’s my old high school boyfriend. We started dating again this summer while I was planning this festival. We spent a lot of time together and discovered we still have so much in common.”

“You’re Mommy’s *boyfriend*, Deputy Matt?” Jayden was staring up at them, wide-eyed.

Matt looked down and give Jayden a conspiratorial grin. “It’s supposed to be a big secret. Can you promise not to tell anyone?”

The boy nodded eagerly. “Cross my heart and hope to die!” he declared.

Phillip was scowling at them again. But the big man seemed at a loss for his next move. *Good.*

“Autumn, why don’t I walk you and Jayden over to the park where your parents are waiting?” Matt suggested, trying to keep his voice steady and professional.

He could see the relief in her eyes as she nodded. “Sounds good,” she breathed, a shaky smile gracing her lips.

She was clearly eager to get away from Phillip. Plus, there was a rapt audience watching their every move from the bakery’s outside tables.

She looked down at her son.

“Jayden, I’m sure Daisy wants you to visit her at the petting zoo.”

Jayden nodded. “Sure!” He threw a longing glance at a nearby table, where a half-eaten dish of ice cream stood melting. “But can I finish my ice cream first?”

Phillip's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You can't keep me from my son, Autumn! He needs his father in his life. Not some *boyfriend*."

"Stay away from us," Autumn said tightly. "You had your chance. You didn't want anything to do with us, remember?"

"But I've seen the error of my ways. I miss you both so much," he declared, grinning nastily at her. "I'm sure my lawyer can get a judge to amend that custody order."

Autumn sucked in a breath. "We'll see about that." But her voice shook.

Matt put his arms protectively around her shoulders. "Don't worry," he assured her. "The Park County judges take *everything* into account when deciding to amend custody agreements." He looked Phillip square in the eyes. "And they hate people who try to game the system. Especially when there are kids involved."

Phillip bristled, but Matt stared him down with the unflinching gaze that made perps quake in their boots.

"Now, Mr. Garthe, I think it's time you were on your way," Matt continued, steel in his tone. "Autumn's got work to do, and Jayden needs to get back to his grandparents. Everyone's worried about him."

After a tense beat, Phillip rasped, "This isn't over, babycakes."

With a final menacing glare, he stalked away.

As he disappeared around the corner, Autumn slumped against Matt, some of the rigid tension leaving her body. “Oh, shit,” she whispered.

He squeezed her briefly in reassurance.

“Mommy, that’s a bad word,” Jayden said reprovably.

“I know, sweetie. I’m sorry.”

Jayden nodded. “Can I go finish my banana split now?” he asked, sounding plaintive.

“Sure,” she said. “But don’t go anywhere else while I talk to Deputy Matt.”

“I promise, Mommy!”

Both Autumn and Matt watched him like hawks until he climbed into the chair in front of his half-melted sundae.

“You okay?” He rubbed her back and felt her take a deep breath.

“Yeah, I think so. Thank you for standing up to him.”

“Happy to help,” he said, then added, “But you were doing a pretty good job of that on your own. I was just your backup.”

She exhaled sharply. “I can’t believe Phillip just showed up like that, out of the blue! He’s supposed to be in New Jersey,

but it sounds like his fiancée kicked him out. Now he wants to get back together with me. As if.”

Anger flared through Matt’s chest. “What is he? Delusional?”

She shivered. “I don’t know. But he scared the daylights out of me today, taking Jayden like that...” She tilted her head back and gave him an assessing look. “Speaking of which, why did you tell him we were, uh, dating?”

“Because I couldn’t just stand there and let that jerk act like he owned you,” he admitted. “I had to do *something*.” He felt his lips twist in a wry smile. “And I can’t really punch his lights out while I’m in uniform.”

Autumn chuckled. Then her arms tightened around him in a fierce hug. “Matt, that was *inspired!* Phillip was way out of line, and sad to say, the only way he’ll back down is if he thinks some other man has staked a claim on me.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “I can’t believe I ever married him.”

“We all make mistakes.” Matt shrugged. “What matters is you got yourself out of a bad situation.” He paused. “Your ex seems like a real asshole.”

“Can’t argue with you.” Autumn stepped back, breaking the embrace.

They waited for Jayden to spoon up the last bite of his ice cream. Then he ran ahead of them, his youthful energy apparently undeterred by the ugly confrontation with his father.

Autumn touched Matt's arm. A treacherous thrill ran through him at the contact... and again at her warm smile as she looked up at him. "Thank you so much for helping me out just now."

He shrugged, torn between pleasure at helping her and embarrassment at the lame way he'd handled it.

"You know there are going to be rumors about us," she said, as if reading his mind.

"You mean because everyone at Jenna's overheard us just now?" Matt shrugged, trying to pretend he didn't care. Once again, an ungovernable impulse prodded him to add, "And if your ex is planning to hang around and try to renegotiate custody—"

Autumn winced at the suggestion.

"—maybe it wouldn't hurt to keep playing along with the whole dating story for a while." Matt's mouth was apparently running independently of his brain today.

Hadn't he decided to stay away from Autumn?

But that was before her asshole ex showed up to make trouble. Matt's jaw clenched as he remembered the smug triumph in Phillip's expression as he goaded Autumn.

The jerk used his own son to score points against his ex-wife. That told Matt everything he needed to know about the guy.

“We can’t tell anyone it’s fake, though,” he continued. “At least not until your ex leaves town.” He spread his hands. “But you know how people talk. If you decide pretending to be my girlfriend is the way to go, we’ll have to keep the truth under wraps. Not even your sisters can know.”

They walked along in silence for a few steps. Autumn was frowning down at her feet, clearly deep in thought.

“I—I don’t know,” she said finally. “We’d have to lie to everyone. That feels wrong, lying to my family and friends.”

“Okay,” Matt said. He told himself he should be relieved that she hadn’t taken him up on his crazy offer. “You do whatever you think is right. No matter what happens, I’ll support you. And you call me right away if Phillip makes any more trouble. Deal?”

He didn’t miss the look of relief that flashed across her face. She turned and stuck out her hand. “Deal.”

They shook on it. Then she surprised him by drawing him into a brief hug. “Thanks, Matt. You’re a better friend than I deserve.”

As they continued walking back to where her family awaited, Matt couldn’t decide whether he felt satisfied at having bested an asshole at his own game or annoyance at himself for jumping at an excuse to spend time with the woman who’d broken his heart.

Chapter Five

Special Delivery

Friday, August 14 (seven days later)

“Hey, Autumn!” Winnie called out from the front of the house. “You think you could get some shots of Jason and me fitting this new railing?”

“Sure thing,” Autumn replied.

Wearing her hard hat and mandatory steel-toed shoes, she left the living room. She had spent the morning chronicling her brother-in-law Nick’s careful removal of an ugly stucco layer from the fireplace, revealing gorgeous, century-old original tile work.

Sunlight streamed through the open windows, illuminating swirling eddies of sawdust in the air. The familiar smells of paint, caulking, and varnish filled her nose, and the sounds of hammers and saws echoed through the empty rooms.

She arrived at the porch, where master carpenter Jason Lund and her sister stood waiting for her, along with a camera operator and a sound guy.

As Autumn snapped photos and the *Reviving Snowberry Springs*’ crew filmed, Winnie and Jason maneuvered the new porch railing into place. As usual, Winnie was wearing her trademark bright pink tool belt and matching hard hat.

Thanks to Autumn’s chronicling of Winnie and her husband Nick’s ongoing restoration projects, the *Reviving Snowberry*

Springs social media feed had become wildly popular.

For their second-season project, Winnie and Nick had chosen a 120-year-old Craftsman. The beautiful but neglected house was located just three blocks from the Snowberry Springs town square, and Winnie had promptly declared it her “forever home.”

The restoration and renovation plans included an addition at the back of the building for the primary bedroom and ensuite bathroom. That way, Nick’s son Kegan would have his own bedroom, and the remaining two original bedrooms could serve as home office space and guest accommodation for now, with an eye for Winnie and Nick’s future children.

It was a joy to capture the flurry of activity as the house slowly came back to life after decades of neglect interspersed with botched restorations. With each click of her camera, Autumn felt her serenity returning. It had been a stressful week, and she felt bleary from several sleepless nights in a row.

As Winnie and Jason finished installing the porch railing, an unfamiliar white van pulled up in front of the house.

With a sinking heart, Autumn recognized the logo on the van’s side. It was the same Bozeman florist’s shop Phillip had always used to send her anniversary and birthday flowers.

Oh, no. Autumn’s fingers tightened around her camera.

“Is there an Autumn Snowberry-Garthe here?” the driver shouted, confirming her fears as he emerged from the van.

She'd dropped the "Garthe" from her last name after her divorce became final last month. But Phillip wouldn't know or care about that.

Everyone working outside stopped what they were doing. They all looked at Autumn.

Anger made her jaw clench and heated her cheeks.

Bad enough that Phillip had spent the last four days sending unwanted flowers, chocolates, and even jewelry to the ranch. And bombarding her with dozens of texts, emails, and voicemail messages, until she finally blocked him.

Now, he's trying to harass me at work, too?

She took a step back, shaking her head.

After his unexpected appearance at the festival last Saturday, Autumn had spent the rest of the day nervously watching for any sign of her ex's presence.

On Sunday, he sent a large basket of chocolates and pastries to the ranch. Autumn didn't discover it sitting on her mom and dad's porch until she returned home late on Sunday night after the festival ended.

The basket bore a gift tag from Jenna's Java, inscribed in Phillip's handwriting. *I'm sorry, babycakes. Won't you please forgive me? All my love, Phillip.*

Beneath his signature, he'd written his new cellphone number. Autumn had seen the New Jersey area code and felt sick to her

stomach.

“I’ll spread the word in town, sweetie,” Mom had said, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Phillip’s money won’t be any good here if he tries to send you something else.”

But the flowers and chocolate deliveries continued on Tuesday and Wednesday. Now, they all came from businesses in Livingston and Bozeman, so at least Phillip was having to work a lot harder to spend his money.

Autumn’s dread and rage grew with every passing day. Every night, she lay awake for hours as an endless parade of scenarios, each one worse than the next, marched through her brain.

What if Phillip dragged her back to family court? And what if the judge split custody? Or, even worse, granted him sole custody of Jayden because he had a better job with a higher salary?

After all, Montana was a no-fault divorce state, so his vile betrayal of his marriage vows wouldn’t count against him. And Autumn knew how smooth and charming Phillip could be when he wanted something. She was sure he could convince any judge that he was a remorseful husband trying to repair his broken family and spend time with his son.

And that just made her angrier.

Curbside, the driver was sliding open the van’s side door, revealing an extravagant pink-and-purple bouquet of roses, lilies, irises, and other flowers Autumn couldn’t identify at this distance.

“Fuck,” she muttered.

Even worse, the TV cameras on the porch were now focused on her. There was no way that the production crew would pass up filming an incident like this.

Great. Now, “Autumn and her ex” are going to become a dramatic sub-plot on Reviving Snowberry Springs, Season Two. Autumn’s stomach clenched.

“Fuck is right,” Winnie said angrily. She rose to her feet, holding her cordless electric screwdriver like a pistol.

“Wait, are those flowers from your asshole ex? The one who tried to kidnap Jayden last weekend?” the show’s Director of Photography, Jake Lee, asked. He added with a wink, “Maybe they’re from Deputy Matt.”

Autumn threw him an appalled look. Even the *Reviving Snowberry Springs* crew had heard all about last weekend’s festival drama?

“Sorry,” Jake said, sounding apologetic. Then he ruined it by continuing, “But is it true that you two have been dating on the down-low? Do you think we could get him to do a cameo this season?”

“I don’t know,” she replied in her most neutral tone. “You could ask him.”

She pictured Matt’s probable reaction to being asked and tried to keep a straight face.

“Autumn Snowberry-Garthe?” the florist delivery guy shouted again.

She sighed and squared her shoulders. “I’ll deal with this.”

Apparently, Phillip wasn’t going to leave her alone until he got what he wanted. And there was no way to stop it. It wasn’t illegal to send someone flowers or chocolates or jewelry.

“No, you stay here,” Winnie ordered. “*I’ll* handle this.”

“But—” Autumn protested. She was a grown woman. She couldn’t let her younger sister deal with the mess her life had become.

“No ‘buts.’ I’m handling this,” Winnie said, using the same firm tone she employed with tradespeople who did substandard work. She looked past Autumn to where her husband had appeared in the front doorway. “Nick, love, make sure Autumn stays on the porch.”

“I’ll sit on her if I have to,” he promised.

“Me, too.” Jason grinned at Autumn. “Besides, you know we all want to see Winnie kick ass and take names.” He shook his head. “Man, I feel sorry for that poor delivery guy.”

“All right. You win.” Autumn raised her hands in surrender.

She watched as Winnie marched down to the street to question the driver. And tried to deny the relief bubbling up from beneath her guilt for making Winnie handle the dirty work.

The camera operator and sound tech tailed her sister, hoping to capture footage for the show.

“Autumn, are you okay?” She looked up to see concern etched across Nick’s handsome face. “Did Phillip threaten you? Has he hurt you in any way?”

She shook her head. “I’m fine. He’s just being annoying. If I ignore it, chances are he’ll get bored and move on.” She forced a smile. “He hates this town. I heard him say it a lot while we were still married.”

Nick looked past her. His gray eyes narrowed as he glared at the florist’s van. “If you ever need someone to talk to—or just a shoulder to lean on—I’m here for you.”

“Thanks,” she whispered. She didn’t deserve her brother-in-law’s unquestioning support—but she was damned glad for it.

After her years in Bozeman, where Phillip had steadily isolated her from her friends, knowing she had her family in her corner made all the difference.

At the curb, Winnie was now having an animated discussion with the driver. Autumn strained to hear what her sister was saying.

If I wasn’t such a coward, she thought, I’d march down there myself and refuse the delivery.

But she couldn’t make her feet move. So, she remained on the wide porch as ordered, her fingers gripping the yet-unpainted new railing and her gut churning with anxiety.

“...job site. Absolutely no visitors or unauthorized deliveries.” Winnie’s voice drifted up to the house. “If you can’t take it back to the store, deliver it to the church on Main Street. Maybe they can use it for a wedding this weekend or something.”

The driver shrugged and got back in the van. The flower arrangement disappeared from sight as the side door closed. He drove away.

“Thanks so much for handling that, Winnie,” Autumn said as her sister returned to the house, tailed closely by the camera operator and sound guy.

“Yeah, those were from Phillip, all right,” Winnie commented, climbing the porch stairs. She held up a small florist’s card and read it out loud. “Thought this might brighten your day. Love always, your husband.” She grimaced. “Ugh.”

“‘Ugh’ is right. It’s like he’s trying to pretend the divorce never happened,” Autumn said, trying to convince herself she wasn’t responsible for the drama that Phillip’s extravagant floral delivery had caused.

Winnie shook her head. “What a creep! Especially after that stunt he pulled on Saturday. I still can’t believe he tried to scare you like that!”

“I’m so sorry about all this,” Autumn began. “I should’ve known Phillip would—”

“Don’t apologize for him,” Winnie interrupted. She grasped Autumn’s shoulders. “Look, you didn’t ask for those stupid

flowers. Or any of the stuff Mom says he's been sending to the ranch house all week."

"But—" Autumn tried again.

"We all know he's doing all this stuff to mess with you," Winnie assured her. "His behavior is on *him*, not you."

Autumn looked down at the painted porch boards. It was difficult to break old habits, especially after years of being conditioned to accept blame for everything that went wrong in her marriage.

But she knew Winnie was right—it *wasn't* Autumn's fault that Phillip was manipulative and controlling.

"I'll tell him to cut it out." She pulled out her phone and brought up her contacts.

She'd blocked Phillip last Monday after a flood of messages and phone calls. First, he'd wanted to know if she'd received his gift. Then he invited her to dinner at her favorite restaurant in Bozeman.

When she ignored his initial messages, he began calling her once an hour.

Her stomach clenched nervously. But Winnie's presence at her side kept her from wimping out again. Autumn unblocked Phillip and sent him a text message.

As she typed with hands that shook with anger and nerves, she kept making typos and having to correct them.

Phillip, you're not my husband anymore. Stop sending me stuff. I don't want to see you or talk to you. Just leave me alone.

Her trembling finger hovered over the Send button. *Am I being too harsh? Am I going to make him angry?*

Then she caught herself. *Of course, he's going to be angry. I'm telling him 'no.' He hates it when people—especially me—don't play along with his plans.*

But it wasn't her job any longer to soothe him and protect his sensitive feelings.

She tapped **Send**. Then promptly blocked him again.

“That couldn't have been easy. He's such a bully. I'm proud of you for standing up to him.” Winnie gave her a reassuring hug. “Now, let's get back to work. This house isn't going to renovate itself, and Nick and I want to move in before Thanksgiving.”



As the day continued, Autumn kept glancing over her shoulder at periodic intervals. She half-expected Phillip to appear as soon as he found out about the rejected florist's delivery.

That arrangement had looked expensive. Like, *really* expensive.

In the past, he'd always demanded she acknowledge his grand gestures.

To her relief, he stayed away. But at least once an hour, Autumn spotted a sheriff department's pickup truck cruising around the neighborhood. She guessed that Winnie or one of the show's production assistants had asked for additional patrols.

It was mortifying to cause so much trouble. And yet, she was glad that everyone wanted to help her and she didn't have to deal with this situation on her own.

"Hey, sis, can we talk for a minute?" Winnie asked while the *Reviving Snowberry Springs* crew was taking their afternoon coffee break.

The crew members were gathered in the house's big backyard, digging into the trays of cookies, turnovers, and mini fruit tarts catered by Jenna's Java.

Wondering if something had happened, Autumn picked up her glass of lemonade and followed her sister through the house to the front room.

"I just got off the phone with Karla," Winnie reported. Karla Jones was the show's executive producer. "She promised she'll make it very clear to Phillip that he and anyone he hires are not welcome on our set. And she'll inform him that if he shows up here in person, she'll have him arrested for trespassing."

"Really?" Autumn asked, her eyes wide with surprise. "Can she *do* that?"

“Yep. This is private property,” Winnie confirmed, a satisfied grin on her face. Then her expression sobered. “I really think you need to talk to Matt about what’s been going on, though.”

“Why?” Autumn asked blankly.

Winnie grinned at her. “Because I’ve heard from, like, four different people that you guys got back together again.” She put her hands on her hips and stuck out her lower lip in an exaggerated pout. “I can’t believe you kept it a secret for this long! You didn’t even tell *me*.”

As much as Autumn loved living in her hometown again, it was definitely the same old hotbed of gossip it had always been. And Matt’s little white lie at the festival had apparently spread like wildfire.

“It’s not, uh, anything serious. We’re just friends,” she protested. She didn’t want to go into the whole story right now.

Winnie gave her a skeptical look. “Riiight. If you say so. But seriously, talk to Matt about getting a restraining order or something against Phillip.”

Autumn cringed inside at the thought of trying to explain the situation to a judge. *Well, your honor, he’s never hit me or threatened me with violence. But I didn’t like that he sent me flowers. And chocolates. And a heart-shaped gold-and-diamond pendant.*

She figured the judge would laugh her out of court. And Phillip probably knew that.

He knew exactly how far he could push without breaking the law.

“I’ll think about it,” she promised.

Winnie patted her arm. “It sucks, I know. But things will get better. And there’s Mom’s fried chicken to look forward to tonight.” She grinned. “And a special guest.”

“Who?” Autumn asked, glad to change the subject away from her ex-husband.

Winnie’s grin widened. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

Chapter Six

Table Talk

Snowberry Springs Ranch

Later that day

“I invited Matt to join us for dinner tonight,” Mom said.

Autumn stopped peeling potatoes. “Why?”

Mom laughed. “I know you and Matt wanted to keep things under wraps, but I talked to Susie yesterday, and she told me all about how you and Matt got back together again while planning the railroad festival.” She beamed at Autumn. “You know your dad and I always liked him. We were sorry things didn’t work out for you back then.”

Autumn grimaced. “Not as sorry as I am now.”

Susie was Matt’s mom. She and Matt’s dad, Will, owned Parker Farms, located just down the road from the Snowberry Springs Ranch.

“Well, we’re all glad you’re giving Matt a second chance.” Mom’s knife thwacked into the plucked chicken carcass on her cutting board, neatly separating a plump thigh from the body. “Susie is so excited and hoping things work out for you two this time.”

Autumn’s cheeks heated in consternation. Why Matt hadn’t cleared up the rumors by telling his parents the truth?

“Um...” She wasn’t sure how to tell her mom that there *wasn’t* actually a relationship. “Look, there’s something I need to tell

you about Matt and me,” she began. “We’re not *really* dating —”

“What do you mean?”

“Hey, Autumn, Matt’s here!” Winnie called from the living room.

Relieved at the excuse to escape the increasingly uncomfortable conversation with her mom, Autumn set down her peeler and a half-peeled potato.

“I’ll explain everything later,” she promised, and fled the kitchen.

She followed the sounds of laughter and conversation to the ranch house’s big, comfortable living room.

When she entered, she found Matt, dressed in a clean Vintage Railroad Days Festival t-shirt and comfortably worn jeans, leaning against the fireplace. His normally serious features were relaxed and smiling as he casually chatted with Spring and Dad.

He looked good, fit and muscled in all the right places.

Autumn’s breath caught as his hazel eyes met hers.

“Hey there, Autumn. Your mom lured me over with the promise of her famous fried chicken.”

“We heard that you and Autumn were dating again, so I thought it was high time we caught up.” Dad beamed at them

both, clearly pleased with himself.

Autumn felt a blush heat her cheeks. She couldn't believe how Matt's little white lie had taken on a life of its own.

"About that," she said. "We're just friends, that's all."

Both of her sisters turned to stare at her.

"You seriously expect us to believe that?" asked Summer.

"After everything I heard about you two at the festival last weekend?" Winnie added.

"Yup. Just friends," Matt confirmed. He winked conspiratorially. "We may have accidentally-on-purpose given her ex the wrong impression because he was acting like a jerk."

Summer and Winnie both exploded into laughter.

"Oh my God, Phillip must've blown a gasket!" Winnie exclaimed. "Good for you, Autumn!"

"Especially since Matt is known as Deputy McHunky around these parts," Summer added, grinning at Matt.

Back when Autumn was dating him, her sister had always enjoyed giving Matt a hard time.

"Deputy Mc-*what*?" he sputtered. His face turned an interesting shade of red under his tan.

“Sorry if I’m embarrassing you, but it’s true.” Summer didn’t look the least bit sorry as she teased him. “That’s how all the girls in town refer to you.”

“I—uh—”

His embarrassment made Autumn cringe. “Hey, stop it, you two. Matt was just trying to help me out last weekend.”

“Serves Phillip right if you put him in his place. I never did like that guy,” Dad said to them with a satisfied expression. “I always thought he was arrogant and way too old for Autumn.” Then his smile turned wicked. “But are you sure you don’t want to give Matt here a second chance? Your mom and I always liked him.”

“Dad!” Autumn protested, just like she had whenever he teased her during her teenage years. Her face heated until she was sure it was as red as Matt’s. “Uh, I’d better get back to the kitchen to help Mom. Dinner should be ready in about forty-five minutes.”



“So, Matt,” Autumn said, passing him the platter of fried chicken. “Captured any runaway livestock recently?”

Somewhat to Matt’s surprise, he was enjoying himself. He’d expected things to be awkward, but it felt just like old times.

Back in high school, he used to come over all the time for dinner. Tonight, Autumn’s mom Priscilla had even made all of

Matt's favorite dishes: fried chicken, oven fries, baked macaroni and cheese, and a large tossed salad.

And Summer had informed everyone that she and her husband Brock had brought dessert—strawberry shortcakes made with fresh berries grown on Parker Farms.

Even the Snowberry's house looked the same. The furnishings were comfortable but dated. Framed family photographs still covered the dining room walls, though new wedding and baby photos had been added in the years since Matt had last been here.

He didn't see Autumn's wedding photo—and thank goodness for that—but a holiday photo showed her smiling tenderly down at baby Jayden asleep in her arms.

He spotted a group photo of the *Reviving Snowberry Springs* production crew with a smiling Winnie, clad in her trademark bright pink tool belt and hard hat, standing next to her husband, Nick Evans.

Tonight, the entire Snowberry family, adults and kids alike, crowded around the large oval dining room table. Autumn sat sandwiched between Matt and Jayden, sitting so close to Matt that they bumped elbows if they weren't careful.

He didn't mind.

As he took the platter from her, he couldn't take his eyes off the glossy auburn waves cascading down over her bare shoulders. He recognized the light perfume of her shampoo as the same scent she'd used when they were still dating.

Matt felt his cock stiffening under the onslaught of memories the perfume triggered. He was suddenly glad about the napkin resting on his lap.

Time to think about something else. And fast.

“I booked the Miller’s Angus bull for petty theft and vandalism after he broke out of his paddock again,” he joked. “I’ve never seen an animal so determined to go for a swim. You should’ve seen him trying to fit all 1800 pounds of himself into the kiddie wading pool over at the Schoening’s place.”

Everyone laughed.

Bob Snowberry, who’d lost most of his hair over the years but not his sense of humor, raised his wineglass. With a twinkle in his eye, he said, “Speaking of wandering critters, I’d like to propose a toast. To family, good food, and Daisy the goat’s festival adventures going viral and sending lots of traffic to our ranch’s web page.”

“Cheers!” The response was unanimous, the clinking of glasses resonating through the room. Everyone took a sip.

Smiling, Priscilla Snowberry turned her gaze to Autumn and Matt. She looked like an older version of Autumn, her short auburn hair heavily threaded with silver.

“Half the town wants to nominate Daisy for mayor, and the other half are trading goat curry recipes on Nextdoor. How did the two of you catch her?”

Autumn gave a modest smile. “Well, Matt and Gabe get all the credit for strategy. As Snowberry Springs’ resident deputies, they were the tactical genius behind Operation Goat-Get-Em!”

Matt offered a deadpan response. “It’s my job to protect and serve, ma’am. Even if that means chasing suspect goats down Main Street.”

Everyone laughed, which was flattering.

Autumn continued, excitement in her voice, “As of this afternoon, that video has over eight million views, and **#DaisyAgentOfChaos** is trending on all channels. She’s now officially a global celebrity. I’ve been getting requests from various news outlets for permission to rebroadcast. I’m really hoping *Critter Capers: Caught on Camera* will get in touch with us soon for their Viral Animal Video of the Week feature.”

Matt couldn’t look away from the sparkle in her eyes and the joy lighting her face. He remembered how quickly Phillip’s presence had extinguished that joy, and gritted his teeth.

Good riddance to that SOB, he thought.

A comfortable silence settled over the room as everyone continued to pass around the fried chicken and sides, punctuated by the occasional giggle from one of Autumn’s young nieces.

Matt turned to Autumn. “You know, I’ve missed hanging out with your family,” he told her quietly. “I’m glad you’re back. Snowberry Springs wasn’t the same without the girl who can turn a goat chase into a social media sensation.”

Autumn froze.

Shit. I overstepped, Matt thought. After I spent the last nine months trying to ignore her, she's gonna take that completely the wrong way.

Then she grinned at him, and he felt relief flood through him. "And I've missed having a partner-in-crime who can keep up with me in runaway goat situations."

Their eyes locked momentarily. Matt's throat went dry. He knew he should make some kind of witty reply instead of staring at her like a dork. But his mind went blank.

Summer saved him from the awkward moment.

"Speaking of viral sensations," she piped up from across the table, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Brock and I have some big news to share with you all."

"You're pregnant?" Priscilla blurted.

Brock turned brick-red from the neck up.

Summer shook her head. "No, not yet, Mom. But this is just as thrilling." She reached out and laced her fingers through her husband's. "We just signed a major publishing deal for *The Yummy Cowboy Diner* cookbook. It's going to be a tie-in to our upcoming FoodieTV cooking show set at the diner!"

The table erupted in cheers and applause.

Matt felt genuinely happy for Summer and Brock. He knew how hard they had worked to make their diner a success.

“That’s amazing, sis! Congratulations!” Autumn exclaimed, reaching over to squeeze her sister’s hand.

Summer beamed, her cheeks flushing with pleasure. “We couldn’t have done it without you, Tum-tum. Your mad social media skills really put our diner on the map this past year.”

Autumn shrugged modestly, but Matt could see the pride in her eyes.

It was great to see her getting the recognition she so richly deserved. Especially after everything she had been through with Phillip.

That thought reminded him he wanted to ask her something.

“Your dad mentioned that Phillip’s been sending you stuff,” he said to her in a low voice.

Bob had spoken to him over beers before dinner. Autumn’s dad had made it clear he considered his ex-son-in-law a colossal asshole, and expressed worry about the stream of unwanted presents arriving daily at the house.

“Oh, that.” Autumn grimaced. “He’s trying to win me back. Not going to work.”

Matt felt a treacherous stab of happiness at the note of determination in her voice.

“He wasn’t like this before. He was sweet and funny and treated me like a queen,” Autumn continued. “But after I got pregnant, it was like he changed overnight. I kept hoping that if I fixed myself, maybe the Phillip who I’d fallen in love with would return.”

Matt’s fists clenched at the misery in her expression. *She wasn’t the one who needed fixing! And fuck Phillip for making her think so.*

“I dunno. Somehow, I think the Phillip you’re seeing now is the *real* Phillip,” Winnie said. “He was probably putting on an act until he baby-trapped you.” She paused. “By the way, Karla agreed to my request to ban Phillip from anywhere we’re filming.”

“Why?” Alarmed, Matt turned to Autumn. “What happened? Did he show up and cause trouble? Is he threatening you?”

To his relief, Autumn shook her head. “No, no, nothing like that. Since last weekend, he’s been sending me all kinds of stuff here at the house. Today, he tried sending flowers to Nick and Winnie’s construction site.”

Okay, that was worrying. Phillip appeared to be turning into a stalker.

“Autumn, please consider getting an Order of Protection against him,” Matt said, trying to make his voice gentle but firm. “You can’t be too careful.”

She bit her plump, kissable lower lip. “That feels like overreacting. I mean, all he’s done so far is send me a bunch of emails and text messages, and a few gifts.”

Matt shook his head. “Maybe so, but if his behavior escalates, I’d feel better if you had some legal boundaries in place.”

“I’ll think about it,” Autumn said. “Let’s see what happens over the next few days. I feel I should at least give Phillip a chance to comply with my wishes before slapping him with a restraining order.”

Matt clamped down on the urge to argue with her. She was a grown woman, and she knew her ex-husband better than he did.

Nevertheless, the situation made him uneasy.

Autumn was clearly done discussing Phillip. She turned away from Matt.

With a bright, artificial smile, she asked in a loud voice, “So, Winnie and Nick, why don’t you tell everyone about what’s been happening over at your dream house? It’s looking great, and I’m so excited about the progress you guys have made in such a short time!”

Winnie looked at Nick. “Tell them about the bathroom disaster, honey,” she urged.

“So, we had this grand design plan for the hall bathroom,” Nick began, a twinkle in his eye. “We chose what we thought was the perfect shade of period-appropriate blue for the walls. You know, something soothing and serene.”

Winnie snorted and covered her mouth with her napkin.

The corners of Nick's mouth twitched upward. "Well, turns out, there was some kind of mix-up at the paint store. Instead of 'Tranquil Ocean,' we ended up with a color I can only describe as 'Pea Soup Apocalypse.'"

"And it looked even worse in my photos," Autumn said with mock sorrow. "An entire afternoon of social media opportunities, wasted." Then she giggled. "Who am I fooling? You know I posted those photos on your Instagram with a **#baddesignchoices** tag, right?"

Nick groaned loudly, and the table erupted into laughter. Even Matt, who usually tried to keep his emotions in check, chuckled at the mental image.

Autumn turned her head and smiled at him. Warmth bloomed in his chest that had nothing to do with the wine served with dinner.

"Needless to say," Nick continued, still grinning, "we're going to be repainting that bathroom first thing on Monday. Or maybe just wallpapering it."

"So, you really think you'll be able to move in before Thanksgiving?" Abigail leaned forward, her blue eyes alight with curiosity. "Any thoughts on what building you're renovating for the next season of *Reviving Snowberry Springs*?"

Despite being such a small town, Snowberry Springs had many architectural gems, most of which badly needed restoration work.

Matt had grown up watching the fancy brick buildings lining Main Street and surrounding the town square gradually falling into disrepair as businesses vacated the storefronts and tenants moved out of the upstairs apartments.

“How about helping our diner expand into the old Cooperman’s Hardware & Ranch Supply next door?” suggested Brock, leaning back in his chair and folding his heavily muscled arms. He glanced at Matt and explained, “Summer and I bought the building last fall since we’ve kinda outgrown The Yummy Cowboy Diner’s original seating capacity.”

Brock had played football in high school, and it showed. Looking at the big guy, you’d never guess he was an acclaimed local chef.

His wife, Summer, nodded vigorously. “Once we survive the never-ending permitting process, we’ll need the help. Especially since a *certain* reality TV show has hired all the best contractors in this area.” Her tone was teasing.

Brock added, “Besides, our diner’s appeared on *Reviving Snowberry Springs* several times so far. It would be a good fit.”

Winnie shared a long glance with Nick before replying, “That’s actually not a bad idea,” she said. “We’ve been discussing which historic building in town needs the most help, and would also make for an interesting TV season.”

Abigail perked up. “If you’re taking suggestions, I have a soft spot for the old Masonic Lodge. It was one of the first permanent buildings in town, and it would be a shame to see it fall into further disrepair.”

Nick considered her words before responding, “You’re absolutely right, Grandma Abigail. The Masonic Lodge is a landmark, no doubt about it. But from a television perspective, the old firehouse on the corner of Main and Third might make for a more visually interesting project.”

The conversation continued as everyone dug into the food. Various family members chimed in with their thoughts and opinions.

“Anything to keep visitors coming to the ranch,” Spring said during a lull in the eating and talking. He addressed his next remark to Matt. “We’ve seen a big uptick in our Airbnb business since the show began airing. The RSS production crew currently rents about half of our cabins, and the rest are booked as soon as they become available. I’ve been trying to talk Mom and Dad into adding more.”

“Well, it’s your call from here on out, son.” Bob cleared his throat and looked at his wife. “This seems like the perfect time to make my announcement, don’t you think, honey?”

Priscilla nodded, and the table fell silent.

“Since you’ve been doing such a great job as our ranch manager, your mom and I have decided it’s time for me to step back and retire from day-to-day operations. I’ll still be available to cover for emergencies and vacations, but Snowberry Springs Ranch is yours now.”

Matt felt the collective shock ripple around the table. Even the reserved and quietly confident Spring looked like he’d been poleaxed.

“You’ve grown into a fine, capable man, Spring, and I’m so proud of everything you’ve accomplished,” Bob continued, sounding a bit choked up. “I know our ranch will be in excellent hands with you at the helm.”

“If Frank were still here, I’m sure he’d agree,” Abigail said, referring to her late husband, Spring’s grandfather.

Spring struggled to find words, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. “Thanks, Dad and Mom,” he managed at last, his voice rough with emotion. “I won’t let you down.”

“I don’t reckon you will,” Bob said, his own eyes suspiciously bright. “We’ll go see the lawyer on Monday to get all the paperwork drawn up.”

“Thanks,” Spring said again.

“Hey, I’ve been thinking,” Winnie chimed in. “Since Dad’s retiring, maybe it’s time you considered hiring some help with April and Abby.”

Clearly caught off-guard, Spring frowned at his sister. “What do you mean?”

“Kelsey,” Nick added, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “Our nanny. You know Kegan’s starting school this year, so she’s looking for more hours. She’s great with kids and could be a big help for you, man.”

“Mom, what do you think?” Winnie asked.

“I think it’s an excellent idea,” Priscilla replied. Her gaze landed on Spring. “Sweetie, you’ve got your hands full with the ranch now. Having Kelsey around would make things easier for you as a single dad.”

Spring scowled. He clearly wasn’t a fan of the suggestion.

“Kelsey’s awesome!” seven-year-old Kegan chimed in. “And April and Abby think she’s cool, too!”

“She is! She does the best art projects!” the girls enthused.

“Okay, okay, I get it. I admit she seems to do a great job with Kegan,” Spring said, throwing up his hands. “But I don’t need a nanny. I can take care of my girls just fine.”

“But, Spring—” Winnie clearly wasn’t ready to let the subject drop.

“Enough about Kelsey!” Spring snapped. He added into the shocked silence, “Can’t we talk about something else now?”

“Like the Labor Day Weekend street fair?” Abigail suggested after an uncomfortably long moment. “Autumn, how is the planning going?”

“Smooth as butter,” Autumn replied. “I think it’ll be just as successful as the Vintage Railroad Days festival.” She paused for dramatic effect before adding, “And maybe we can even convince Daisy to make another appearance in the petting zoo.”

“Over my dead body,” Matt muttered. “Maybe we can get a booth to offer goat curry.”

“No!” Jayden wailed as the adults laughed.

The sound of the driveway gravel crunching under tires drifted through the open dining-room windows. Justin, the family’s black-and-white sheepdog, began barking and racing back and forth in front of the living room windows.

Everyone craned their heads to see who it was. Apparently, the Snowberrys weren’t expecting any other guests this evening.

“Oh crap,” Autumn whispered. She suddenly quivered with tension.

Then Matt recognized the silver-haired figure climbing out of a white rental car parked haphazardly in the driveway. *Shit.*

“Who the hell invited *him*?” Bob Snowberry growled.

Chapter Seven

Protective Pretense

“Autumn! I know you’re in there!” Phillip shouted from the gravel driveway. “Autumn! *Baby!* We need to talk!”

Autumn’s heart began pounding. Panic froze her in place.

The dining room fell silent except for Justin’s frantic barking from the living room.

“You gotta be kidding me!” Winnie snarled. She turned her head to glare through the dining room windows.

As if impelled by a single thought, the men all shoved back their chairs and shot to their feet. Matt’s chair leg caught on the edge of the dining room rug and toppled over with a clatter against the hardwood floor.

Every inch of his lean, tall frame radiated anger and protectiveness. It sent warmth arrowing through the churn of anxiety triggered by her ex-husband’s unexpected, unwelcome appearance.

Jayden shrank down in his chair.

At the sight, a surge of red-hot anger banished Autumn’s nerves. *How dare Phillip come here? And how dare he frighten my little boy?*

She stood. “I’ve got this,” she said in a hard voice she didn’t recognize.

The Snowberry men—and Matt—looked ready to protest.

She forced herself to smile at them. “And if I can’t handle him, I’ll scream like a girl. Feel free to rush to my aid.”

Her brother chuckled. “Go kick his butt, Tum-tum.” Then he sat down again. Everyone else followed suit.

Except for Matt, who remained on his feet, watching her with concern.

She squared her shoulders and marched out of the house.

“Oh, there you are, babycakes. Thought you were gonna hide from me,” Phillip slurred as she pushed open the front door and stepped out onto the ranch house’s wide porch.

“What are you doing here?” She crossed her arms, studying him with a mixture of anger and wariness.

Her ex looked a mess. Food stains splotted his dress shirt, his chin and cheeks were rough with silver stubble, and his face was flushed with alcohol.

“You wouldn’t answer my texts or phone calls,” he said with a sulky expression.

“So now you’re stalking me?” Her heart was still pounding crazily, but miraculously, her voice sounded calm.

Phillip scoffed loudly. “Stalking? Is *that* what you’re calling it? Sheesh.” His gaze darted around the porch, as if addressing an invisible audience. “All I did was send you a few text messages and call you once or twice,” he continued plaintively.

“*Fifty* text messages,” Autumn corrected him. “And twenty missed calls, all with voicemail messages.”

“And since when is trying to talk to my wife a crime?” he blustered.

“I’m not your wife anymore,” Autumn reminded him, yet again.

She couldn’t tell if he honestly couldn’t remember, or if he wanted to ignore an inconvenient fact. Either was possible.

“But I want you back,” he pleaded, a desperate edge in his voice. “Give me another chance. Please, baby.”

A shiver of revulsion arched through her. “A chance for *what*, Phillip? To cheat on me again with another younger woman?”

“Baby, no!” His eyes swam with tears. The sight alarmed her. Phillip prided himself on always being in control of his emotions.

He staggered up the porch steps, his hands outstretched. “I’m here to apologize.”

She stared at him in shock. *Who are you, and what have you done with my ex?*

For as long as she'd known him, Phillip had never apologized. For *anything*.

Because nothing was ever his fault. He had a way of making sure someone else—usually her—took the blame for things that went wrong

“I made a mistake, the biggest mistake, okay?” he babbled, apparently spurred by her lack of response. “A *huge* mistake. I... Theresa... she... oh, never mind. What I'm trying to tell you is, I want to be with you again, baby. We were so good together.”

“Funny. I don't remember it that way.” She kept a nervous eye on the shrinking distance between them as he climbed the porch steps with ponderous care.

Swaying, Phillip made it to the top of the steps. Then he came to a dead stop and clutched at the porch railing to steady himself.

“Let's have dinner tomorrow night. One date. That's all I'm asking.”

The breeze wafted alcoholic fumes in her direction. She couldn't believe he'd actually driven here. She only hoped he hadn't run anyone off the highway on his way over.

“Just give me a chance to prove I've changed,” he continued. “To make things right. If you want, we could even have dinner at that cowboy restaurant your sister owns.”

Autumn hesitated momentarily. *Am I being unfair to deny him a chance?*

Then her common sense returned and smacked her upside the head. “No. It’s too late, Phillip. You had your shot at being a good husband and father. You failed. Now, please leave.”

“But I’ve changed, baby! Give me a chance to show you.” His tone turned wheedling. “If you don’t want to do dinner, then how about coffee tomorrow? Coffee’s not too much to ask, right?”

She recognized the opening steps to his familiar dance of manipulation. Phillip’s favorite boast was: *‘No’ is just the beginning of the journey to ‘yes.’*

Autumn shook her head. “No. It’s over. We’re done. You destroyed what we had. I’ve moved on.”

Behind her, the front screen door opened and closed quietly.

Phillip’s face twisted. “It’s because of *him*, isn’t it?” he sneered, pointing over her shoulder.

She didn’t have to turn around to know that Matt stood behind her. His tall, silent presence felt like a pillar of support. “This isn’t about Matt. It’s about you and me. And we’re done.”

“I can’t believe you moved on so quickly,” he scoffed, scanning Matt up and down. “He’s just a small-town cop, Autumn, with a small-town cop’s salary. What can he offer you that I can’t?”

She raised her chin, a fresh spurt of anger fueling her words. “Honesty? Respect? Oh, and I know for sure he doesn’t have a second family in New Jersey.”

Matt made a strangled noise.

Phillip glowered. “That’s not *fair*—”

The screen door burst open again. Phillip’s eyes widened as Autumn recognized her dad’s heavy tread on the porch board.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw the thunderous expression on his normally genial face. Her brother and Brock followed close on Dad’s heels. They looked just as pissed off.

“That’s enough, Phillip,” Dad declared, his voice crisp with authority. “You’ve said your piece. Now, get your ass off my ranch. Pronto.”

Phillip huffed indignantly. But when Spring and Brock stepped up beside Dad, Phillip began digging frantically in his pants pocket.

A car fob fell out of his pocket and bounced off the porch boards. He bent to scoop it up and nearly toppled over.

As he straightened, his bloodshot gaze returned to Autumn. “Don’t worry, baby. I’m not giving up on us. You’ll see.”

“No, I don’t want to see,” Autumn said. “I just want you to leave me and Jayden alone.”

Phillip scowled. “You can’t keep me from my son!” he said petulantly.

It was probably useless to argue with Phillip when he was this drunk. But she couldn’t help herself. “*You’re* the one who didn’t want to split custody, remember? Because you had a baby who needed more of your time than a kid already in school.”

Her ex-husband’s face turned purplish-red. She could practically see his brain short-circuiting at her unaccustomed defiance. “You—you—This is unfair!” he sputtered, waving the car fob. “I’ll see you tomorrow for coffee, and we’ll talk,” he threatened, then turned to go.

“Stop!” Matt ordered.

Phillip froze.

Matt stepped forward, radiating calm authority. “You’re clearly too drunk to drive, Mr. Garthe. I’ll slap cuffs on you if you try to get in that car.”

“I’ve got an empty guest cottage,” Dad said, sounding reluctant. “He can sleep it off there.”

Spring moved around Autumn. He marched over and took Phillip by the elbow. “C’mon. Don’t give us any more trouble.”

Brock took Phillip’s other arm. “We’ll make sure you get to bed all safe and sound.”

“But I don’t want to go to bed,” Phillip protested weakly. “Not alone.” His head swiveled around to look at Autumn. “Tell them to let go of me, baby!”

“No way.” Autumn crossed her arms.

The two young men ignored his protests as they marched him down the porch stairs. Dad stomped after them as if cutting off Phillip’s avenue of retreat.

As she watched the three of them escort Phillip across the ranch’s wide lawn to the guest cottages area, Autumn took a deep, shuddering breath of relief.

“Hey, you okay?” Matt asked, resting a warm hand on her bare shoulder. The unexpected contact jolted through her as if she’d brushed against a live wire.

“Fine.” She tried to smile, but it faltered.

“You really need to file for a restraining order.” Matt’s voice was thick with concern. “Otherwise Gabe and I won’t be able to do much to help you if he keeps bothering you like this. I can help you with the paperwork.”

She hesitated before nodding reluctantly. “Okay.” Then she sighed. “I just never thought it would come to this. You know what Phillip’s favorite quote is?”

“‘Never give up. Never surrender’?” Matt suggested, half-joking.

“Close. *No is the opening gambit, not the closing statement,*” she quoted, her mouth twisting sourly. “Oh, and he also likes, *‘When faced with a no, don’t retreat, recalibrate.’*”

“Is he for real?” Matt groaned.

She blew out a breath. “Sadly, yes. He once told me that his refusal to take ‘no’ for an answer made him the highest-performing sales rep at his company. Back then, I thought it was cool.”

“Great.” Matt spread his hands. “You know what I think?”

“That my man-picker is broken?” she asked, wryly.

“No! Of course not,” he protested. “I mean, you picked *me*, once upon a time.”

That made her laugh. “True. So, what you’re saying is, I have excellent taste in men fifty percent of the time?”

That won her a heart-stopping grin. Damn, he was even sexier now than he had been back when they were still dating.

“You saw how quickly Phillip backed down as soon as he thought we were an item,” he said. “I think we should keep pretending we’re together.”

Is he serious? Autumn couldn’t tell. “Well, thanks to last weekend, the whole town thinks we’re dating for real. That’s why Mom and Dad invited you over for dinner tonight.”

“I know,” Matt acknowledged. “People have been asking me about you all week.”

Autumn rolled her eyes. “Say what you want about Bozeman. People there sure don’t gossip as much as they do here.”

“Yeah, well.” Matt shrugged and spread his hands in a *what can you do?* gesture. “I mean, since everyone thinks we’re together, maybe we should play along for a while longer. Until the Phillip situation is resolved.”

It sounded crazy... but also dangerously appealing.

Then Matt added, “To really sell it, why don’t you move in with me for the time being?”

Her eyes widened. “Are you *serious?*”

It was either the craziest thing she’d ever heard... or a stroke of genius.



Matt had never been more serious in his life. His chest felt tight and hot with rage at the way Phillip Garthe had tried to bully her just now.

The sadness, the fear, the uncertainty in her expression... those were new. And he was a hundred percent sure they were Phillip’s handiwork.

Protect. I have to protect her.

His Autumn had a quick wit, an uninhibited laugh, and a wicked sense of humor. She radiated confidence and sexiness, not this heart-wrenching uncertainty and frustration.

A quick memory of a naked Autumn in his bed, smiling up at him with flushed cheeks and sleep-tousled hair, flashed across his mind.

He wondered if his impulsive offer was stirring up her memories of sneaking into each other's bedrooms at night, of fevered kisses and tentative caresses exchanged under the covers while listening for approaching footsteps in the hall.

He caught the hesitant glance she threw his way, and he felt a sting. *Damn. Does she think I'm just like Phillip, trying to trap her into a reconciliation?*

"I don't know if you heard, but I just bought a three-bedroom house in town," he explained quickly. "You and Jayden would have your own rooms. It would be strictly platonic. Housemates."

Autumn still looked uncertain. "I don't want to impose..."

She looked so vulnerable. He fought the urge to wrap her in his arms.

This isn't the time or place, he chided himself. *And the last thing Autumn needs is another guy hounding her.*

He shook his head and tried to find something to say to reassure her. "We've been friends for a long time. It's the least I can do."

“Let me think about it,” Autumn said. “In the meantime, we’re going to miss out on dessert if we stay out here too much longer.”



“Is Dad still out there?” Jayden asked in a small voice as Autumn came back into the dining room.

I'll never forgive Phillip for scaring our son like this. A son should look up to his father. Not fear him.

“No, sweetie. Your grandpa and uncles made him go to a cabin. He’s probably asleep by now.”

Jayden was quiet for a moment. “Good,” he finally said. “I don’t have to see him, do I?”

She hated that Phillip’s bullying actions were affecting her son this way. Jayden deserved to have a loving father in his life! Not a selfish, manipulative one, like the man she’d so foolishly married.

“Not if you don’t want to,” Autumn assured him. She leaned down to kiss his cheek. “Don’t worry, okay? Deputy Matt and I are handling this.”

Jayden nodded and gave Matt a shy look. “Okay.”

“All settled and out like a light,” Dad announced a few minutes later as he and the others returned to the dining room.

He ruffled Jayden's hair as he passed by. "Daisy's been pining for you all day, little man. Why don't you go say hi and maybe give her and the other goats some carrots for their dessert?"

Jayden's face lit up, and Autumn silently blessed her father for offering her son the perfect distraction. "Okay, Grandpa!"

"We wanna go, too!" chorused Abby and April.

"Sure," Mom told them. "We'll call you in when it's time for dessert. Auntie Summer and Uncle Brock brought the fixings for strawberry shortcakes."

The kids cheered and raced out of the house, toward the goat barn.

While Summer and Brock assembled the desserts in the kitchen, Spring and Dad cleared the dinner plates and serving dishes from the dining room.

Autumn sat silently next to Matt while her mom and sisters discussed their plans for canning the upcoming plum, pear, and apple harvests.

Her thoughts churned as she considered his ridiculous proposal. Seeing Phillip just now had shattered any hopes of him just going away.

She chewed on her lower lip as she tried to come up with an alternate solution to the one Matt was offering her.

But pretending they were a couple was perfect—and totally believable to everyone, given their history.

But what if helping me stirs up trouble for him?

She didn't want to drag Matt into this mess. *Her* mess. She was an adult. It was her responsibility to pull up her big-girl panties and deal with her ex.

As if reading her mind, Matt turned and surveyed her with empathy. "You know Phillip's not gonna to let this go," he told her in a low voice. "Let me help you. We're still friends, right?"

She nodded. "I'm thinking hard about your offer," she admitted reluctantly.

"Yeah? Good." He paused. "Would it sway your decision that I stock Jenna's Java dark roast in my kitchen? And that I have an espresso maker?"

"Maybe." She surrendered. "And I think you're right. I *have* to convince Phillip that he doesn't have a chance in hell to win me back. And I don't want to upset Jayden with any more scenes like the one just now. So, I'll just invoke the power of the patriarchy—"

Matt's hazel eyes glinted with amusement. "Damn that patriarchy. Bunch of jerks, I tell ya," he said solemnly.

Autumn returned his smile. "You got it!" It was an old joke between them. "Anyhow, he'll back off if he thinks I'm now the property of some other man." She grimaced. "I hate he won't take no for an answer, but... it's Phillip."

Now that she'd decided, relief washed over her, calming her.

“All right,” Matt said, suddenly all business. “Here’s how it’s gonna work. I want you and Jayden to move into my place tonight. Before Phillip wakes up and starts bugging you again.”

He’s moving fast. Autumn swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. “Okay. But I have some conditions for our arrangement.”

“Of course.” Matt nodded, his gaze serious. “What are they?”

“First, my family knows this is all fake, but we can’t tell anyone else. You know how people talk. If we’re going to do this, we can’t risk Phillip finding out the truth.”

“Yup,” he agreed.

“Second,” she continued, her eyes searching his. “I know we’re going to have to, um, kiss. And hold hands. And all that stuff.” *Damn it, why am I blushing? I’m a grown-up,* she thought. *A mom.* “But only in public or when we have to convince someone that we’re crazy about each other.”

“Sure. That makes sense.”

“And, uh, I can’t believe I have to say this—” She glanced over at Mom and her sisters, and lowered her voice to the barest whisper. “Absolutely no sex.”

She hated the heat rushing to her face.

The old Matt would've teased her mercilessly about that. The new Matt was all business. "Understood."

"One last thing," Autumn said, feeling a hint of humor return. "We need a codeword for when we need to play our part."

"You mean a safeword?" Matt asked with a wicked glint in his hazel eyes.

"Exactly. Let's go with 'Daisy,' after our favorite goat," she suggested, a smile tugging at her lips.

Matt rolled his eyes. "Daisy it is."

"And... thank you," Autumn murmured. "I appreciate you helping me out."

"Just doing my job, protecting and serving, ma'am." He paused. "Though I've never needed a safeword for that before."

She was still laughing when Brock and Summer entered the dining room and began handing out plates of freshly baked shortcakes overflowing with deep red strawberries and mounded with freshly whipped vanilla cream.

Chapter Eight

Domestic Arrangements

“Want to share what’s so funny?” Summer asked, placing a dessert plate in front of Autumn.

“Um,” Autumn said, aware that everyone was now looking at her. “It’s hard to explain.”

“We were just discussing Autumn and Jayden staying at my place for a few days until she gets a restraining order against her ex-husband,” Matt explained calmly.

Autumn looked for signs of disappointment or disapproval, but saw only concern on her parents’ faces.

Mom’s mouth thinned. “Good. I knew things were bad, but I can’t believe he actually dared to show his face here. Oh, Autumn, I’m sorry you have to deal with all this, especially since everything’s been going so well for you the past few months.”

Dad nodded. “I think it would be best if you and Jayden weren’t here when Phillip wakes up tomorrow morning,” he said to Autumn.

To Matt he said, “That’s real kind of you, son. It’ll make us feel better to know that our daughter and grandson are in good hands.”

“I’m happy to do what I can for Autumn and Jayden, sir,” Matt said.

“And if Phillip thinks I’m going to offer him coffee and breakfast tomorrow morning, he’s sadly mistaken,” Mom commented in an icy tone that was completely unlike her.

“Need help with moving your stuff?” Winnie offered. “We can use my pickup truck.”

“I don’t have much to move,” Autumn reminded her. “Just clothes, books, toiletries, and Jayden’s toys.”

Everything else she owned—a few pieces of furniture from the Bozeman house, and some boxes of knickknacks and Christmas decorations—was in storage under tarps in the ranch’s tractor barn.

“Those’ll fit in my truck, no problem,” Matt assured her.

“Let’s call the kids in for dessert,” Summer suggested as she distributed the last of the desserts.

“Make sure they wash their hands,” said Mom.

“Yeah, I heard goat slobber doesn’t pair well with strawberries,” Matt remarked in his deadpan style.

Everyone burst out laughing.

Grinning, Winnie asked. “So, how do you guys plan to split the chores at Matt’s place?”

“We haven’t really discussed that yet—” Autumn began.

“Better not let her cook!” teased Summer. She traded wry glances with Winnie. “Remember Autumn’s honey-mustard spaghetti?”

Winnie laughed, “Or her blueberry-curry pancakes?”

“You’re never going to let me forget that, are you? I thought the turmeric in the pancakes would help Grandpa Frank’s arthritis,” Autumn protested, laughing. She added, “I don’t have any excuse for the spaghetti. It was just a bad idea.”

Her eyes sparkling with restored good humor, she turned to Matt. “Don’t worry, I’ve learned a lot about cooking since then. I only *occasionally* set off the kitchen smoke detector these days.”

Matt raised an eyebrow. “Oh, don’t worry about that. I’ve got a good fire insurance policy.”

“Hey!” Autumn exclaimed in mock outrage. Everyone laughed.

“Autumn’s actually a very good cook these days,” Mom defended her. She smiled across the table at her. “Remember Christmas? Your turkey was so moist, and that sweet potato casserole was really tasty.”

“Yeah,” Brock chimed in. “Don’t let my wife and sister-in-law scare you, Matt. I asked Autumn for that casserole recipe. It’s on our diner’s menu as a comfort food side dish.”

“Oh, that was just something I got from an online cooking blog,” Autumn said, both embarrassed and warmed. Her

family loved to tease each other, but unlike Phillip, they were never mean about it.



After dinner, Matt volunteered to dry dishes while Dad and Spring washed up.

While they were working, Autumn and Jayden went upstairs. She hauled their suitcases out of the hall closet and rolled them into the bedroom they shared.

“Sweetie, you won’t need that,” she said, as she saw Jayden pull his parka from the back of the bedroom closet. “We’re only going to be staying at Deputy Matt’s place for a few days, maybe a week.”

He turned to her, frowning. She noticed brown-and-white goat hairs coating his dark blue Spider-Man t-shirt.

“Mommy, are you going to marry Deputy Matt?”

Autumn shook her head. How to explain what was going on?

Best if I keep things as simple as possible, she decided. “No. I know Matt told Daddy he was my boyfriend, but Matt and I are just old friends. We went to high school together. He’s just letting us stay at his house until Daddy leaves town.”

“Okay.” Jayden nodded solemnly. “I love Daddy, but he’s always mad at you and me. He scares me sometimes.”

He scares me, too, Autumn thought.

“Oh, sweetie.” Pain burned through Autumn’s chest as she kneeled and opened her arms to hug him. “I’m trying to make things better for us. Everything’s going to be okay. I promise.”

“O-okay.” Jayden didn’t sound convinced, but he stepped close and wrapped his arms around her neck. He smelled of fresh soap, strawberries, and beneath that, the faint, musky odor of goat.

“Hey, are you all right?” Summer asked.

Autumn looked up from the dresser drawer she was emptying and saw both of her sisters peeking in through the bedroom doorway. “We’re fine. I was just explaining to Jayden that Deputy Matt and I are just friends, and we’re only staying at his place for a few days.”

“We came up to see if you guys need a hand with packing,” Winnie added.

“Sure,” she replied. “And thanks. I’m just taking our summer clothes. All of our winter stuff can stay here. I’m hoping to move back next week. Two weeks from now at the latest.”

“You *sure* about that?” Winnie asked with a sly grin as she followed Summer into the bedroom.

“I mean, it’s hard to believe that moving in with Deputy McHunky is strictly a ‘deter Phillip’ move, right?” Summer added with a wicked twinkle in her blue eyes.

“What do you mean?” Autumn asked, though she had a pretty good idea.

Winnie snorted. “Don’t play dumb. It sure looks like Matt still has the hots for you, Tum-tum.”

Summer nodded vigorously as she pulled a pile of Autumn’s sensible cotton underwear from the top dresser drawer. “Did you see how he kept sneaking peeks at you during dinner? And then he was really champing at the bit to save you from Phillip.”

“He always was your knight in shining armor,” Winnie commented.

Autumn’s cheeks warmed. “Oh, stop it. This whole living-together thing is just, you know, pretend. Because we’re trying to convince Phillip to move on because we’re together now.”

But her blush betrayed her.

“Uh-huh, sure, it’s all fake,” Winnie said with a skeptical look. “You just keep telling yourself that.”



Matt’s house was on a tree-lined street in one of the mid-century neighborhoods built on the outskirts of town.

“Home sweet home,” he said as he pulled up and parked in front of his house.

Autumn took in the bungalow with its deep porch and neat lawn. It was painted a light olive with cream trim and a bright red front door. It looked cozy and welcoming, especially with a set of rattan patio furniture and a tile-topped coffee table on the porch.

“I love it!” she exclaimed.

Matt shrugged, but she could tell her reaction pleased him. “It’s nothing fancy,” he said modestly. “But the roof doesn’t leak, and it didn’t need any major work, so I figured it was a good investment.”

Jayden leaned forward from the back seat in the truck’s extended cab and poked at her shoulder. “Deputy Matt, Mom said I could have my own room?” His tone made it a question.

“Yup.” Matt answered. “And I’ve got a bunch of superhero posters in the basement, if you want to pick out a few to put up on the walls.”

“Awesome!” exclaimed Jayden.

“Glad you like it, buddy. Wait until you see the tire swing in the backyard.”

Autumn silently blessed Matt for his kindness to her son.

Inside, Matt’s house was plain but spotlessly clean. The front door opened directly into a medium-sized living room with original hardwood floors. He’d furnished it with a leather sectional sofa, a battered coffee table, and a large-screen TV. A

pellet stove sat in the far corner, surrounded by vintage brown tiles.

To Autumn's right, an arched doorway led into a small kitchen with a breakfast nook next to windows looking out over the street. Another arched opening at the back of the kitchen led to a dining room, which had a sliding-glass door to the backyard.

"Your bedroom is on the right, next to the hall bathroom," Matt told Jayden, pointing to a hallway leading from the living room to the back of the house. "Your mom will stay in the room next to yours."

"Yay!" Jayden cheered, grabbing his suitcase handle to wheel it down the hall.

Autumn heaved a sigh of relief as she watched him go.

Just being here, miles away from Phillip, loosened the tight knot of anxiety that had bound her since encountering him at the festival last weekend.

"Thanks again for inviting us, Matt. I really didn't want to be there when Phillip wakes up with the mother of all hangovers."

She grimaced as she thought about how angry he was going to be when he sobered up and found her gone.

Matt tucked her hair behind her ear, just like he used to do when they were still dating. Callused fingertips skimmed her cheek and sent a pleasant shiver down her spine. "Don't have to worry about him. I'm sure your dad and the rest of your family can handle him just fine."

She bit her lip and nodded.

Sudden concern clouded his warm hazel eyes. “Autumn, did he ever hit you? Or Jayden?”

She shook her head. “No. Phillip’s not violent. Just unpleasant. I think he actually *enjoys* making people unhappy.”

“Some people are just like that,” Matt said. “I’d feel sorry for him... but he’s an asshole.”

Autumn felt a weak laugh bubble up from her chest. “I can’t argue with you.”

“I wish I wasn’t right about him. You deserve better, Autumn.”

Her cheeks burned as she looked away.

“We should finish unpacking.” Her voice came out husky, and she cleared her throat. “And then we should divvy up the chores. I’m happy to take turns cooking, if my sisters’ stories didn’t terrify you.”

Matt grinned down at her. “I’m not easily scared. Plus, I’ve got good fire insurance, remember?”



A few hours later, after she’d finished unpacking her suitcases and boxes and Jayden was in bed, Autumn joined Matt on the

porch. He was sitting on the rattan sofa, his booted feet propped up on the low tiled table.

It was a warm summer night, with just the faintest traces of deep scarlet lingering over the western ridge. Crickets sang a rasping lullaby as stars winked to life overhead.

“Beer?” he asked, offering her a bottle.

“Thanks,” she said, taking it and settling herself next to him. “And thanks again for helping us.”

“You’re welcome, and you can stop thanking me now. I have the space, and it’s no big deal.” He clinked bottles with her, then took a swig of beer. “But we should get our story straight before we go public with our pretend relationship.”

She took a sip of her own. “Don’t I know it! I’ve already gotten a few comments about our supposed romance this past week.”

“So, remind me: when did we start dating again?” he asked.

She frowned, considering. “We told Phillip it was while we were getting ready for the Vintage Railroad Days festival.”

He nodded, and she continued, “If anyone really wants to know, how about we tell them it all started when we went out to dinner over July Fourth weekend to discuss, uh, security arrangements for the festival?”

“That sounds plausible,” he agreed. “It helps that nearly everyone around here knows we used to be an item.”

A silver thread streaked across the sky and winked out.

“Hey, remember that time we snuck out of your bedroom and climbed on the roof to watch the meteor shower?” Autumn asked.

“I remember the part where my dad scared the living daylights out of us, because he heard his bedroom ceiling creaking as we crawled over that part of the house, and came out to investigate, shotgun in hand,” Matt said, his tone wry. “I’m only glad we were both dressed.”

“So much for being stealthy with our sleepovers.” Autumn smiled at the memory. “But it was worth it.”

“Definitely worth it,” he agreed, taking a deep pull from his bottle.

Autumn swallowed hard. “Matt, I need to tell you something,” she began, looking away from him.

“What?” His body language was still relaxed, but he wasn’t looking at the stars now.

She’d been waiting for the perfect moment to talk to him. The time had finally come, but making her confession was a lot harder than she thought it would be. “I—I messed up. When we broke up... I thought Phillip was everything I wanted. But I was wrong.”

His features shadowed in the dim light. “Autumn, you don’t have to—”

“No, let me finish,” she insisted. “Ever since things went wrong with Phillip, I keep thinking I should’ve known better. I should’ve stuck with you, Matt. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, we were both young and stupid. And if we’re talking about regrets, I always wondered if I should have fought harder for our relationship. Or moved to Bozeman with you when you left for college.”

“They say hindsight gives you 20/20 vision,” she whispered, forcing the words around the lump in her throat.

“But I want you to know I never stopped caring about you.” Matt put his arm around her shoulders. “I’m glad we can still be friends.”

Friends. Matt didn’t hate her for dumping him? Phillip would never forgive something like that. Her eyes stung with sudden tears. She sniffled. “I’m glad, too. And thanks for helping me now.”

He smiled. “It’s what friends do. And what did I say about thanking me?”

She gave a watery laugh, and he cupped her cheek with his big, warm hand.

The air between them crackled with sudden electricity. Her heart began pounding at the heat in his eyes.

Then the sound of approaching voices broke the tension. They both turned to look at the trio of shadowy figures approaching them.

“It’s showtime,” Matt whispered. “Codeword: Daisy.”

“Oh, yeah?” she challenged him.

He smiled at her, his eyes glinting with mischief in the porch light. For a moment, she saw the boy he’d once been.

The one who’d held her hand at the county fair and won her a stuffed bear at the ring toss. The one who’d given her his jeans jacket on cold autumn nights while they sat on the tailgate of his pickup, gazing up at the stars.

“It’s the Fredericksons,” he explained. “They always take their dog out for a walk just before bedtime.”

From what Autumn had heard, Donna Frederickson was the town’s biggest gossip and all-around busybody on Nextdoor. If someone parked in the wrong place or forgot to update their car registration stickers, she was on the case. She also ran the town’s “Stitch-n-Bitch” knitting and crochet group.

Heat shot through Autumn in anticipation as Matt turned and slowly leaned in. His warm breath brushed her lips just before he pressed his mouth gently against hers.

His kiss was soft and lingering. In an instant, the years dropped away. This felt real. More than just a show for Matt’s neighbors.

Long-dormant arousal sprang to aching, pulsing life between her legs. She hadn’t felt desirable since Jayden was born. That was when Phillip had switched from treating her like the

woman he loved and was crazy about to someone who couldn't do anything right.

Matt's kiss deepened. It felt healing. And oh-so-right.

No, she told herself, fighting the temptation to pull him closer and touch her tongue to his. This isn't real. We're just pretending... remember?

When they finally broke apart, both of them were breathing hard. She saw the same spark of surprise in his eyes that she felt.

"Hey, Matt!" Donna called as she and her husband Chris passed Matt's house. Their golden retriever strained at her leash. "Nice evening, isn't it?"

Her knowing smile broke the romantic spell for Autumn.

"Sure is, Donna," Matt replied, forcing a casual tone as he squeezed Autumn's shoulder. "Taking advantage of the nice weather before it gets cold."

"Oh, I'm sure you two will enjoy sitting in front of your fireplace when the time comes," Donna assured them.

Chris, a tall man with a short silver-and-brown beard, nodded.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," he called with a cheery wave.

The couple continued walking. Autumn and Matt both watched them until they reached the end of the block and

rounded the corner.

“Guess we put on a good show,” Matt said, as if trying to brush off the intensity of the kiss.

“Definitely,” Autumn agreed, her cheeks flushed. “I think she’s going to tell everyone she knows before dinnertime tomorrow.”

“Step one of the plan, accomplished,” Matt said. He kept his arm around her shoulders, but sat back on the porch sofa and looked out at the stars.

Autumn fumbled for her beer with trembling fingers.

One kiss. All it had taken was one kiss, and the lines between pretense and reality had evaporated like morning dew.

She could still feel the warmth and feeling of Matt’s lips imprinted on her mouth, and the ghostly pressure of his fingers cupping her cheek.

Crap, she thought, staring out into the darkness.

Was staying here a mistake? Shaken and scared by Phillip’s drunken ranting, all she’d been thinking about was the escape Matt offered. But now...

What if this fake relationship turns into something real? Will I make the right decisions this time around?

Or maybe she was reading too much into it. Overthinking things, as usual.

She glanced at Matt's profile. He seemed completely unaffected by their kiss.

Yup, she thought. Definitely overthinking it. He's just a friend trying to help me out. I need to keep my cool.

Chapter Nine

Coffee and a Kiss

Saturday, August 15

Autumn blearily opened her eyes as the aroma of frying bacon wafted to her nose. She'd spent way too many hours tossing and turning last night.

After yesterday's confrontation with Phillip, followed by the hasty move to Matt's place, Autumn had been emotionally and physically drained. She'd expected to fall asleep immediately.

But her brain kicked into overdrive as soon as she turned off the bedside light. Vivid replays of Matt's mouth against hers had quickly morphed into vivid, arousing fantasies of his hands stroking and caressing her as he kissed his way down her body. What kinds of things had he learned in the years they'd been apart?

And what would happen if she got out of bed and walked across the hall to his bedroom?

Then the sound of a car driving down the street had stabbed her with irrational panic. Was it Phillip? Had he left the ranch and tracked her down?

And with that, her imagination was off and running, spinning out increasingly catastrophic scenarios.

She wasn't sure what time she'd finally drifted off, but it had been late.

Now she groaned softly and rolled over to peer at the digital clock on the nightstand.

Seven thirty. In the days before motherhood, that would've been inhumanely early for a Saturday morning.

It was *still* inhumanely early, except Jayden had turned out to be a Morning Person, just like his father.

She was tempted to roll over and grab another hour of sleep, but heard Jayden and Matt's voices drifting down the hall from the kitchen. Reluctantly, she pushed back the covers and forced herself to swing her legs over the edge of the mattress.

Her toiletries bag tucked under her arm, she headed for the bathroom and took a quick shower before getting dressed.

When she entered the kitchen a short time later, she watched Matt expertly flipping blueberry pancakes. She paused to appreciate his tanned, muscular forearms as he worked. Thick strips of bacon sizzled in a cast iron pan next to the griddle, and her stomach growled at the delicious, smoky scent.

Her gaze lingered on Matt's red "The Yummy Cowboy Diner" apron, and the tight white t-shirt that molded itself to his lean, strong body.

The branded t-shirts and aprons sold at the diner had been her idea. Right now, she thought that "yummy cowboy" described Matt to a "T."

"Hi Mom! Deputy Matt's making blueberry pancakes, just Grandpa Bob!" Jayden called out from his seat at the breakfast

nook table. It was set for three, with small bowls of fresh blueberries and sliced strawberries sitting next to each plate.

“Jayden’s been a big help this morning,” Matt told her. “He set the table, and he helped me mix up the pancake batter.”

“That’s my job when Grandpa makes pancakes or Grandma makes waffles,” Jayden explained.

“Well, I’ll do my best to live up to your Grandpa Bob’s culinary standards,” Matt said in a solemn tone.

Autumn couldn’t help smiling.

Jayden peered around. “Is there any whipped cream for the pancakes?”

Matt shook his head. “Sorry, buddy, I’m fresh out. But there’s huckleberry syrup.” His gaze flicked to Autumn, and his tone turned apologetic. “I’m out of coffee too. Sorry. I’ve been putting off grocery shopping for far too long.”

Autumn couldn’t help but compare his reaction to Phillip’s in a similar situation. Her ex-husband would have snapped at her, blaming her for the shortfalls.

“Hey, it’s okay,” she reassured him with a smile. “You weren’t expecting guests. I can pick up some coffee later. And your pancakes smell delicious.”

“Thanks,” Matt replied, his features softening. “I can offer you a choice of orange juice or milk with breakfast. Which do you prefer?”

He began lifting the purple-splotched pancakes from the griddle and piling them on a serving plate, along with the bacon.

“Orange juice, please!” Jayden replied, his eyes wide as he stared hungrily at the growing stack of pancakes.

“Autumn, is milk okay for you?” Matt asked.

“Sure.” She moved over to the fridge. “What will you be having?”

“OJ,” he replied.

She filled the glasses, then took her place at the table.

Matt joined her, and they dug in. The pancakes were fluffy and perfect, generously studded with deep purple blueberries, and the applewood-smoked bacon was mouth-meltingly crisp.

“What are your plans for the day?” Autumn asked after a few minutes.

“I have to work. My shift starts at ten,” Matt replied. “How about you two?”

“Uncle Spring’s giving me and Abby and April riding lessons,” Jayden announced proudly. “He says that he needs extra cowboys and cowgirls on the ranch, and that we can help him out as soon as we’re good enough in the saddle.”

Autumn glanced at the kitchen clock and wondered if Phillip was awake yet.

After yesterday, she knew Mom and Dad wouldn't let him linger on their property. She only hoped she wouldn't to run into him when she dropped Jayden off.

Then she remembered something else and cursed herself. *Crap.*

"Matt, I'm so sorry, but I have to ask you for another favor," she said, hating to impose on him. "My car's still parked at Mom and Dad's place. Could you give us a lift over there? Then you could go to work and I could drive up to the grocery store in Livingston, if you want to give me your shopping list."

Matt didn't hesitate. "Sure, no problem. Do you have any other plans today?"

"Not really," Autumn said. "If it's okay with you, I'd like to come back here later to edit my photos and schedule this coming week's social media posts for The Yummy Cowboy Diner and *Reviving Snowberry Springs.*"

"Make yourself at home," Matt said. "I'll write down my Wi-Fi password for you. Hey, before you head to Livingston, how about we head over to Jenna's Java for coffee after we drop Jayden off and retrieve your car?"

"I'd love to," Autumn said. "But I don't want to make you late for work."

Matt shrugged. "Don't worry about it. It's a short commute to the police station." He winked at her. "Besides, Jenna's is the

perfect place to make our first public appearance as a couple, don't you think?"

He was right. The bakery was always bustling on the weekend. People put their names and cell numbers on The Yummy Cowboy Diner's wait list for weekend brunch, then strolled across Town Square Park to Jenna's Java for coffee while waiting for a notification that their table was ready.

One appearance together at Jenna's, and everyone would think she and Matt were an item again. *If they haven't already heard the story from Donna and Chris*, she thought.

"Okay, sounds like a plan," she agreed. She raised her glass of milk in a toast. "To new beginnings."

"New beginnings!" Jayden said, enthusiastically grabbing for his juice. "Does that mean we can stay here?"

Matt clinked his glass against hers with a warm smile. "Sure, you guys can stay as long as you like. This place feels kind of empty when it's just me, you know?"

Not for the first time, Autumn wondered why someone as thoughtful and kind as Matt was still alone. As far as she knew, he wasn't dating anyone. Mom had made a point of mentioning it last winter, right after Autumn and Jayden moved back home.

"Hey, Matt," she began tentatively. "I was thinking, if you'd like, I could cook dinner for us tonight after your shift finishes."

“Sounds great.” He grinned at her. Then his smile turned teasing. “As long as it’s not honey-mustard spaghetti.”

Autumn laughed. “My family’s never going to let me forget about that,” she said wryly. “How about chicken pot pies? Brock gave me the recipe he uses at the diner. It’s one of the most popular lunch specials there.”

“I know, and I love those chicken pot pies,” Matt said. “I’m looking forward to it.”



Bob and Priscilla Snowberry, alerted by Autumn’s phone call, stood waiting for them on the porch when Matt rolled into Snowberry Springs Ranch a short time later.

Matt got out of his truck first and looked around for Phillip before signaling to Autumn.

“Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!” she called as she slid out of his truck, then helped Jayden out.

Bob came down from the porch and exchanged hugs with his daughter and grandson, then shook Matt’s hand. “Morning, Deputy.”

“Morning, Mr. Snowberry, Mrs. Snowberry.”

Priscilla waved from the porch.

Autumn craned her head toward the guest cabins. “Still here?” she asked her dad.

“Yeah, still sleeping. Not gonna let him laze around too much longer, though,” Bob answered, frowning.

“We don’t want him to think he’s welcome here anymore,” Priscilla added. She bent and swept Jayden up into a hug as he ran up the porch steps to embrace her. “Hey, how’s my favorite little cowboy today?”

“Ready to round up some cattle!” Jayden exclaimed. He peered over his grandmother’s shoulder and waved excitedly. “Hi, Abby! Hi, April!”

Priscilla released him from her embrace. Matt had to smile as the little boy practically launched himself off the porch and sprinted toward the corral.

Two brown-haired girls stood there in riding boots and helmets, waiting while Spring checked the buckles and girth straps on a trio of patiently waiting horses.

Watching Jayden enthusiastically greet his cousins, Matt felt a pang of regret.

He could’ve been my kid, if things had worked out differently.

He glanced over at Autumn, and remembered the taste of her, and her soft mouth against his.

He’d be willing to swear in a court of law that she’d enjoyed their kiss just as much as he had. Now, he just had to wait for

another opportunity to put Codeword: Daisy into operation and find out.

“Thanks for keeping Phillip off the road last night, Mr. Snowberry,” Matt said, forcing his thoughts back down to earth. “He’s really lucky he didn’t hurt or kill anyone... or spend the night in jail.”

Bob grunted. “Appreciate you taking such good care of my girl.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Matt said. “It’s been great catching up with Autumn.”

With Jayden safely delivered into his uncle’s care, she was in a hurry to leave.

They both declined Priscilla’s offer of breakfast, and Autumn all but sprinted over to her blue Subaru Impreza. Matt got back in his truck and followed her back to town.

He parked his truck behind hers around the corner from the cafe.

“Ready for Codeword: Daisy, part deux?” he asked when she climbed out of her car.

“Ready as I’ll ever be! I’m prepared to kill anyone standing between me and that coffee.” Autumn laced her fingers through his and shot him a flirtatious look. “Oops, that was probably the wrong thing to say in front of law enforcement.”

Matt wanted to make a joke about handcuffs, but figured it was too soon.

Also, the thought of a naked Autumn cuffed to his bedpost was far too appealing, and he didn't want to walk into the bakery sporting a visible hard-on.

"It's my job to prevent crime—especially violent crime," he responded instead. "So, I'll be getting you one sixteen-ounce drip coffee with a splash of milk and one Splenda, pronto."

"You remembered how I take my coffee?" Autumn came to a dead stop and gazed up at him.

The gratitude in her eyes made him feel uncomfortable, especially for such a small thing. "It's no big deal," he mumbled.

"Nine years of marriage, and Phillip still thought I liked my coffee black, like he did."

"Which just confirms that your ex is a self-centered ass," Matt remarked.

They resumed walking.

Jenna's Java was housed in a two-story beige brick building opposite Town Square Park from The Yummy Cowboy Diner. A sign embedded in the facade above the second-story windows said, **E.F. Forster & Sons, 1913.**

Signs painted over the large plate-glass windows advertised **Jenna's Java & Bakery - Locally Owned & Operated -**

Fresh Daily - All Natural.

He paused in front of the old-fashioned wood-and-glass door, and bent to whisper in her ear. “Codeword: Daisy?”

A faint flush colored her cheeks as she nodded. As they walked in, the smell of fresh coffee and baked goods greeted them.

A large blackboard hung from the ceiling behind the register. It advertised salads, soups, and sandwiches besides a long list of coffee drinks. On either side of the register, clean, lighted display cases held an extensive selection of tempting pastries.

“Morning, Jenna!” Autumn greeted the bakery’s owner brightly, her voice carrying over the hum of conversation and the hiss of steaming milk.

Jenna Gomez, the mayor’s daughter, had been a freshman in high school when Matt was a senior. She’d moved away from Snowberry Springs after getting married, but returned a few years ago after her divorce to open the combination bakery-café.

“Morning!” Jenna replied, her dark eyes bright with curiosity as she glanced down at their joined hands. “What can I get you two lovebirds?”

Autumn blushed deep red, then ordered their coffees and a cinnamon roll, which was Matt’s favorite breakfast treat.

I guess I’m not the only one who remembers, he thought, feeling absurdly pleased.

As they waited in line to pick up their orders and pay, Matt spotted Donna Frederickson and the rest of the Snowberry Springs Stitch-n-Bitch club watching them from a corner table piled with balls of yarn.

Autumn leaned in closer, her auburn hair tickling his cheek. "Let's give them something to talk about," she murmured.

Matt bent to whisper in her ear. "Why did the cowboy get a dachshund?"

He knew it was corny, but it was one of his dad's favorite jokes.

"No idea," Autumn whispered back.

"He wanted to get a long little doggie."

She giggled. "Oh my God, Matt, that's such a total dad joke!"

"But it made you laugh, didn't it?" Looking into her sparkling eyes, Matt felt an irresistible urge to kiss her. He tucked back a lock of her auburn hair and heard her inhale at his gentle caress.

Her pink tongue darted out to moisten her lips. "Matt, I..."

He couldn't help himself. He drew her close and captured her mouth in a searing kiss. A tsunami of desire swept over him, so strong his knees nearly buckled.

God, I want this woman! No matter how he'd tried to deny it, he'd *never* stopped wanting her. Even after she broke his heart.

Forgetting that this was supposed to be an act, he wrapped his arms around her, crushing the soft mounds of her breasts against his chest. The familiar scents of her shampoo and perfume flooded his senses.

Her arms slid around his waist, and then she was frantically kissing him back, returning his passion with a fervor that surprised them both.

“Alright, you two,” Jenna chided playfully a few moments later, “That’s enough PDA. And your order’s up.”

Autumn stiffened and broke the kiss. Matt wanted to keep kissing her, but he forced himself to pull away.

Just supposed to be for show, he reminded himself. No matter how strongly his traitorous body was reacting.

He picked up the tray with their coffees and the cinnamon roll and led the way to an empty table a safe distance from a smirking Donna and her friends, who were all armed with knitting needles and crochet hooks.

His cock stiff and aching, Matt leaned back in his chair. He picked up his mug and took a deep breath, inhaling the rich fragrance and letting the scent ground him.

Autumn sat across from him, her fingers wrapped around her own mug. Her cheeks were pink, and she wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“You look tired,” he said, mostly to break the uncomfortable silence between them. “Didn’t sleep well?”

She sighed. “I spent a lot of time thinking last night,” she said. “About the restraining order and, um, other things. I—I just don’t know if it’s going to work.”

Alarmed, Matt sat up straight. “You mean the restraining order?” he demanded.

She nodded, her eyes firmly downcast.

“Autumn, you *need* it,” he insisted. “Phillip’s a fucking menace. You saw and heard him yesterday.”

“Yes, but what if the judge thinks...” she began, then interrupted herself. “I mean, Phillip hasn’t *hit* me. Or done anything, really, except yell at me and send me a bunch of text messages. What if the judge doesn’t think that’s enough for a restraining order?”

Matt’s chest ached to see her normal confidence dissolve into timid uncertainty.

What the fuck did Phillip do to her? It wasn’t the first time he’d had asked himself that question.

He leaned forward, cupping her hands with his. He forgot about playacting the part of an infatuated boyfriend. All he could think about was protecting her from that asshole she’d married.

Her fingers felt cold despite the heat of the coffee mug she still held.

“Look, emotional and psychological abuse is serious, and any judge worth his or her salt knows that. And stalking is even more serious. And believe me, what Phillip’s doing right now is textbook stalking.”

She sighed, her shoulders slumping under an invisible weight. “Are you *sure* they’re not just going to laugh me out of the courthouse?”

“I’m positive.” Matt tried to imbue his voice with every ounce of his conviction. “I have to go to court pretty often, and I’ve gotten to know Judge Arran pretty well. She won’t give you a hard time. I promise.”

Autumn nodded. “Okay.”

“So, you’re going to head over to the courthouse in Livingston first thing on Monday and file the petition for a temporary Order of Protection?” Matt asked. “You can download the form from the court’s website and fill it out today or tomorrow. Make sure you list everything Phillip’s done since you asked him not to contact you anymore. Judge Arran will *definitely* want to hear about his visit to the ranch yesterday, not to mention his repeated threats to interfere with your custody of Jayden.”

She took a deep breath. “Yes. I’ll do that.” Then she lifted her mug. Matt reluctantly released her so that she could take a sip. “So, once I fill out that form, what happens next?”

“You sign the petition and hand it to the court clerk.” He reached out again and captured her cold left hand in his. “They’ll give it to the judge, who might want to chat with you.”

Autumn's eyes widened in alarm. "Chat?"

"Just if she has questions about anything you wrote," Matt assured her. "Judge Arran's not going to interrogate you like a criminal. She just needs to understand what's going on. She'll probably grant you a temporary order right away, and set a hearing date for a permanent Order of Protection."

Autumn bowed her head. "If I get the order, how do I let Phillip know? Do I have to see him? Call him?" Matt saw her shudder.

"Nope," he assured her. "The police—that would be me or Gabe—will handle that part."

Matt hoped he got to serve Phillip with the paperwork. He wondered how the other man would react to the news that he was now banned from contacting Autumn and her son.

"Oh, thank God." He could see and feel the tension draining from her. *Good.*

Matt squeezed her hand, trying to lend her some of his strength. "I know going to court isn't fun, but remember, this is about keeping you and Jayden safe."

She looked up, and he saw gratitude in her blue eyes. "Thank you, Matt. I didn't know what to expect."

"Don't worry," he assured her. "Whatever you need, I'll be there for you."

He leaned forward and gave her a quick, reassuring kiss.

Too late, he realized this wasn't part of his act for Donna and the others.

Dammit. The lines between faking it and reality were already getting too blurry for comfort.

How the hell was he going to survive the next week or two with this kind of temptation just across the hall from his bedroom?

Chapter Ten

The Proposition

“Deputy Matt’s home!” Jayden called as Matt walked through the front door later that day.

The savory aroma of chicken pot pie baking in the oven enveloped Matt as he poked his head into the kitchen.

Autumn stood at the kitchen counter, tossing a salad, while Jayden sat at the breakfast nook table, hunched over a coloring book. A plate piled with golden, flaky apple turnovers sat on the counter, next to a bakery box labeled “Jenna’s Java & Bakery.”

For years now, Matt had dreamed about coming home to a loving family instead of cold beer and takeout, eaten alone in front of his TV. This cozy domestic scene felt like all his wishes had come true.

Except it was nothing more than a fantasy that would dissolve like Cinderella’s carriage once Autumn got her Order of Protection on Monday.

“Let me change out of my uniform and I’ll be right back to help set the table,” Matt said, suddenly depressed at the thought of returning to an empty house on Tuesday after work.

As he closed his bedroom door behind him, the thought struck him like a bolt of lightning: *But what if it wasn’t temporary? What if I could convince Autumn and Jayden to stay here?*



Over dinner, Matt marveled at the chicken pot pie's buttery, flaky pastry and the delicious filling of rich cream gravy studded with tender bits of chicken, fresh peas, carrot slices, and celery crescents.

"This is even better than The Yummy Cowboy's pot pie," he said honestly, scooping himself another large serving from the deep baking dish on the table.

Despite her sisters' teasing at yesterday's dinner at the ranch, Autumn's cooking had improved by miles since their high school days.

Back then, he'd choke down whatever horrible concoction she served him because he loved her. Right now, he'd sing with gratitude if he could come home to food like this after every long shift he worked.

She beamed at him. "Really?"

"Really," he confirmed, returning her smile. Their gazes caught and held.

He decided he wanted to have dinner with Autumn and Jayden every night from now on for as long as she wanted to stay.

"It's delicious!" Jayden chimed in. "Can you make it again tomorrow?"

Autumn laughed. "For tomorrow's dinner, I was hoping to show Matt that my spaghetti game has improved. You like my meatballs, right?"

“Yay! Spaghetti and meatballs!” Jayden cheered. He turned to Matt. “Mom’s meatballs are the *best*. She puts cheese in them.”

“I’m looking forward to trying them,” Matt said, then added in a teasing tone, “As long as she promises to stay away from the honey mustard.”

“I swear my honey mustard days are long behind me,” Autumn said, laughing. “Cross my heart and hope to die.” She paused and added slyly, “Though I saw a recipe online for chicken glazed with honey mustard and coated with crushed pretzels that looked pretty good.”

“I’d be willing to try that,” Matt conceded.

“Me, too!” Jayden chimed in. “It sounds crunchy!”

Matt took another bite of the pot pie. “So, Autumn, what are you thinking about doing once you get the Order of Protection?”

She hesitated for a moment, her fork paused mid-air. “I’m hoping to move out as soon as possible. I know you probably want your peace and quiet back.” Her tone was apologetic. Almost meek.

No! he shouted silently. *Stay as long as you want to!*

Jayden slouched in his seat, suddenly looking unhappy.

“I’ve been thinking about finding a place in town,” Autumn continued. Her blue eyes met his, as if searching for something. “Mom and Dad have been incredibly generous to house me for the past eight-and-a-half months, and I love them for it, but...” She trailed off, a wistful smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “I’d really like to have a bedroom to myself again, you know?”

“Like the one you have here?” he asked.

Her brows shot up in surprise.

He took a deep breath. “If you’re serious about moving to town, why don’t you and Jayden keep living here? As my housemates, I mean.”

Autumn’s eyes widened. “I—I hadn’t considered it.”

“It’s been, uh, really nice having you guys here,” Matt said. He desperately wanted to convince her not to move out. And he suspected he was totally fumbling it. “As you can see, I have plenty of room.”

She looked around the kitchen, and the uncertainty in her expression made his chest twinge. “I don’t want to impose...”

Her tone was hesitant, but she wasn’t saying no. It sounded like she wanted him to convince her to stay.

“I mean, you’d have your own room, right?” Matt asked. “Jayden, too.”

Jayden was nodding vigorously.

Autumn traded looks with her son. "I want to stay here!" he said.

She turned back to Matt. "Um, what were you thinking in terms of rent?"

Matt swallowed hard. He longed to tell her she and Jayden could stay for free. But that would probably scare her off. Or make her wonder whether he had ulterior motives.

"How about \$700 a month for both rooms?" he asked, knowing he was quoting less than half the going rate in Bozeman. "And you'll be able to use the rest of the house, of course."

Her eyes widened, and he added quickly, "Just think about it, okay?"

"It's a great deal, and it's in my budget," Autumn said, but she still seemed hesitant. "But I really don't want to impose..." she repeated.

"You wouldn't be imposing," Matt assured. "Just the opposite. I don't like coming home to an empty house. You'd be doing me a favor. Honest."

"I appreciate the offer, Matt. Really, I do. It would be really nice for Jayden and me to have some stability again." Autumn bit her lip. "Can I let you know Monday? After the hearing?"

"Of course." Matt told himself he could be patient a little longer, if it meant that she'd stay. "Take all the time you need to think about it."



After dinner, Autumn went to her bedroom to finish filling out the petition for an Order of Protection. Matt stayed in the kitchen to clean up and load the dishwasher.

As he scooped the remains of the pot pie from the baking dish into a smaller plastic container, the memory of Autumn's "fake" kisses last night and this morning returned to torment him.

As far as he was concerned, nothing had felt fake about her mouth. Or her soft whimpers of pleasure. Those had driven him crazy in the best possible way.

His cock—no, his entire body—ached for Autumn.

He put the lid on the container of leftovers and shoved them in the fridge. As he turned back to the sink, the sound of footsteps approaching from the dining room caught his attention. It was Jayden, holding his dinner plate in one hand, and his fork and knife in the other.

"Hey, Deputy Matt," Jayden said, joining him at the sink. "Can I can help you?"

"Sure. Why don't you bring me the rest of the dirty dishes?" Matt replied, taking the plate and scraping the leftovers into the small countertop compost bin before putting it in the dishwasher. "That'll really help me out."

As they worked together, Matt noticed Jayden's Avengers-themed shirt and distracted himself from thoughts of Autumn. "So, who's your favorite superhero?"

"Spider-Man!" Jayden exclaimed, eyes lighting up. "He's so cool, swinging around the city and saving people."

"Can't argue with that," Matt agreed, grinning. "Mine's always been Batman. I like that he fights crime with no real superpowers."

"And the Batmobile is cool," Jayden agreed, bringing over a pair of glasses with the amber dregs of iced tea.

"I always wanted a Batmobile of my own," Matt confessed. "But it turns out that a pickup truck is more practical in Snowberry Springs."

Jayden nodded and made another trip over to the dining table.

When he returned with the big salad bowl hugged to his chest, he looked up at Matt with worried eyes. "Do you think my daddy will take me away from Mommy?"

Matt's heart ached at the unexpected question. "Your dad can't take you anywhere without your mom's permission," he assured Jayden. "Not without breaking the law. Why do you want to know?"

Jayden's shoulders slumped. He looked down at his Spider-Man sneakers.

“Last weekend, Daddy told me he wants to take me to New Jersey to meet my new baby sister,” he confessed. “But I don’t want to go to New Jersey! I want to stay here with Mommy and Grandma and Grandpa and the horses and the goats. And you. You’re cool, Deputy Matt!”

“Thanks, buddy. And you can just call me Matt from now on,” Matt told him, warmed by the boy’s words. He added, “If you don’t want to go with your dad, I’ll do everything I can to make sure you get to stay right here where you belong.”

“Promise?” Jayden held up his little finger.

Matt linked his pinkie with Jayden’s. “Pinky swears.”

Apparently reassured, Jayden asked, “Which Batman movie is your favorite?”

“Definitely *The Dark Knight*,” Matt answered. “How about you? What’s your favorite Spider-Man movie?”

“*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse!*” Jayden replied, excitement in his voice. “It’s got all those different Spider-People from other dimensions!”

“That one’s pretty great too,” Matt admitted.

As they continued discussing superhero movies, Matt decided that Autumn’s son was a sweet, funny kid. He deserved better than the way Phillip treated him.

Autumn peeked into the kitchen a short while later.

“Uh-oh, I see you two are having a Marvel versus DC Comics debate,” she said, leaning against the doorway.

“Guilty as charged,” Matt replied, winking at her.

“Don’t forget about the female superheroes. Like Wonder Woman versus the Black Widow,” she said. “Or the Amazons versus the Dora Milaje.”

“Good point. I sure wouldn’t want to be a bad guy facing any of those women,” Matt said. “And you should give yourself some credit, too, Super Mom.”

“Yeah!” Jayden declared. “You’re definitely a Super Mom! An’ Matt an’ me, we’ll protect you from any bad guys who show up.”

“Well, it’s good to know I’ve got two superheroes right here to protect me,” she said.

Matt grinned and touched the brim of his imaginary cowboy hat. “We’re here to protect and serve, Ms. Snowberry.”

Jayden straightened up and saluted. “Yes, Mom! That’s us!”

Autumn’s smile lit up her eyes and made her face glow.



After tucking Jayden in, Autumn carried two glasses of iced tea out to where Matt was sitting on the porch, catching up on the latest baseball news. The August night was almost

tropically warm, perfumed with the sweet scents of roses and honeysuckle.

“All finished with the paperwork?” he asked, putting aside his tablet as she settled herself next to him.

Autumn nodded, brushing a loose tendril of auburn hair behind her ear. “I’ll be driving up to Livingston first thing Monday morning to file it.”

“I’m off work Mondays. I could go with you,” Matt offered.

Autumn smiled, her blue eyes lighting up. “I’d like that. We could get lunch at Fiesta Jalisco afterwards.”

Matt grinned. “Sounds great. I haven’t been there in ages.”

Fiesta Jalisco used to be their favorite place to eat whenever they drove up to Livingston for a Friday night movie date.

“Remember how you’d always ask for the extra-hot salsa?” she asked, her voice soft and wistful. “And you’d tease me for being a lightweight when I told you my tongue was on fire?”

“You *are* a chili pepper lightweight. Or, you were.” He studied Autumn’s profile in the soft porch light. She was still so beautiful, even with faint stress lines on her forehead and smudges under her eyes. He ached to see physical evidence of the toll Phillip’s harassment had taken.

Too bad you can’t just ride unwelcome strangers out of town on a rail anymore, he thought.

Autumn turned her head, meeting his gaze. “What?” she asked self-consciously.

“Nothing, just... I’ve missed this. Hanging out with you, I mean.” Matt reached over and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “And you just reminded me I haven’t been to the Empire in at least five years.”

Back in their high school days, the historic Empire Theater in downtown Livingston had been *the* place to take a date.

She smiled softly. “Me neither.” She paused, thinking. “In fact, I haven’t been to the movies in years.” She sighed, her breath mingling with the cool night air. “After Jayden was born, Phillip insisted going out to the movies was a waste of time and money when we had a big-screen TV at home, with surround sound and a Netflix subscription.”

Matt felt a flare of anger toward Phillip. He tried to keep his voice light. “Well, that’s just crazy talk. Nothing beats the big screen experience.”

“I know! A box of popcorn drenched in butter, a big box of Junior Mints and a giant Diet Pepsi... and sitting in the dark with you. It was fun.” Autumn gave a small, sad smile.

Matt couldn’t understand how anyone lucky enough to have Autumn’s love would treat her so poorly. The woman he’d known in high school had been full of laughter and fire, always eager to explore new experiences. It pained him to see how unsure of herself she’d become under her ex-husband’s influence.

“Autumn,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady, “what the hell did you ever see in Phillip?”

She looked down at her iced tea, nervously wiping at the beads of condensation on her glass. “He swept me off my feet when we first met. Showered me with attention and gifts. Made me feel so beautiful, so special, so loved.” She shook her head ruefully. “It wasn’t until I got pregnant that his ugly side came out. He became extremely controlling and bugged me non-stop to close my marketing business. He said that since he traveled so much with his job, it would be better for Jayden if I were a stay-at-home mom.” Her voice caught. “My world kept getting smaller and smaller. And I didn’t even realize it until it was almost too late.”

The porch creaked beneath them as they sat in silence, the weight of Autumn’s words hanging heavy in the air. Matt’s mind raced, thoughts colliding and tangling together as he tried to find the right thing to say.

“Autumn,” he said finally, his voice rough with emotion, “you deserve so much more than what Phillip gave you. You’re strong, and talented, and capable. Don’t let anyone ever make you feel you’re not.”

She leaned back against the cushions, regarding Matt thoughtfully. “So, what about you? You’re a real catch, you know. How come you never got married?”

Her words caught him off guard. Matt shifted in his seat, suddenly self-conscious under her intent gaze. “Oh, I don’t know. Guess I never met the right one.”

“Now that just doesn’t make sense,” Autumn said. “You’re smart, kind, respected.” She smiled. “And let’s be honest, you grew up real nice, Matt Parker.”

Matt cleared his throat, avoiding her eyes. “Well, I, uh... I appreciate that, Autumn. But it just never found anyone who made me feel the way you did back then.”

Her eyes widened, her lips parting slightly. Matt realized what he'd just admitted.

Before he could think about it, he reached for her, threading his fingers through her soft hair.

He pulled her close, and his mouth descended on hers in a searing kiss.

Autumn stiffened in shock for only a second before wrapping her arms around him. Her lips were just as hot and soft as he remembered. He deepened the kiss, desire raging through him.

As the kiss grew more urgent, more passionate, Autumn drew up her legs and leaned into him.

Without breaking their kiss, she threw her leg over his thigh, straddling him, and wriggled onto his lap.

Matt groaned as her warmth ground against the aching bulge of his cock. He was drowning in desire, aware only of the need to get rid of the layers of fabric separating them.

When they finally broke apart, both gasping for air, Matt saw her cheeks were flushed and her eyes dilated with need.

“I want you so bad,” he said, his voice ragged. He caressed her cheek. “Stay with me tonight.”

Chapter Eleven

Playing with Fire

Autumn couldn't believe she was on Matt's lap. And yet, it felt so right.

His mouth ignited a fire in her veins she hadn't felt in years. She desperately wanted to grind herself against the hard ridge pushing boldly against the thin shield of her panties.

"Matt," she gasped, breaking their passionate kiss.

Every part of her screamed to say yes to his offer. To relive the passion they'd shared all those years ago.

It had been a long time since she'd had sex, and an even longer time since she'd had sex with someone who wanted her this badly, and who she wanted in return.

But... *but*. Beneath her arousal and intense need that screamed for relief, her rational mind knew that sleeping with Matt would only make things messier in an already-messy situation.

Autumn summoned up every ounce of will she possessed and shook her head. "I can't. I'm so sorry."

Then she scrambled off his lap. She needed to put some space between herself and the dangerous temptation he offered.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she stood and braced herself for his frustration.

Of course, he was going to be mad. She'd led him on by sitting on his lap and making out with him like a tease, then she'd cock-blocked him.

"I want you. I really do. But my life is such a mess right now. And with Phillip acting so unpredictable..." Aware that she was babbling, she trailed off.

Matt's hazel eyes bore into hers, myriad emotions playing across his features, with disappointment and desire warring for dominance. But no anger.

He sighed and ran a hand through his short hair. "It's okay, Autumn. You're right. I got carried away. I'm sorry. It's just that I've wanted you for so long."

Autumn's knees weakened at his confession. She ached to forget about Phillip and the weight of her responsibilities for a few hours and just lose herself in heat and sensation.

"I care about you, Matt. But this... *us*... it's too complicated. Especially since we're going to be housemates."

He nodded, regret shadowing his handsome face. "I understand," he said, his voice steady and controlled. "You've been through a lot. I don't want to make things harder for you."

Autumn felt torn between the relief that he understood and the ache of longing still pulsing through her.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I didn't mean to lead you on."

His lips twitched into an almost-smile. “I believe I was the one who kissed you first.”

Oh, Matt. My white knight.

If only she could let him rescue her broken heart.

With that thought, she realized they were walking a thin line between friendship and something far more dangerous.

“Maybe it’s best if I move out,” she said reluctantly.

Matt’s eyes widened. “Why? I thought you liked it here.”

“I do. But won’t it be awkward, me being here after what almost happened between us?” She looked away, unable to meet his gaze. “Besides, don’t you need your space?”

“Hey.” He rose and came to stand in front of her, so close she felt his body heat. “Don’t go. I was serious when I told you I hated coming home to an empty house, and I enjoy having you and Jayden around. I promise I’ll keep my hands to myself from now on.”

She really didn’t want him to keep his hands to himself, but knew it was for the best. “I don’t deserve you, Matt.”

“That’s not true.” He brushed his knuckles down the soft curve of her cheek. “You’ve been through hell with Phillip. But you’re one of the strongest women I know. I’ll support you any way I can.”

“You’ve always been a good friend, Matt. I’m so lucky to have you in my corner.”

“Always.” He pulled her close for a gentle hug. She sank into his solid warmth, letting it chase away her doubts and fears, if only for a moment.

Then a fresh worry reared its head.

“I was just thinking,” Autumn began hesitantly, “we’re going to have to be careful from now on. Putting on this happy couple act is making things complicated.”

Instead of denying it, Matt sighed. “Yeah, it feels like we’re both walking a fine line.”

“Is it wrong that part of me really wants this to be real?” Autumn blurted.

Shoot, she thought immediately. I shouldn’t have said that!

She knew she should step away, but she couldn’t bring herself to leave his arms. He made her feel safe. Sheltered.

For a moment, Matt didn’t answer. He seemed to weigh his words. When he spoke, the warmth in his voice sent shivers down her spine.

“Autumn, I want it too. More than anything. But I also know that right now is not the best time. Once we clear up this mess with Phillip, maybe we could give it a shot.”

“Deal,” she whispered, resting her forehead against his strong shoulder.

“And for now, if things get uncomfortable, why don’t we promise to talk to each honestly about how we’re feeling?”

“Sounds good,” Autumn said. She finally found the strength to step out of Matt’s embrace. Despite the warmth of the summer night, she instantly felt cold. “Good night, Matt.”



Sunday morning

“Do you think they’ll have churros at the farmers’ market?” Jayden asked as he and Autumn left Matt’s house and headed for Main Street.

“Maybe,” Autumn answered. “We’ll just have to go there after church and see.”

Despite their heart-to-heart talk last night, breakfast had been a little strained this morning before Matt left for work.

Mom and Dad greeted them with hugs at the church door fifteen minutes later.

After the rollercoaster of emotions over the past week, the familiar rituals of the service and hymns settled Autumn’s nerves. Here in the pews, surrounded by her family, lifelong friends, and neighbors, she could forget her troubles for a while and find peace.

When Sunday service ended, it was time for Autumn to get to work. As the head of the tourism board, capturing images of local events like the Farmers' Market was part of her job.

The entire length of Main Street was closed to cars on the third Sunday of every month. Local farmers, artists, and craftsmen set up their booths along both sides of the street, displaying a variety of products beneath colorful awnings. The Chamber of Commerce hired musicians to perform, with a dance area set up next to the row of food trucks.

As Autumn and Jayden wandered slowly down Main Street, she chatted with vendors and snapped photos of handmade breads and pastries, gleaming jars of jellies and honey, and the bounty of fresh local produce.

“Look, Mom! Watermelon!” Jayden exclaimed, pointing at the Parker Farms booth.

“Ooh, and I see blueberries, too. Let's go check them out,” Autumn said, seeing that Matt's mom and younger sister Lily were staffing the booth today.

“Morning, Autumn! Hi, Jayden,” Mrs. Parker called out as they approached. “How are you doing today?”

“Good morning, Mrs. Parker! We're doing well, thank you,” Autumn replied, snapping photos of the vibrant display for the town's social media accounts.

Besides berries, the long tables under the Parker Farms striped awning displayed pyramids of ripe melons, mounds of golden-

green plums, and rows of blushing apricots nestling in egg trays.

Other tables held cardboard boxes filled with the farm's gourmet mushrooms, along with beets, asparagus, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, eggplant, broccoli, a variety of lettuce, and enormous bunches of fragrant freshly picked mint, basil, cilantro, and dill.

"I'd love a small watermelon and a pound each of those apricots and cherries, please," Autumn told Lily when she'd finished photographing.

"Matt told us you moved into his place," Lily said as she took Autumn's cloth shopping bags and began filling them. When she wasn't helping her parents at the family farm, she built websites. She grimaced. "Tell me you're not letting my brother cook. He can barely reheat a frozen meal."

Apparently, Lily hadn't tried Matt's blueberry pancakes. His breakfast the other day had been outstanding.

"We made a deal," Autumn replied. "I cook, then he and Jayden wash the dishes afterwards."

"I've learned that willingness to do your fair share of the chores is important for a happy marriage," Mrs. Parker commented.

Matt's mother was tall and deeply tanned, with laugh lines etched deeply around her mouth and eyes. Silver frosted her light brown hair, and her hazel eyes were kind.

Autumn wasn't sure if Matt had told his family that he and Autumn were faking their relationship, so she just smiled and said, "I'm trying to teach Jayden that."

Hearing his name, Jayden stopped raiding the watermelon cubes laid out on a tray labeled Samples. Red smears framed his mouth. "Matt says I'm a big help," he announced proudly.

"I'm sure you are," Mrs. Parker said with a kind smile.

Jayden beamed back at her. "I'm gonna learn how to cook like Uncle Brock and Aunt Summer!"

"Promise you'll invite us over for dinner when you do," Mrs. Parker responded.

"Hey, did you see Evie's cute knitted polar bear and panda hats?" Lily pointed at the next booth over. "Aren't they perfect for the upcoming Snowberry Springs Winter Festival?"

"Absolutely!" Autumn agreed as Lily handed her the shopping bag, heavy now with ripe fruit, and took Autumn's card to process the payment.

"Oh, stop, you're embarrassing me!" Evie Carter protested. She owned the town's auto repair shop and could fix anything. She was also becoming famous for her knitting and crocheting skills.

"You must've been knitting like crazy all summer to make all these things," Autumn said, turning to admiring the selection of sweaters, shawls, mittens, and hats. "I'll post photos of your creations on the town's social media pages. I'm sure you'll sell out of everything before the festival."

“Awesome! You’re doing such a great job promoting Snowberry Springs,” Evie said. “Have you noticed how crowded the Farmers’ Market has gotten since you started posting your photos?”

After saying goodbye to the Parkers and Evie, Autumn and Jayden continued their stroll down Main Street.

“Look, churros!” Jayden exclaimed a few minutes later, tugging at her hand. He pointed at a familiar green awning announcing El Churro Redondo. “Can I have one?”

Autumn dug in her purse and fished out a ten-dollar bill. “Sure. I’ll be over there, taking some pictures.”

She showed him the Whispering Willows Jewelry booth, then handed him the cash.

“Thanks, Mommy!” Jayden grabbed the money and sprinted to join the line of customers waiting to order.

Autumn spotted Matt standing a block away. He looked tall and handsome in his tan deputy’s uniform, and she couldn’t help grinning as he tipped his cowboy hat to her.

This morning’s awkwardness between them seemed to have vanished, thank goodness.

She waved in return before returning her attention to photographing the jewelry display and the artisan, Willow, standing proudly next to her creations.

That was when Autumn caught sight of Phillip making his way towards the booth.

Oh, no.

Her first impulse was to duck behind the line of booths and hide.

Too late, though. He'd already spotted her.

"Autumn! Just the person I wanted to see!" he exclaimed in the hearty tone she'd labeled his Salesman Mode.

Not wanting him to trap her inside the Whispering Willows booth, she stepped out into the street just as he arrived.

Taking a deep breath, she asked in the most neutral tone she could manage: "What do you want, Phillip?"

"I wanted to apologize," he announced. His gaze flicked toward the people who had stopped to listen. He continued, "I shouldn't have shown up at the ranch like that on Friday night. I was drunk, and I wasn't thinking clearly."

Two apologies since Friday? And he's sober now, too. Autumn blinked, struggling to process what she was hearing. Contrition and apologies were as foreign to Phillip as humility and kindness.

She looked around for Jayden. Her little boy was still standing in line for churros and apparently unaware of his father's unexpected arrival. *Good.*

“Phillip, I don’t want—” she began.

“Just hear me out,” he interrupted, his tone insistent. And too loud. “I messed up, Autumn. I upset you and Jayden, and I was rude to your parents and brother. I’m... I’m sorry.”

Autumn could only stare at him. *Who are you? And what have you done to the real Phillip?*

Because the man she’d married would rather chew glass than admit wrongdoing.

Steeling herself, she met his ice-blue eyes. His expression seemed genuinely remorseful.

“I know this divorce has been hard on you,” Phillip continued. “On both of us. I guess I was still angry about you leaving me. But that’s no excuse to take it out on you and our boy.”

Autumn didn’t know what to make of this apparent change of heart. *Did he get wind of my plans to get a restraining order?*

“Apology accepted,” she said finally. “Just don’t let it happen again.”

Phillip nodded, relief flooding his features. “I’m glad you understand. I’ll do better from now on, I promise.”

Red flags rose in Autumn’s mind at the way he phrased that.

“Let me make it up to you. Have you had lunch yet? I’ll treat you and Jayden.” Phillip looked around and spotted his son accepting a churro wrapped in a white paper deli sheet. “Oh,

there he is!” he declared in an unnaturally loud and dramatic tone. “I miss him so much now that you’ve got full custody!”

Understanding dawned. Phillip’s apology hadn’t been for Autumn’s benefit. He was putting on a show for the dozens of interested spectators, trying to craft a narrative of being the penitent ex, hoping to win public sympathy.

If he was truly sorry, he would’ve approached me privately, not made a spectacle of himself in the middle of the street.

Anger blasted through Autumn. She straightened and squared her shoulders. In her coldest voice, she said, “I’m not having lunch with you, now or ever. And if you’re *really* sorry, leave us alone from now on.”

Phillip looked genuinely shocked by her response. Heck, eight months ago, she wouldn’t have dreamed of rebuffing him like that. She would’ve been too worried about making him mad.

Let him be angry, she thought defiantly. I don’t have to tiptoe around his feelings anymore.

She spied Matt striding toward them. His Stetson shaded his face, but his body language was tense. Determined.

“Morning, Autumn. Everything okay?” he asked, frowning at Phillip.

“Well, if it isn’t my cheating ex-wife and her new beau,” Phillip declared.

Gasps arose from the crowd. Autumn's cheeks flamed with rage. This attempt at public smearing was a new and unexpected low.

Matt's expression hardened. "Mr. Garthe, Autumn doesn't want any contact with you. Respect her wishes and stay away."

"*Excuse me?*" Autumn interjected, rage shooting through her veins like white-hot lava. "How *dare* you try to turn this around on me! *You're* the one who cheated, not me."

"Autumn, don't let him get to you," Matt murmured. "He's just trying to deflect."

"Of course you'd take her side," Phillip sneered. "She's really got you wrapped around her pussy, doesn't she?"

"Enough," Matt snapped. "Mr. Garthe, you need to leave. Now."

"Or what?" Phillip challenged, taking a step closer to Matt. "You'll arrest me for telling the truth?"

"Keep pushing me, and I just might," Matt warned, his muscles tensing beneath his deputy uniform. "Public harassment. Everyone here heard Autumn tell you to leave her alone."

Autumn took a shuddering breath as she clawed for self-control. "You know perfectly well that my relationship with Matt only began after our divorce," she said, compelled to defend her reputation in front of townspeople and strangers

alike. “But you cheated on me during all those business trips you took to New Jersey.”

Phillip reddened.

Autumn couldn't resist asking him, “Which reminds me, how old is your baby girl now? The one born to your mistress before our divorce was finalized?”

Murmurs—and a few snickers—rippled through the onlookers.

Speechless with rage, Phillip glared at Autumn and Matt. Then he turned on his heel and stalked off.

Autumn let her gaze drift over the crowd, taking in the supportive faces of her friends and neighbors. Rick Stinson gave her a thumbs up. Mrs. Parker smiled and nodded at her.

Relief washed over her. *No one believes Phillip's lies.*

Because everyone in Snowberry Springs knew her, trusted her. They had her back.

She swayed, her knees suddenly weak in the encounter's aftermath.

“Hey, hey, it's okay,” Matt said. “Why don't I walk you home?”

Home. The word sent a pang through her heart. After two days, Matt's house was quickly becoming more of a home than the house she'd shared with Phillip for nine years.

I should think seriously about Matt's offer to rent me his spare rooms.

She found Jayden. He looked nervously at his dad's departing back, then grabbed for her hand.

Matt guided them through the crowd thronging the market. As she walked, Autumn realized she was shaking like a leaf.

She recalled the venom in Phillip's eyes as he left.

She knew him. He wouldn't let this go. He'd find some way to punish her for rejecting him.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" Matt asked, draping a protective arm around her shoulders as they walked. "I can call Gabe and ask him to take over the rest of my shift."

Autumn shook her head. "We'll be okay, but thanks. And you bet I'll be heading for Livingston first thing tomorrow morning. Phillip is completely out of control."

She fervently hoped the judge would grant her the Order of Protection.

"Good." Matt gave her shoulders a reassuring squeeze. "We've got this."

Chapter Twelve

Protection

Livingston, Montana
Monday

“Here’s to Judge Arran,” Autumn said, raising her margarita glass. “And my shiny new Order of Protection.”

It had been a stressful morning, but Judge Arran hadn’t laughed Autumn out of court, as she’d feared. After Autumn had answered Her Honor’s questions, Matt had offered his testimony regarding Phillip’s threats and his harassing behavior, both at the ranch on Friday and yesterday at the Farmers’ Market.

Now Autumn was starving. It was a good thing they’d come to Fiesta Jalisco as soon as the hearing ended and she had her temporary Order of Protection in hand.

She hadn’t eaten since breakfast, too nervous to even think about food. But now she felt light and giddy, the weight of her worries lighter with the document in her purse.

“To Judge Arran!” Matt clinked glasses with her, then solemnly repeated the action with Jayden’s glass of soda.

“And here’s to being housemates,” Autumn added, using a tortilla chip to scoop up salsa. She’d done a lot of thinking yesterday afternoon and evening, then talked to Jayden about what he wanted. “Jayden and I want to take you up on your offer. If you still want to rent us your spare rooms.”

“Heck yeah,” Matt said. “After that chicken pot pie, I’m willing to give you a discount on your rent if you promise to take over all the cooking.”

“No need. You’re already giving us a great rate. I’d love to cook if you and Jayden continue to do all the cleanup. I absolutely hate washing dishes,” she confessed.

“You’ve got a deal,” Matt said without hesitating.

“I can do chores, too!” Jayden declared stoutly.

“Sure thing,” Matt said. “I need a good dish dryer.”

They were still splitting up the chores when the waitress delivered their lunches—cheese enchiladas for Jayden, a chimichanga filled with carnitas for Matt, and shrimp tacos for Autumn.

Once they were alone again, Autumn smiled at Matt. “Thank you. For everything. You have no idea how much your support means to me.”

She couldn’t believe he was so willing to split the chores.

Since Matt had offered her such a good deal on rent, she’d been expecting to take on all the housework in return. Phillip had expected her to do all the cleaning, cooking, and grocery shopping.

“Do you need help moving the rest of your stuff from the ranch?” Matt asked. His tone was casual, but she caught the hint of eagerness in his tone.

“Sure, if it’s not too much trouble,” she replied. “We don’t have much, mostly clothes and Jayden’s toys. I have some furniture, but I know Dad won’t mind me storing it in his tractor barn for a while longer.”



After lunch, they parted ways.

Autumn and Jayden wanted to head to her parents’ ranch to pack up their remaining belongings. And Matt had a promise to keep.

He watched Autumn and Jayden drive off.

She’d agreed to live with him! He wanted to dance a jig of happiness.

He’d spent years dreaming of having a family with Autumn, of building a life together in their hometown. Now here was his chance.

You’d better not screw it up, he told himself.

He climbed into his pickup and headed over to the outskirts of town where Phillip was staying in an Airbnb. Matt had worn his sheriff’s uniform to the courthouse, hoping to run this errand afterward.

The house came into view. It was a nondescript brown bungalow that blended into the neighborhood. He parked at

the curb and walked up the front path, scanning the windows for any signs of movement.

He rang the doorbell and waited. He heard someone was moving around inside and rang the doorbell again.

When Phillip finally opened the door, Matt had to fight back a curl of disgust. Unshaven, bleary-eyed, and unwashed, Autumn's ex looked like he'd spent the last twenty-four hours on a bender.

"Oh, it's you. What the hell do you want?" Phillip demanded.

Matt held out the rolled papers. "I'm serving you with an Order of Protection on behalf of Autumn Snowberry and Jayden Snowberry-Garthe."

"A restraining order? What the *fuck*?" Phillip's face contorted with shock, quickly followed by rage. "You can't do this! She's my *wife*."

"Ex-wife," Matt corrected. "And if you come within fifty feet of her or Jayden, I'll arrest your ass. Don't contact her by any means—text, email, phone call, anything. And don't try to recruit someone else to contact her on your behalf. You do any of those things, Mr. Garthe, and you'll violate the Order of Protection."

Phillip snatched the papers and crumpled them in his fist. "She has no right to keep me from my son!"

"Autumn has full legal custody. Stay away from them both." Matt met Phillip's furious gaze. "I mean it. One wrong move

and you'll regret the day you ever came to Snowberry Springs."

"You have no idea who you're dealing with," Phillip blustered. "I'm not going to just sit back and let you steal my family!"

"Your family wants nothing to do with you. And the judge agrees with them," Matt said calmly. "If you take Autumn back to family court, the whole town will rally behind her. We'll hold a fundraiser to hire the best damned lawyer in the state to fight you." He leaned forward and got into Phillip's face. "You see, Mr. Garthe, the people in Snowberry Springs love Autumn and respect all the hard work she's done for our town. And they think you're an asshole for threatening to take her boy away."

Phillip's face turned purple with rage. His mouth worked, but nothing came out.

Matt added in a growl, "If I see you anywhere near Autumn or Jayden, you'll regret the day you ever came to Montana."

He turned on his heel and strode to his truck, pulse pounding. Part of him hoped Phillip would violate the order just so he could throw the asshole in jail.

He's not worth the trouble, Matt told himself. As long as he keeps his distance from Autumn, that's enough.



Feeling a grim sense of satisfaction, Matt drove back to Snowberry Springs. He'd stood up to bullies before, and

Phillip was no different.

Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't over. Men like Phillip didn't give up so easily.

Then I'll just deal with whatever he does next, Matt told himself.

When he pulled up in front of his house, Autumn and Jayden were hauling boxes and suitcases up the front steps. Jayden waved at him, a wide grin on his face.

Autumn dropped her box onto the porch and hurried down the stairs.

The tension in her expression melted into relief when Matt gave her a thumbs-up.

"How'd it go? Did he give you any trouble?" she asked eagerly as he stepped out of his truck.

"He was pretty mad, but nothing I couldn't handle." He put his hands on her shoulders, giving them a gentle squeeze. "I made it very clear I'll throw his ass in jail if he comes anywhere near you or Jayden."

But Autumn still looked worried. "You know what he's like. He doesn't care about the law or anyone else's feelings. All he cares about is control."

"Mommy!" Jayden called, interrupting the tense moment. "Where should I put my PlayStation?"

“In your bedroom for now!” Autumn turned away from Matt. “I should get back to work. I still have another carload or two of stuff waiting at Mom and Dad’s.”

“Do you want help moving the rest of your things?” Matt asked.

She shook her head. “No, Jayden and I can handle it. You’ve done more than enough for us already.”

“I don’t mind. And my truck is a lot bigger than your car. It’ll save you an extra trip out to the ranch.”

She smiled up at him. “Well, if you insist, I’d really appreciate the help.”



That evening, Autumn curled up on the porch sofa, watching the sunset. She felt exhausted from her long day of court and then moving.

Her emotions were a tangled mess, joy and fear and relief twisting into a knot in her stomach.

She was free. The Order of Protection meant Phillip couldn’t legally come near her or Jayden. And she had a room of her own again. She should be happy.

But Philip’s threats still echoed in her mind. If he fought her for custody, he could drag her into a long legal battle she couldn’t afford.

The front door opened, and Matt appeared, holding two bottles of beer.

He offered her one beer, and she took it. Then he sat beside her. “You okay?”

She shook her head, took a long drink, and blurted out her deepest fear. “What if Phillip convinces a judge to give him custody of Jayden? He can afford the best lawyers.”

As she’d discovered during their divorce. He’d gotten nearly everything he wanted, including the house in Bozeman.

“That won’t happen.” Matt sounded confident. “Now that you have an Order of Protection against Phillip, any judge he tries to petition for custody will see his actions for what they are—harassment.”

Sudden tears of relief stung her eyes and spilled over. Matt brushed the wetness away with his thumb. “Hey, everything’s going to be all right.”

“Promise?” she whispered.

“Promise.” He sealed it with a soft kiss, just the barest brush of his lips against her.

When he tried to pull away, Autumn put down her beer and threw her arms around him, clinging to him.

He held her close, stroking her hair as she deepened the kiss. She lost herself in the warmth and comfort of his arms. The

rest of the world faded away until there was only Matt, chasing away the shadows of dread that hovered over her.

Their kiss quickly turned passionate as Matt's tongue stroked into her mouth, igniting a fire inside them both.

The years melted away as she remembered how it felt to be in his arms, and she couldn't help but feel a wave of relief that he was back in her life again.

Matt's lips moved down to explore the sensitive skin on her neck and shoulders. His breath tickled her skin, and the familiar scent of his aftershave surrounded her like an embrace.

She wanted him with a raw intensity that made her tremble with anticipation. His lips found hers again as he kissed her deeply, his tongue exploring every inch of her mouth as if it was the first time, the last time, and the only time.

When the kiss ended, desire simmered in his gaze. She saw her own longing reflected there, felt it in the rapid beat of her heart and the heat pooling low in her belly.

"Take me to bed," she begged.

Without a word, he took her hand and led her through the house to his bedroom.

A giggle bubbled up inside her, joy and excitement mixing until she felt light and breathless.

He stopped next to his neatly made bed. “You sure about this?” he rasped. “We don’t have to rush into anything.”

She smiled and reached for the buttons of his shirt. “This is the only thing I’m sure about right now.”

They undressed each other, pulling at buttons and hems in between lingering kisses, letting clothes fall haphazardly on his bedroom floor.

At last she was naked in his arms, skin to skin with no fabric to separate them.

He claimed her mouth again. She whimpered when he palmed her breasts, then teased her nipples until they were hard and aching for his touch.

“Look at you,” he murmured reverently, his gaze roaming over her body. “So beautiful.”

Her arousal flared under the intensity of his stare, heat pooling between her legs in throbbing, aching need.

“Matt, please.” She reached for him, craving his touch, his kiss, his everything.

“Let me enjoy this,” he chided. “I’ve been waiting a long time to do this.”

He kissed a path down her neck to her breasts, lavishing attention on each one until she was writhing beneath him.

His lips followed the path of his hands, kissing and licking their way down her body as he explored every inch of her curves.

Her fingers clawed at his short hair as he continued his slow, torturous journey south.

By the time he settled between her thighs, she was desperate with need.

She moaned softly and arched as he gave her folds a long, slow lick. "You taste so damned good," he whispered.

Then he set to work, his tongue expertly tracing circles around her clit, teasing it with licks and nibbles.

His fingers joined in the dance, penetrating and stroking her while his mouth continued to work magic on her clit.

Autumn felt like she was soaring higher and higher with each stroke of Matt's talented tongue.

"Come for me," he ordered in a whisper, then lowered his head and sucked hard on her clit.

She exploded with an intense climax that shook her from head to toe, drowning her in wave after wave of pleasure. When the waves finally subsided into aftershocks, she relaxed against the mattress in blissful exhaustion. She felt like she had truly come home again.

"Wow," she breathed. "You've learned a lot since the last time we were together."

She saw his teeth gleaming in the dim light as he grinned down at her. “And I’ve got more to show you. You’re still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.”

His thick cock rose proudly from between his thighs as he quickly rolled on a condom.

Matt wasted no time in claiming her. He rose to his knees and slid his hands under her knees, spreading her wide. Then he entered her with one powerful thrust.

Autumn gasped as he filled her completely, his rigid length hitting against all the right spots and sending sparks of pleasure through her body.

He moved slowly at first, teasing every inch of her inner walls before picking up the pace, pounding into her with an intensity that left them both breathless.

Autumn could feel another climax winding up as Matt continued to thrust deeply into her. He bent his head to her breasts, kissing and nibbling on them while he pounded her pussy.

Their pants and soft groans mixed in a passionate symphony as they moved together in perfect rhythm.

Autumn’s climax rolled over her, even stronger than her first release. Mindful of Jayden sleeping just down the hall, she bit back her scream of pleasure as almost-unbearable shudders of ecstasy shook her. Matt’s thrusts sped up until he groaned and convulsed.

“Oh, fuck, Autumn,” he groaned, collapsing onto her, a hard, damp weight. “Fuck. That was amazing.”

She couldn't agree more.



Autumn woke slowly, aware of Matt's arm draped over her waist and his breath stirring her hair. Sunlight filtered through the curtains, and she wondered what time it was.

For the first time in longer than she could remember, peace infused her, right down to her bones. She felt utterly relaxed, with contentment that had nothing to do with physical pleasure and everything to do with the man sleeping beside her.

Matt made her feel special. Cherished. All the things she'd once believed about love and forever, before Phillip had systematically destroyed her faith in happy endings.

Being with Matt again felt so right.

Yet doubt still lingered. What if she'd made another mistake last night? She'd been so sure that Phillip was The One. Until he proved her wrong.

Sudden anxiety twisted her stomach into knots. *How can I trust myself to make the right choice?*

She curled up into a fetal position. Matt stirred.

“Morning,” he mumbled, pressing a kiss to the back of her neck.

She tried to push down her inner turmoil and forced herself to straighten. “Morning.”

“You okay?” Of *course*, he’d noticed. He could always read her too well.

“I’m fine.” She rolled over to face him, trailing a finger down his stubbled jaw. “Just thinking too much, as usual.”

He caught her hand, bringing it to his lips. “About what? Talk to me.”

“It’s stupid.” She looked away, heat flooding her cheeks.

“Hey.” He kissed her forehead. “Nothing that worries you is stupid. You can tell me anything, you know that.”

His steadfast gaze felt like he was peering down into the depths of her soul. “I’m scared,” she admitted in a whisper. “Scared this won’t work out. Scared I’ll end up hurt. Or hurt you again.”

“Oh, Autumn.” He gathered her close, wrapping her in the safety of his embrace. “I’m willing to take the chance, if you are. I believe we’re exactly where we’re meant to be.”

“How can you know that?” she challenged, hating the bitterness in her tone. “Things change. People change.”

“Not me. Not when it comes to you.” He stoked her hair.
“Have a little faith, Autumn. Everything will be okay in the end.”

Chapter Thirteen

Date Night

Thursday, August 20

“Would you like to go on a real date with me tomorrow night?” Matt asked.

It had become their thing over the past few days to sit out on the porch and talk—and kiss—every evening after Jayden went to bed.

The kissing usually led to other things, though after Monday night, Autumn always returned to her own bed afterwards.

She and Matt were careful to keep their interactions completely platonic when Jayden was around.

Privately, she’d started thinking of her nighttime activities with Matt as a “friends with benefits” thing.

Not that she’d ever had a “friend with benefits.” Phillip had been her second serious relationship, and she’d married him the summer after her freshman year of college, when she was nineteen. She’d gone through her remaining college years as a married woman. No wild parties or one-night stands for her.

Not that she’d ever been a party girl. “Homebody” was more her speed.

“I—I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” she told Matt. “Can I think about it?”

Matt nodded, his expression understanding but tinged with disappointment. “Sure. I don’t want to pressure you. It’s just that I think we’re really good together. Now that Phillip appears to be behaving himself, maybe it’s time to take the next step.”

He was right. She hadn’t spotted Phillip hanging around town since Matt had served Phillip with the Order of Protection on Monday afternoon. And her ex hadn’t tried to contact her in any other way, either.

Was the nightmare finally over? Had he returned to New Jersey?

Autumn desperately wanted to believe it, but she knew Phillip. When he wanted something, he didn’t give up.

Matt was confident that the Order of Protection would work with Phillip. But she shuddered at the memory of her ex proudly quoting, *When faced with a ‘no’, don’t retreat, recalibrate.*

She was sure he’d find some loophole to exploit and get his revenge.

“While you’re thinking it over,” Matt said, interrupting her mental doom-scrolling with a friendly leer, “how about we go inside and let me convince you to give me a shot?” He rose to his feet and extended his hand to help her up.

“Oh, it’s not you, it’s me,” Autumn responded deadpan. “But I’m sure I’ll enjoy being convinced.”



The next day, Autumn took a lunch break from her work and walked over to The Yummy Cowboy Diner.

Jayden was spending the afternoon at the ranch with his cousins, and Matt was working, so Autumn had the house all to herself.

Normally, she liked peace and quiet while she edited photos and composed short but pithy blurbs for her various clients' social media postings. But today, the silence gave her too much time to think, which resulted in her brain racing through disaster scenarios like hamsters on a wheel.

As soon as she stepped into the cozy diner, the comforting smells of fried chicken and freshly brewed coffee enveloped her.

The Yummy Cowboy Diner had been a town fixture for decades before Autumn was born. All throughout her childhood, it had been the place where the Snowberry family gathered for a hearty breakfast after church on Sundays.

Back then, the diner's decor had been stuck in the early 1970s, with dingy wood paneling, ugly fake-wood tables, and hideous yellow-and-brown floor tiles.

Then Brock had taken over the place after his mother, the diner's longtime half-owner, passed away.

Grandma Abigail, who had owned the other half of the business, had brought in Summer to help turn the failing diner

around. Autumn's sister was a trained executive chef, and she'd made a real name for herself on the San Francisco fine dining scene.

Working together—reluctantly at first—she and Brock had given the diner a major facelift, and reworked the menu to offer elevated comfort food. During this time, Summer and Brock had also become an item, and they now ran the diner as a married couple.

These days, the dining room had pale green walls and vinyl floors that looked like weather-beaten wood planks. The breakfast counter was now quartz-topped, and the ratty old red vinyl booths had given way to high-backed padded banquettes built against the dining room wall with long tables.

Autumn hoisted herself onto a dark-green metal stool at the breakfast counter and greeted the diner's manager, Marlene Wittmeyer. Then she ordered the fried chicken lunch special with a slice of huckleberry pie for dessert.

"Hey, sis. How's it going?" Summer asked a few minutes later.

Autumn turned to see her sister settling onto the stool next to her.

"What's got you looking so worried?" Summer asked. Before Autumn could reply, she said, "No, let me guess. More Phillip shenanigans?"

"No, thank God. Uh, Matt asked me out on an actual date," Autumn replied, toying with her coffee mug. "I want to say yes, but with all this drama going on with Philip and Jayden, I'm not sure it's a good idea. The last thing I need is *another* relationship going south."

“I don’t know,” Summer said, surprising her. “I mean, what happened with you and Philip was awful, but you can’t let it hold you back from something potentially great with Matt.”

Autumn took a sip of coffee. “But what if things don’t work out between us? I don’t want to put Jayden through another failed relationship.” She blew out a breath. “Maybe it’s better if I stay single for a while. A *long* while. Like, until Jayden is eighteen.”

That last part was only half-joking.

“Autumn, you can’t predict the future,” Summer said, her tone compassionate. “Don’t you deserve some happiness? Maybe staying single for a while is a good idea, but until Jayden is old enough to vote?” She scoffed. “C’mon. That’s extreme. Even for *you*.”

That made Autumn smile despite her gloom. “I just wish there was a way to protect Jayden from any more pain. Thanks to Phillip using him to get at me, my little boy is pretty anxious right now. He really looks up to Matt as a role model, and I don’t want to do anything to ruin that.”

“Matt’s always been a stand-up guy, even back when you two were dating in high school,” Summer reminded her. “Watching you guys together, it’s clear he truly cares about you and Jayden.”

“I know. He’s been a good friend and my rock this past week,” Autumn acknowledged. “It’s just hard to trust my judgment right now. I mean, I thought Philip was the most wonderful man alive when we started dating. And look how *that* turned out.” She grimaced. “Argh! I don’t know what to do!”

“Be brave,” Summer said firmly. “Go on that date with Matt. Take it slow. And if things don’t work out, hey, no judgment from any of us.”

Autumn hesitated, considering her sister’s advice.

“All right,” she said finally. She reached for her phone. “I’m going to text Matt right now and tell him we’re on for tonight.”

Decision made, she felt the gray cloud of sadness and gloom finally lifting.

“Good for you!” Summer leaned over and enveloped Autumn in a tight hug. “And I’m sure Mom and Dad won’t mind keeping Jayden for a sleepover. In case you get lucky, right?”

Autumn wasn’t ready to tell her sister that she’d been getting lucky with Matt since Monday. “You never know.”

“That’s the spirit!” Summer gave her a playful wink.

A bell dinged from inside the diner’s kitchen. “Oh, hey, your order’s up. I’ll go get it.” She slid off the stool. “Have fun tonight—and don’t forget to ask Mom and Dad if they’ll keep Jayden until tomorrow.” Then she stopped. “Hey, what’s Matt’s favorite dish? I want to feature it as tonight’s dinner special.”

Autumn chuckled. “Subtle, Summer. Real subtle.”

Her sister spread her hands. “Hey, I do what I can.”



Six hours later, Autumn took a deep breath. Excitement churned in her stomach. She smoothed her hands over her floral skirt and checked her lipstick one last time before she left her bedroom.

It had been so long since she'd been on a romantic date.

Years of marriage to Phillip had drained any sense of romance or fun from their evenings out.

But being with Matt was usually fun, whether they were bantering over breakfast or having heart-to-heart talks on the porch after dark.

When she emerged from her bedroom, he was waiting for her.

To her delight, he held out a Mason jar filled with a bouquet of heirloom pink and red roses from his garden. "These aren't fancy from a florist or anything, but I remember you saying you loved how they smelled."

"Oh, Matt." Touched that he'd remembered her casual remark, she accepted the roses. She bent over the bouquet, breathing in the delicate perfume. "They're beautiful. Thank you."

He ducked his head, rubbing the back of his neck. "You're welcome. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes." She beamed up at him. "Our date awaits!"

He chuckled and offered his arm. “Then let’s not keep it waiting any longer.”

She set the jar with the roses on her chest of drawers, bent to take one last sniff, then came over to take his arm.

Arm in arm, they walked together on the sidewalk, heading for the town square.

As expected, he’d made dinner reservations for them at The Yummy Cowboy Diner.

Autumn had texted her sister a heads-up this afternoon, after Matt had wistfully mentioned he hoped the bison meatloaf with onion gravy and mashed potatoes would be the diner’s Friday Night Special.

Great! Summer had texted back. **We just got a shipment of bison from Dad. Meatloaf it is!**

Maybe she and Matt were moving fast, but being with him felt so right. Like coming home had after her years in Bozeman.

Autumn turned to study his profile. She adored the firm line of his jaw, the little furrow between his brows, and the soft smile that curled his lips when he glanced back at her.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

She smiled. “You.”

A blush crept up his neck. “Oh. Well, I was thinking about how beautiful you look tonight.”

The compliment warmed her. “You’re such a sweet talker,” she teased. “You hoping to get laid tonight or something?”

He squeezed her hand. “You figure a guy like me has a chance with a girl like you?”

“You’d be surprised. I mean, not every girl gets to date Deputy McHunky.”

Matt’s embarrassed groan made her laugh out loud. “Please, don’t ever let Gabe hear you call me that,” he begged. “He’ll never let me live it down.”

When they arrived at the diner, he gallantly opened the door for her.

As she stepped inside, she glimpsed a familiar couple. Donna and Chris Frederickson were sitting at the table next to the diner’s front windows, where they could see everyone passing by.

“Autumn! Matt!” Donna trilled, waving to them. “Well, isn’t this a lovely surprise?”

She rose and came over to hug Autumn. Then she said in a stage whisper, “It’s about time Matt took you out to dinner instead of keeping you all to himself at home!”

“Um,” Autumn stammered. Matt’s hand came to rest against the small of her back in a silent show of support.

He offered Donna a polite smile. “We couldn’t resist the bison meatloaf special.”

“I always knew you two were meant to be,” Donna declared. “I remember when you were high school sweethearts! You just seemed so right for each other!”

Matt chuckled. “I thought so, too.” His tone was wry but affectionate.

Like most of the town, he and Autumn had known Donna their whole lives. She was the biggest in gossip in the county, but she didn’t have a mean bone in her body.

“Well, you know what they say about second chances.” Donna patted his arm. “Now you two go on and enjoy your date. I’ll be waiting for a wedding invitation!” She winked at them and turned to go. Then, as if remembering something, she stopped and added, “And don’t you worry, Autumn-dear. We don’t believe a word of that article. I know everything Philip said in that interview was a lie.”

Autumn was taken aback by Donna’s words. “What interview?” she asked, her stomach clenching in sudden dread.

“Your ex-husband gave an interview to some gossip website,” Donna explained, her voice filled with disdain. “It got picked up by national news because your sister’s show is so popular right now, and it’s currently trending all over the Internet. You were so right to divorce him. He sounds like a miserable excuse for a human being.” She gave Autumn a sympathetic look before walking away to rejoin her husband.

As soon as Donna was out of earshot, Autumn reached into her purse.

Her heart was pounding like a jackrabbit on the run and her fingers were trembling as she fumbled for her phone. “Oh my God,” she muttered. “What did he *do*? What did he say about me?”

“Autumn, don’t look.” Matt placed his hand over hers, preventing her from taking her phone out of her purse. “Don’t let him ruin our night out.”

“But—”

“Whatever that article says, you can’t do anything about it right now. And it’s not as if anyone here is going to believe a thing that man says about you.”

“You’re right.” It took every ounce of her willpower, but she dropped her phone back into her purse. “Why let Phillip ruin our nice dinner together?”

Matt smiled approvingly at her words and led her over to an empty table.

But thanks to Donna’s dire warning, Autumn couldn’t relax and enjoy her dinner or Matt’s company.

I knew he’d find some way to get back at me!

She felt sick with dread and barely touched her meatloaf, and ended up boxing it up to take home.

Not even dessert, a scrumptious bourbon-pecan brownie sundae with a scoop of vanilla ice cream and salted caramel sauce, could overcome the boiling unease that ruined her appetite.

When they arrived back at the house, Matt walked her to the porch and drew her into his arms. The kiss was slow and deep, lighting her up like the emerging stars.

She sighed as he pulled away, glad their date didn't have to end yet. "Thank you for a wonderful time."

"The pleasure was all mine. I just wish Donna hadn't ruined the meal for you." He brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. "Your parents have Jayden until tomorrow?"

She nodded and forced herself to banter in a light tone. "You see, I was hoping to get lucky with you tonight."

"Why, Ms. Snowberry, are you propositioning an officer of the law?" he asked her with mock outrage.

She threw him her most sultry look and lowered her voice suggestively. "Are you going to slap a pair of cuffs on me if I am?"

He looked startled for an instant. Then he gave her a wicked smile. "Don't give me ideas."

After one more deep, delicious kiss, he opened his front door and ushered her inside.

“I’ll just go change into something more comfortable,” she told him as he led her further into the house. “And I want to take off my makeup so I don’t get it all over your pillows.”

In her bedroom, once she’d cleansed her face and changed into her nicest lingerie, curiosity overwhelmed her. She *had* to know what Donna had been talking about.

She pulled her phone out of her purse and searched for Philip’s name online. Her eyes widened as the results popped up.

True to form, Phillip hadn’t *technically* violated the Order of Protection.

No, he’d found something much, *much* worse to do to her.

Chapter Fourteen

Rough Comfort

Autumn trembled with shock and rage as she read the interview.

Oh yes, Phillip had found the perfect revenge for her restraining order. All the venom he'd spewed at her over the past two weeks laced the interview like poison.

He painted her as a hypocrite, a liar, and a negligent mother. He accused her of ignoring Jayden in favor of her social media career while sleeping around with her old boyfriend. And, of course, he accused her of trying to keep her son away from his loving father.

Even worse, he said her depiction of her beloved hometown as a friendly place filled with caring people was nothing but lies. In his eyes, Snowberry Springs was a foul nest of backstabbing locals who bowed to Grandma Abigail's will and gave the Snowberry family special treatment they didn't deserve.

No one escaped his wrath. It was sickening to see him spout nasty lies about Winnie and Nick, Summer and Brock, and even her parents.

Then she made the mistake of reading the comments section beneath the article. Every troll on the Internet appeared to have converged here, and they gleefully trashed her and her family in the most horrible ways.

When she finally put her phone down, she wanted to throw up. And scream. And cry her eyes out.

Belatedly, she remembered Matt was waiting for her in his bedroom.

She peeled off her lacy bra and panties, leaving them discarded on the floor, and padded naked across the hallway.

Tonight, she didn't want a gentle seduction. She needed something stronger to drive every horrible thought out of her mind.

She pushed open his bedroom door with a shaking hand.

Matt had stripped down to his usual sleepwear, a t-shirt and boxers. He registered Autumn's naked form. His gaze lingered on her bare breasts, then he caught sight of her face.

She wasn't sure what he saw there, but it couldn't be good. Not with the way she felt right now.

"What happened?"

"I—I just—I read that interview," she confessed. "It was even worse than I thought!"

"Aw, shit," Matt said, his face twisting in pain. "I *knew* it. That asshole!" He opened his arms to her.

Autumn rushed into his embrace. She clung to him, her face buried in the crook of his neck as she inhaled his comforting scent. It was a mixture of his pine-scented soap, aftershave, and something uniquely him.

His muscular arms wrapped around her, his large hands stroking her bare back.

“I was going to wait until tomorrow morning,” she mumbled against his skin, shivering violently. “Phillip’s lies... all those horrible comments... what am I going to do? How do I stop him?”

“Hey, it’s gonna be okay,” Matt murmured soothingly, pressing a tender kiss to her temple. “We’ll find a way to fix this. I’ve got your back.”

Plastered against him like this, she felt the unmistakable bulge in Matt’s boxers. Her heart raced, her body responding with an intense surge of pure need.

“Matt, I...” she began, her voice trembling. She’d never asked for anything like this before. “I need you to fuck my brains out. Don’t be gentle. Don’t give me time to think about anything. Just make me *feel*.”

She didn’t have to ask him twice.

He surged forward and pushed her against his bedroom wall. The cool plaster against her back did nothing to quell the heat rising within her as his cloth-covered erection ground against her core. He caught her wrists in a bruising grip, pinning them above her head.

The possessive gesture sent a gush of moisture between her thighs. This was miles from his usual gentle exploration of her body. This was a claiming. And she craved more of it.

Then he bent his head and kissed her savagely.

“Keep your hands up,” he commanded, then released her wrists as he nipped and sucked his way down the column of her throat.

She realized he was probably marking her. And she didn't care. Each bite sent a shudder of agonizing pleasure shooting through her.

“So fucking beautiful,” Matt growled, his hands cupping her breasts, pinching her nipples and drawing a needy moan from her lips.

Until this moment, Matt had always been so tender, so patient with her. But tonight, he understood exactly what she needed from him.

Then his mouth descended to her breasts, teeth scraping the sensitive tips before he sucked hard on one nipple, tearing a moan from her throat.

Her hands dropped to his head. He glared up at her. “Hands. Up. Over your head. Or I'll stop.”

Oh, God. She loved being ordered around like this more than she ever thought.

He rewarded her by using his lips and teeth on her other breast. His hands squeezed her hips hard enough to bruise.

She writhed helplessly in his grip, holding her hands high while frantically trying to wrap her legs around his hips and ride the rock-hard ridge of his erection.

She was on fire, her pussy hot and throbbing with a deep ache that needed something big and hard deep inside it to relieve the torment.

But he held her pinned mercilessly against the wall.

“Spread your legs,” he ordered, his foot tapping the inside of her ankles. “Wider. Now.”

She obeyed instantly, a fresh wave of desire flooding her at his commanding tone. He thrust a hand between her thighs, groaning as he drew his fingers through her slick folds.

“You naughty girl. So wet for me already,” he breathed as he sank to his knees before her. “Admit it. You like being manhandled.”

“Only by you.”

“Right answer.” A shocked cry escaped her as he spread her folds and licked boldly up her center.

Then, without warning, Matt plunged two fingers inside her. She cried out at the sudden invasion.

“Hands up,” he reminded her, an instant before his mouth found her clit. He sucked it greedily as his fingers pumped in and out of her, ratcheting her need higher with each thrust.

It seemed like he was trying to drive away her pain and disappointment with every brutal movement of his hand, every teasing flick of his tongue.

She moaned and whimpered as pleasure built inside her like a tidal wave.

She was teetering on the edge, her body screaming for release as Matt's fingers curled within her, grazing that secret spot that always sent her spiraling.

"Now, Autumn," Matt urged, his voice rough and commanding. "I want to feel you come while you're riding my hand."

Her climax hit her like a freight train. She screamed, arching away from the wall. Her inner walls clenched helplessly around his fingers as he stroked her, prolonging her release until she slumped boneless and panting against him.

"Feel better now?"

She nodded, breathless. Aftershocks still sparked through her. He slid his fingers free and brought them to his mouth, licking them clean while she watched, transfixed.

"Delicious," he purred. "My turn now."

He turned her to face the wall, then grabbed her butt and positioned her. She braced her hands against the wall, anticipation coiling in her belly.

She heard the rustle of a condom wrapper. Then he was behind her, one hand on her hip, the other guiding his cock to her entrance.

He impaled her in one smooth stroke, stretching her deliciously around his thick length. She moaned, rocking back to take him deeper.

“Christ, you feel good,” he gritted out. He gave her a moment to adjust, then began to move.

His thrusts came hard and fast, pounding into her sweet spot on every stroke, sending fresh shocks of pleasure rocketing through her.

She lost herself in the sensations, in the slap of his hips against her butt and the drag of his cock inside her.

Autumn had never experienced sex like this before—wild, rough, and completely uninhibited. No one had ever made her feel so so irresistible, like they couldn’t control themselves around her.

Her thoughts of Phillip and his betrayal evaporated at last, replaced by the overwhelming sensations Matt was giving her.

“Matt,” she moaned, struggling to form words through the haze of pleasure. “Please don’t stop... it feels so good.”

She’d never come more than once during sex. But she could feel the familiar tension building deep in the pit of her belly.

Unexpectedly, he bit down on her shoulder with a muffled groan. The sharp sensation pushed her over the edge. She cried out as her second orgasm washed over her like a tidal wave.

His fingers dug into her hips and his rhythm faltered just before he climaxed with shuddering intensity.

They collapsed to the floor together, a tangle of sated limbs on the hardwood. He curled around her, spooning her.

After a long, contented silence, he pressed a kiss to her hair. “You gonna head back to your room now?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to stay here tonight.” She didn’t want to sleep alone.

And with Jayden out of the house until tomorrow, there was no need to pretend that she wasn’t having sex with Matt. Rough, dirty, *noisy* sex.

And just like that, she was ready for another round. Maybe he’d spank her this time.

“I don’t mind at all.” He sat up. “C’mon, let’s get off this floor and climb into bed.”



Autumn woke slowly, relishing the warmth of Matt’s body against hers. His hand splayed across her hip, his thumb stroking lazy circles against her skin.

She sighed, snuggling closer and draping her arm across his chest. She decided this was her new favorite way to wake up.

“Morning, sweetheart.” His voice was rough with sleep, the rumble of it vibrating through her.

“Good morning.” She tilted her head up, meeting his gaze. His hazel eyes were heavy-lidded, his chin and jaw furred with light brown stubble. He looked delectable. Unable to resist, she stretched up for a slow, deep kiss.

Matt met her eagerly, his hand sliding up to cup the back of her head. Heat unfurled inside her as his tongue tangled with hers, and she moaned softly.

When the kiss ended, they were both breathless. Matt’s erection was a hard length against her belly. “Keep kissing me like that and neither of us are gonna make it out of this bed anytime soon.”

She smiled, trailing her fingers down his chest. “I can think of worse threats.”

“Tempting as that is, I have to report to work in an hour.” He caught her hand, bringing it to his lips. “Rain check?”

“I have a better idea.” She wriggled her way down, and kissed the tip of his cock. “This shouldn’t take long.” Then she opened her mouth and took him in.

It was wildly arousing to see Matt come undone as she used her lips and tongue on him. He bucked beneath her as she swirled her tongue around the sensitive head of his cock, then took him as deeply as she could.

It didn’t take long at all before he shuddered with a loud groan and filled her mouth with heat and salt.

“Oh God, that was amazing,” he moaned as she sat up, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. “I’ll make it up to you. When I can move again.”

She laughed and Matt rolled her onto her back, leaning over her with a wicked gleam in his eye. “After Jayden’s in bed tonight, you’re all mine. You’ll have to be real quiet, though.”

Heat sparked low in her belly at the promise in his tone. “I guess we’ll have to test the limits of my self-control. In the interests of science, of course.”

“Of course.” He dipped his head, kissing her deeply.

No matter how many times they kissed, it still felt new. Exciting. And somehow utterly right.

When Matt finally lifted his head, they were both breathless, and he was hard again. “Time to get up before I change my mind and take a sick day.” He pressed a quick kiss to her forehead before sliding out of bed.

Autumn watched appreciatively as he walked naked to the dresser, all lean muscle and tanned skin. She’d never tire of the sight.

“Enjoying the view?” he asked, turning to give her a full-frontal. A clean pair of boxers dangled from his fingers.

“Ten out of ten. Would ride this cowboy again,” she assured him.

Matt grinned at her. “The rating’s mutual, sweetheart.”

She laughed, warmth flooding her at the affection in his gaze. “Charmer.”

“Only for you.” He went to his closet and grabbed a t-shirt and his uniform. “Do you mind if I shower first? And I need some coffee and breakfast before my shift starts.”

“Ooh, so bossy,” Autumn teased. “I’ll put on an apron and run to the kitchen right away.”

She got out of bed and discovered she was sore in lots of interesting places this morning. Looking down, there were some finger-shaped bruises on her hips. She touched her throat, skimming her fingertips over several tender patches.

Oops. Time to wear that silk scarf Grandma Abigail gave me for Christmas.

She decided she liked Bossy Matt. And she definitely wanted him to take her to bed—or up against the wall—again sometime soon.

But for now, Matt was right. It was time to get up and face the new day.

And figure out how to deal with this latest Phillip-induced crisis.

Chapter Fifteen

Firestorm

Saturday, August 22

Bracing herself to deal with the fallout from Phillip's interview, Autumn went to sit on the living room sofa while Matt cleared the breakfast dishes. She took a moment to gather her courage, then pulled out her phone and re-read the article posted on RedCarpetRumorMill.com.

She didn't want to see all of Phillip's hurtful lies again, but she knew she needed to publish a rebuttal ASAP if she had any hope of damage control.

The dishwasher loaded, Matt came to join her on the sofa.

"Listen to this," she said, her voice trembling with rage. "The author claims he tried to contact me for my side of the story. But I never saw any messages from him! And I checked my spam folders for all my accounts."

The thought that she might have missed an opportunity to clear her name sickened her.

She reached the bottom of the article, where thousands of comments piled up like vultures on roadkill.

"Autumn, whatever you, don't read the comments," Matt warned, but it was too late.

Fire the b*tch already! That cheating wh*re doesn't deserve a job or a child.

Wow! Momzilla of the year! Her poor husband. He had to put up with sooo much!

Someone should call CPS on that woman and rescue her little boy!!! Phillip totally deserves to get full custody.

The tears she'd been holding back finally escaped. They stung her cheeks and dripped off her chin.

"Aw, dammit," Matt groaned. "I *warned* you, didn't I?" He grabbed a box of Kleenex from the coffee table and handed it to her.

"I can't believe he's using his own son like this!" she sobbed, unable to stop the torrent of hurt that threatened to drown her. "After I've worked so hard to keep Jayden out of the media spotlight." She wiped at her eyes and blew her nose. "It's not just that he's trying to destroy *me*. He's using our son to do it!"

Thank goodness Jayden was still at the ranch, where he'd spent the night with his grandparents while Autumn and Matt went on their date.

"Because he's an asshole," Matt said flatly. "You know it, I know it, and Judge Arran knows it, too."

"Look at all these comments." Autumn jabbed at the screen. "Over six thousand already. And almost everyone's on Phillip's side. They're calling me a horrible mother and saying that Jayden would be better off with Phillip."

“It doesn’t matter what a bunch of strangers think.” How could Matt sound so calm when her life was imploding?

She voiced her greatest fear. “Why wouldn’t a family law judge think the same if Phillip challenges the custody order?”

She felt herself spiraling into panic. Her chest tightened, and she couldn’t draw a full breath.

“Autumn,” Matt said, putting his hand on her shoulder. “Believe me, Phillip will never get custody of Jayden now. He may be following the letter of your Order of Protection, but not the spirit. Any judge will view this interview as harassment and treat it accordingly.” He snorted. “I’ve met guys like him before. He’s ‘That Fucking Guy.’ The one who just knows he’s smarter than everyone else, and that the rules are for rubes too dumb to figure out a way around them. Judges meet his kind all the time. And they really don’t like ‘That Fucking Guy’.”

“I hope you’re right.” Autumn badly wanted to believe him.

But her gut churned with acid doubt.

Her phone chimed with the notification sounds for her Snowberry Springs Tourism Board and *Reviving Snowberry Springs* accounts.

What she saw there confirmed her fears. It wasn’t just her personal social media inboxes that were blowing up. All her clients’ accounts were being bombarded by hate mail.

Even The Yummy Cowboy Diner was suddenly being hit with a flood of one-star reviews on Yelp.

What am I going to do about this? A fresh flood of panic threatened to swamp her. How do I protect Summer and Winnie from all this? Are the trolls going to go after Mom and Dad's Airbnb business next?

Her parents depended on the money that the ranch's guest cottages brought in.

Her phone buzzed again. She looked down and winced at the preview of yet another hateful message.

Matt grabbed the phone from her. "I don't want you reading any more of this trash. Let me handle it."

"But—" she protested. These were her social media accounts and clients. *Her* responsibility.

"Please, Autumn." He kept a tight hold on her phone when she tried to take it back. "Let me do this for you."

She sagged against the back of the sofa in relief, too wrung out to argue. "You're the best. And I owe you big time."

He raised one brow and shot her a sideways glance. "What are friends for?"

She touched one of the sore spots on her neck and wondered if they'd moved beyond friendship. Waking up next to him this morning had felt so right. And now he was doing his best to buffer her from the incoming flood of nastiness.

He's a keeper, she thought fondly as she watched him scroll through the flood of hundreds of email and text messages, deleting them.

His jaw tightened as he paused occasionally to read something. She could only imagine what kind of vitriol had caught his eye.

“Jeez,” he muttered, rapidly tapping Delete. “The 101st Chairborne Division of the Internet Keyboard Warriors really came out in force for this.”

Then he stopped, frowning. “Hey, someone named Karla emailed you. She wants you to call her,” he said. “Her email address is karlaj@revivingsnowberrysprings.com.”

Crap. Oh, crap. Autumn groaned silently and closed her eyes in despair.

The show's crew had probably heard all about this debacle by now. And Karla would want to fire the person responsible for the firestorm of controversy.

She shook her head when Matt offered her the phone. “Just delete it. I can't—I mean, I know what she wants to talk to me about. I'll get in touch with her later.” *Maybe in a decade.*

Matt hesitated. “Are you sure? It might be important.”

“I'm sure. She just wants to let me know she can't work with me anymore.” It was hard to force the words out around the lump in her throat.

Matt deleted the email, then turned to her. “I’m sorry.” He drew her into his arms. “It’s not your fault he’s doing this to you.”

“I know,” she replied, because he expected her to. *Does it even matter who’s at fault?*

The result was the same: her dream job, working for Winnie’s show, gone. Her town, in a harsh spotlight of negative publicity. Her sisters, caught in the fallout.

Overnight, Phillip’s cruelty and spite had destroyed everything Autumn had worked for these past nine months.

Her phone started ringing with her “Family” ringtone, the cheerful melody at odds with her bleak mood. She tensed when she saw “Grandma Abigail” on the caller ID.

Of course. Her grandmother was the driving force behind Snowberry Springs’ recent rebirth. She kept tabs on everything happening in town and online. She was probably upset at the current blast of terrible publicity.

Bracing herself, Autumn took her phone from Matt and answered it.

Grandma Abigail’s warm, familiar voice came through the line. “Autumn, dear. How are you doing?”

“Not great,” Autumn confessed. “You’ve heard about the interview Phillip gave to RedCarpetRumorMill.com?”

“Yes. And I don’t believe a word of that nasty article,” Grandma Abigail said firmly. “Your ex-husband is a snake and always has been.”

Autumn’s eyes welled with tears at the fierce protectiveness in her grandmother’s tone. “Oh, Grandma. My life is falling apart. I just want to run away and hide for a while.”

“Nonsense. You’re not a coward, Autumn. And you’ve got your family standing behind you. *We* know the truth.”

Autumn drew a shaky breath, clinging to her grandmother’s certainty. “You honestly don’t believe what he said? About me being a terrible mother, and sleeping with Matt before the divorce?”

“Not for one second,” Grandma Abigail interrupted. “And neither does anyone else who knows you. Don’t you worry about that stupid interview. No one is going to remember anything about it in six months.”

A watery chuckle escaped Autumn, some of the heaviness in her chest easing. “I love you, Grandma.”

“I love you too, Autumn. Now you go on and keep doing a great job for our town and your sister’s show.”

After the call ended, Autumn wiped her eyes. Matt smiled down at her, his eyes warm with affection. “See? It’s gonna be okay.”

Autumn let out a long breath.

She knew that the battle wasn't over yet—not by a long shot. But at least she hadn't disappointed Grandma Abigail.



Tuesday, August 25 (Three days later)

“Autumn?” Matt’s voice came from the hallway outside her bedroom, concern lacing his words. “You okay in there?”

“Fine. Just struggling with wardrobe choices,” she lied.

She stared at the closed bedroom door, her stomach twisting into knots. She knew she couldn't hide in here forever.

I have to go to work. It's the Miss Huckleberry Queen parade today. Grandma's counting on me to do my job.

But she couldn't make herself move.

Yesterday had been beyond awful. A barrage of reporters had ambushed her at the Snowberry Springs Tourism Information Office. They hadn't been interested in her side of the story. All they'd wanted to do was goad her for soundbites they could use to make her look even worse online.

Thank goodness she had a lot of experience dealing with media outlets. Even so, answering even the most maddening questions and wildest accusations with a calm “no comment” had been one of the hardest things she'd ever done.

And she really needed the Tourism Board job to pay the rent, especially since she'd probably lost her biggest client, *Reviving Snowberry Springs*.

Over the past few days, Karla had left her several more messages, but Autumn hadn't had the courage to read the texts or listen to her voicemail. She hadn't been to the Craftsman, either.

She already knew what Karla wanted to say to her. Autumn had become an overnight liability to the show, which depended on its wholesome image to attract viewers and followers. Her services were no longer needed, nothing personal.

"I brought you coffee," Matt announced. "Come out, if you're decent."

"Thanks!"

What would I do without him? He had truly been her pillar of strength since this nightmare started.

But that thought triggered a fresh wave of guilt. *Is leaning on him like this fair? Or am I only dragging him into the mess my life has become?*

With a sigh, she forced herself to shuffle to the mirrored closet door. Her reflection stared back at her, pale and drawn, shadows bruising the skin under her eyes after a sleepless night.

Even Matt's tender lovemaking these last three nights hadn't been able to relieve the shame and stress of her ordeal.

“Come on, Autumn,” she muttered, forcing herself to reach for a blouse in her closet. “Time to go to work. You’ve got a job to do.”

The thought of stepping outside the house filled her with dread, like a thousand tiny needles prickling her skin.

Her overnight “Do Not Disturb” setting expired, and her phone began buzzing nonstop.

She couldn’t help herself. She picked it up, unlocked it, and scrolled through her notifications.

What she saw confirmed that even now, hundreds of hateful messages were still pouring into her inboxes like a foul, unstoppable torrent from a sewer.

Grimacing, she changed into a simple blouse and jeans, trying to ignore the ache in her chest. She needed to pull herself together. For Jayden, if nothing else.

Her phone buzzed again on the nightstand, another hateful message lighting up the screen. Hands shaking, she silenced the notifications and dropped the phone into her bag.

She took a deep breath and opened the door. Matt was waiting in the hall, concern etching lines into his forehead. He was in uniform, which meant he was headed to work.

“You okay?” he asked, handing her a steaming mug of coffee.

She took a big swig of her coffee before answering and found that he had fixed it exactly the way she liked.

“No,” she confessed. “I really don’t want to go to work today. But I have to.” She managed a watery smile. “I’ve got to pay my rent, right? I’m really sorry I didn’t make breakfast this morning.”

“You know I don’t care about the rent or breakfast.” He stepped close and pulled her into a hug. She relaxed against him, breathing in the woodsy scent of his aftershave. “Now, come into the kitchen. You need to eat something before you fall over.”

She’d skipped dinner last night, though she’d made Instant Pot chicken and dumplings for Matt and Jayden.

She still wasn’t hungry, but she followed him down the hallway. If nothing else, she needed to make sure Jayden had breakfast.

Seated at the table, Autumn forced herself to choke down a few bites of toast, and doggedly drank a mug of coffee, knowing she’d need all the strength she could get to deal with today. The smell of the scrambled eggs that Matt had cooked nauseated her.

“What was wrong, Mommy?” Jayden asked her with a distressed expression.

Crap. She didn’t want to upset her son. She’d been able to fake her usual cheerfulness yesterday and the day before. But she didn’t have the strength to put on a smiling face this morning.

“Some people on the Internet are being very mean to me right now,” Autumn explained. “They hurt my feelings, so I’m feeling a little sad today.”

“Don’t worry, though. I’m working with your mom to fix the problem,” Matt assured Jayden. “I’ll stop the bullies and make your mom happy again.”

Her son nodded solemnly. “My teacher said that bullying is bad. I’m sorry you’re facing a bunch of online bullies, Mommy.” He frowned. “And when they’re online, you can’t make them stop by beating them up.”

“True,” Matt said. “But you shouldn’t be beating people up, in any case.”

“I want to!” Jayden persisted. “They’re bad people! Batman beats up bad guys.”

“I’ll protect your Mom,” Matt promised. “Just like Batman. Okay?”

Autumn shot him a grateful smile.

“Okay.” Jayden spooned up the last of his cereal and looked at Autumn. “May I be excused? I have to go to the bathroom.”

She nodded, and Jayden left the kitchen.

“We should get going soon,” she said, pushing her plate away. “I need to drop Jayden off at the ranch, and then I’m heading downtown to take photos of the Miss Huckleberry Parade.”

“I’ll be working security at the parade,” Matt reminded her. “If you need anything, I’ll be there.”

“I wish you’d been at the tourism info office yesterday,” she blurted.

He winced, and she immediately felt guilty.

It wasn’t *his* fault that a bunch of out-of-town paparazzi had shown up to get a rise out of her.

“Yeah, well, you call me if anything like that happens today,” he said in a stern voice.

Autumn nodded. She couldn’t rely on Matt to hold her hand through every difficult moment. But it was nice to know he cared. “Okay. Now, wish me luck.”

“You don’t need luck. You’ve got this.”

Matt has more confidence in me than I do, Autumn thought.

Chapter Sixteen

An Irresistible Offer

“Do you think Uncle Spring will let me feed the goats today?” Jayden asked, bouncing in his seat with excitement as Autumn drove through the gates of the Snowberry Springs Ranch.

“I don’t know. You should ask him,” Autumn replied. She looked around, but didn’t spot any reporters hiding in the bushes. *Thank goodness.*

But when she parked outside her parents’ house, she spotted Karla standing next to Mom on the porch, both of them holding coffee cups.

Busted. Her heart sank.

But Karla didn’t look angry or grim. In fact, she and Mom appeared to be having a friendly chat. And both of them looked glad to see Autumn.

Autumn unclenched her hands from the steering wheel and stepped out of the car.

Hand in hand with Jayden, she climbed the porch steps to face her doom.

“Hi, Mom!” She kissed her mother’s cheek, then turned to Karla.

“Karla, I’m so sorry I haven’t returned your calls or messages. It’s been a rough few days.”

“Don’t I know it?” Karla replied with a sympathetic expression. “I totally understand that you needed a couple of days off, but I’m really hoping that you’re ready to come back to the set this afternoon.”

Autumn blinked in disbelief. “Wait—you’re not firing me?”

Karla’s eyes widened. “Of course not! Why on earth would you think that?”

“Because of what Phillip—” Autumn began.

“Oh, please!” Karla exclaimed. “Why would we believe the guy you took a restraining order against? He’s such a di—” Her gaze flicked to Jayden, who stood next to Autumn. “Uh, a *dork*.”

Autumn just stared at her. She felt gobsmacked by the news that her biggest client still wanted her services.

“And if you’re worried about being hassled by those so-called reporters, we’ve got extra security guys on-set,” Karla assured her.

“I thought—well, it seemed natural that the show wouldn’t want this kind of controversy,” Autumn stammered.

“Nonsense,” Mom said crisply. “Why should Karla punish you for a bunch of lies Phillip is spreading?” She turned to Jayden. “Sweetie, Daisy escaped from the goat pen again this morning. You want to go help your uncle and cousins find her?”

“Sure!” Jayden gave his grandmother a hug, then turned to Autumn. “Bye, Mom!”

He dashed off the porch and headed around the house towards the barns and corrals at a run.

At least all of this awfulness isn't affecting him too badly, Autumn thought with deep relief.

“Priscilla told me you're off to the Huckleberry Queen Parade at ten,” Karla said. “Could you stop by the Craftsman afterwards? We'll be filming Nick's reveal of the restored fireplace. It's the highlight of this episode and we'd like to you tease it on RSS's Instagram feed and Facebook pages.”

“Of course,” Autumn replied automatically.

Inside, she was reeling with the unexpected good news.

“And then I have something important to discuss with you,” Karla continued. “Please stop by my trailer once Nick's done with his fireplace reveal.”



To Autumn's relief, the crowning ceremony for this year's Park County Huckleberry Queen, followed by a parade down Main Street, passed without incident.

It was kind of a shame that the paparazzi who'd harassed Autumn earlier hadn't stuck around long enough for the parade. The event deserved some extra publicity.

After the parade wrapped up, she packed up her camera bag and headed over to the Craftsman. As usual, subcontractors' pickup trucks and vans lined the street, along with the production company's makeup and office trailers.

Autumn put on her hard hat and went inside. Jake Lee greeted her with no sign that he'd heard about the interview fiasco. Though of course he did.

She began taking her teaser shots. Nick had done a beautiful restoration job on the fireplace surround's antique tiles. No trace remained of the plaster that had covered them for decades.

She was finishing up when Winnie came up behind her. "This is really shaping up to be my dream house, isn't it?"

Autumn lowered her camera. "It sure is. I can't wait to see what it'll look like with finishes and furniture."

"I can't believe that a year ago, I was working on another so-called 'dream house' and hating everything about it. This is like a dream come true." Winnie studied her and added with her usual bluntness: "You look terrible."

"Thanks for noticing. Didn't get much sleep last night." Autumn shrugged.

"No one in Snowberry Springs believes anything Phillip said in that stupid interview. You know that, right?"

"So people keep telling me." Autumn sighed. "It's hard because this is so damned personal, Winnie. It's much easier

when I'm trying to manage someone *else's* social media meltdown."

"Like my wedding from hell?" Winnie asked with a crooked smile. "I know exactly what you're going through right now."

She probably did. Winnie's ex-fiancé had put her through the social media wringer, too, trying to justify his unjustifiable behavior. In the aftermath, Autumn had helped her sister as much as she could, but the public humiliation and heartbreak had devastated Winnie.

"You remember the Wicked Witch of the West's flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*?" Autumn asked.

"Those monkeys scared the heck out of me when we were kids," Winnie admitted. "I hated that movie until I saw it again as an adult."

"Right now, I feel like every troll on the Internet is flying at me."

Winnie hugged her. "You once told me, 'it gets better.' That was right after Geoff jilted me at the altar. On TV. And you know what, sis? You were absolutely right. It's less than a year later, and things are going better than I could've ever dreamed."

"And I'm so happy for you. Nick's a great guy, and you deserve every ounce of your success," Autumn said with genuine feeling.

"Well, I'm sure that the same thing will happen to you." Winnie sounded impossibly confident. "I know things are

horrible right now, but just keep your chin up and carry on. By this time next year, no one will remember or care about anything Phillip has to say.”

“Amen to that,” Autumn said. “I mean, Karla didn’t fire me after the poop hit the fan. That’s a start, right?”

“Speaking of Karla,” Winnie said, “She told me she really needs to talk to you. She’s in her office right now, if you want to go see her.”



When Autumn entered Karla Jones’ trailer a few minutes later, she found the producer sitting behind a desk piled high with blueprints, flooring and tile samples, and paint chips.

“Autumn! Thanks for stopping by,” Karla greeted her with a warm smile. “Have a seat.”

Reviving Snowberry Springs’ producer was an energetic Black woman, with a cascade of dark curls framing her beautiful oval face and intense, warm brown eyes. She’d worked with Winnie for years, starting with *Restoring Seattle*.

Wondering what this was all about, Autumn lowered herself warily into a guest chair. “I came as soon as I could.”

“First of all, I wanted to tell you I’m so glad you’re working with us,” Karla said. “You’ve done such a great job for us, publicizing our first two seasons. I’ve been talking you up to my bosses at The Renovation Channel. And let me tell you, they’re impressed by how many followers the show’s feeds

have, not to mention Winnie and Nick's social media accounts."

"Thank you, Karla," Autumn replied, touched by her support. "That means a lot to me."

"Well, it's all true," Karla said. "Now, I have some exciting news for you. My big boss is Lisa Maiffret, the General Manager of U.S. Programming and Development at The Renovation Channel. And she's so impressed with your work on this show that she wants to offer you the position as The Renovation Channel's Director of Publicity and Social Media at HomeRenoTV's headquarters in Seattle."

Then Karla quoted a salary figure that made Autumn's throat go dry. And the benefits package sounded out-of-this-world.

"Wow," Autumn breathed, taking in the weight of Karla's unexpected offer. "That sounds like an incredible opportunity. Thank you so much for thinking of me!"

It was a dream job on steroids. And it had landed in her lap in the same week when she felt she'd hit rock-bottom. She hated to look a gift horse in the mouth, but she had to know. "Is the position remote?"

Karla shook her head. "I'm afraid not. Lisa was pretty clear she expects lots of face time with her team. You'd have to relocate." She added, "Seattle's a great city. You'd love it there."

Just this morning, Autumn had desperately wanted to run away from Snowberry Springs. But now, the thought of moving away from her hometown again felt wrong.

Did she really want to leave her family and the life she'd built here?

Do I want to leave Matt? Maybe they were just friends with benefits, but she couldn't help feeling they'd developed a meaningful connection over the past two weeks.

Okay, if she was being honest with herself, she'd fallen hard for him. *Again.*

"Autumn," Karla said, pulling her attention back to the conversation. "I know this is a big decision. But Lisa needs an answer by the end of the week. If you don't want the job, we'll offer it to someone else."

Autumn swallowed, her throat tight with emotion. Moving to Seattle meant leaving behind the family and community that had supported her through her darkest moments. Yet, this was an opportunity that only came along once in a lifetime.

If she took the job, she'd never have to worry about money again. And if Phillip took her back to court, she could afford to hire the best family law attorney in the state.

She could fund Jayden's college education and give him the kinds of choices her parents couldn't afford for her.

"Can I talk to my family about it first?" Autumn asked.

"Of course," Karla replied. "It's a big decision. I totally understand. Just remember, we need an answer by Friday at the latest."



“So, Jayden, did you and Uncle Spring find Daisy today?” Autumn asked over dinner.

She seemed to be in much better spirits tonight, Matt thought as he served himself a slice of pot roast and root vegetables.

At least she was finally eating. He’d been seriously worried about her for the past few days.

All that hate mail had really gotten to her. Ever since Phillip’s tell-all interview, people had been saying such cruel things. He wished he could track down every one of those commenters and give them a piece of his mind.

This morning, he’d told Jayden that beating people up wasn’t right.

Nevertheless, Matt itched to punch Phillip in the face after what he’d done to Autumn and Jayden. The asshole in her ex extended all the way to his core.

Jayden nodded, grinning. “She was over at Mr. and Mrs. Parker’s farm!”

“What?” Autumn asked with exaggerated surprise. “No way!”

“Matt’s the one who actually found her,” Jayden said. He looked at Matt. “Tell Mom what happened!”

“So get this,” Matt began. “I’m on patrol when I get a call from Lily. She’s freaking out, telling me there’s a goat destroying the house, and it looks like one of Bob Snowberry’s beasts. I drive over to my parents’ place, and sure enough, there’s Daisy, happy as can be, munching away on the wallpaper in my parents’ living room.”

“Oh, no!” Autumn exclaimed in mock horror. It was nice to see her come to life again.

“Oh, yeah. That darn goat had already stripped half the wall. I swear she gave me a little head bob, like ‘Oh hey, just making some renovations here’.” He shook his head wryly. “I mean, it’s some seriously ugly 1970s wallpaper, but Mom is still flipping out about it.”

Autumn actually chuckled. “Maybe Winnie and Nick should hire Daisy for the next season of their show, and feature her on the demolition segments.” She paused. “I hope you got photos. Will you let me post them on the ranch’s Instagram feed? Our followers adore Daisy’s antics.”

“I think Lily beat you to it. She’s already posted the pictures on the Parker Farms site. They’re tagged **#GoatCurryCandidate**,” Matt said. “I’m sure she’d send you the images, if you ask.” “Yeah, that would be great. I’ll text her after dinner,” Autumn said.

“So, how was your day?” Matt asked, and braced himself for more bad news.

To his relief, she smiled. “It was actually okay. A bunch of people came up to me during the parade and told me they didn’t believe a word of Phillip’s story. Oh, and Karla didn’t fire me after all, so I went over to Winnie and Nick’s place

after the parade to do the usual stuff, and things there were... weirdly normal.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Matt told her. “Maybe we’re through the worst of it.”

He sure hoped so. He hated seeing her in pain, and the last few days had been torturous for both of them. “Just out of curiosity, why was Karla trying to get hold of you? She must’ve sent you, what, ten texts? Twelve?”

“Oh, that.” Autumn suddenly looked uncomfortable again. “It’s uh, good and bad news.”

“Tell me the good news first,” Matt suggested.

“She made me the most amazing job offer today.”

Matt raised his eyebrows. That was unexpected.

“That’s great!” he said. “What kind of job?”

“Director of Publicity and Social Media for all the shows on HomeRenoTV.”

“No kidding? That’s perfect for you!” Matt exclaimed, genuinely happy for her. She deserved some good news after all the nasty shit this week. “So, what’s the bad news?”

“The job is at their headquarters in Seattle. If I accept the job, I’d have to relocate.”

He froze, his stomach dropping. *Seattle?* That was over seven hundred miles away. “And you’re thinking about accepting the offer?”

Of course she’s thinking about it! he told himself angrily. A job like this was too good to pass up.

She nodded.

Dammit. His heart plummeted like a stone tossed into a lake. The prospect of losing her, just when they’d reconnected, made him feel like she’d just pulled the rug out from under him.

“Moving to Seattle is a big change,” he pointed out. “Have you really thought this through?”

“Of course I have!” She glanced at Jayden, who was listening to them, wide-eyed. “I haven’t stopped thinking about it since my meeting with Karla!”

“Jayden just started at a new school here. And your whole family is in Snowberry Springs. You’d be completely on your own in a big city full of strangers.” He tried to keep the emotion out of his voice. Tried to hide how much the idea of her leaving gutted him.

“I know,” she said. “But after everything that’s happened, maybe it would be better if I made a fresh start somewhere else.”

Matt’s heart raced as he tried to process Autumn’s words. He felt a mix of shock, hurt, and anger boiling within him. He had

thought their relationship was on solid ground, but now it seemed like everything was slipping away.

Worst of all, he hadn't seen this coming. Hadn't thought that Autumn would want to leave him... *again*.

"I didn't expect you wanted to move away to another state," Matt said, trying to mask the pain in his voice. "I thought... well, I thought things were going well between us."

She looked down at her hands, her fingers nervously fidgeting with her napkin. "Matt, this doesn't have anything to do with you. You've been amazing. A real friend. It's just... maybe being here isn't what's best for me and Jayden right now."

Her words stung, and Matt couldn't help but feel a stab of betrayal. He clenched his jaw, holding back the frustration that threatened to surface.

"Well," he said, taking a deep breath, "if you want to run away to Seattle, I can't stop you."

She looked up at him, her blue eyes sparking with anger. He realized he hadn't purged his emotions from his tone.

He added, "But I hope you'll consider your options. We all care about you here."

"I know, Matt, and I appreciate everything you've done for me. More than you can imagine. But... I'm just so tired. I need to figure things out, and maybe a change of scenery will help."

“All right,” Matt snapped, feeling the weight of her decision settling on his chest. “If that’s what you need to do, I won’t stand in your way.”

“Thank you for understanding,” she murmured, her fingers fidgeting with her napkin. “I should probably get some sleep. I’m exhausted, and I have an early start tomorrow.” She looked at Jayden. “Are you ready to say goodnight to Matt?”

The boy looked as shell-shocked as Matt felt. “Goodnight,” he mumbled.

As he left to follow his mother down the hall, Matt heard him say, “But I don’t *want* to leave here!”

Me, too, kid. Matt watched her retreating figure, his heart heavy with the realization that he might lose her for good.

“Fuck,” he whispered into the empty dining room.

In his mind, he spoke the words he’d desperately want to say to her: *Stay, Autumn. Stay here with me. Please don’t go.*

But who was he to ask her to sacrifice the job opportunity of a lifetime?

He loved her. Hell, he’d never stopped loving her. There had never been room for any other woman in his heart.

And because he loved her, he had to let her go follow her dream.

It sucked, though.

Chapter Seventeen

Fight Fire with Fire

Wednesday, August 26

The next morning, Matt sat alone in his quiet living room. The house felt empty, though Autumn hadn't left Snowberry Springs yet.

Autumn had spent last night in her own room, and Matt had missed having her in his bed. Sex with her was fantastic, but he loved the afterwards part, too, when she cuddled with him and they talked and kissed and fooled around a little more.

She'd left for work just after dawn. The show was planning to film the arrival and installation of an antique weathervane on the roof of Nick and Winnie's Craftsman house, and Autumn had to be there to take what she called "teasers" for the event on an upcoming episode. She'd taken a sleepy Jayden with her, planning to drop him off with her parents at the Snowberry Springs Ranch before she continued on to her next task.

With a sigh, Matt opened his laptop. As he scrolled through the morning national news, an article in the Entertainment section caught his eye.

More lies from Autumn's ex-husband, Matt thought in disgust as he read Phillip's complaints about being a loving husband who only wanted his family back.

"Loving husband, my ass," Matt muttered under his breath. He knew the truth now—Phillip had emotionally abused Autumn for years, crushing her spirit bit by bit.

And now he thought he could trash her reputation with his bald-faced lies. *Over my dead body.*

It was time to fight back. But how?

There had to be *something* Matt could do to help her. How could he prove to the world that Phillip was the one who was the liar and hypocrite, and Autumn his innocent victim?

He started searching online, hoping to find clues that would lead him to Phillip's mistress.

Everyone in town knew that Autumn had divorced her husband when she found out about his baby with his so-called fiancée in New Jersey. But as far as he knew, she'd never discussed the details with anyone.

His search for Phillip Garthe's information brought up some unexpected results.

"Well, would you look at that?" he murmured. Warmth spread through him as he read comment after comment on various gossip sites supporting Autumn.

Her sisters and friends had taken to the Internet like a pack of loyal wolves, defending her fiercely and refuting Phillip's claims. "Seems like Snowberry Springs won't let you get away with your garbage lies, Garthe."

His heart swelled with pride. This was a town that looked out for its own, and they were rallying around Autumn in her time of need.

A knock on the door startled him.

He went to answer it.

Standing on his porch was his sister, Lily. She'd twisted her long brown hair into a messy bun and she wore an old Snowberry Springs High t-shirt over her jeans.

"Hey Lily, what's up?" Matt asked.

"I was in the neighborhood and needed coffee." Lily breezed past him into the house and made a beeline for his kitchen. "I heard Autumn's leaving town again. What are you gonna do about it?"

It never stopped surprising him how quickly news spread in their town.

"What can I do?" he asked bitterly, tailing his sister. "She got a great job offer in Seattle. I don't want her to miss out on a bright future."

"Uh-huh." Lily rummaged in his cupboard for his largest mug and filled it to the brim. "That's very noble of you." There was no mistaking the sarcasm in her tone.

She carried her coffee into his living room. "I gotta tell you, I'm not looking forward to watching you mope around with a broken heart, just like the last time she left."

Damn, Lily wasn't pulling any punches today. He leaned against the living room doorway, waiting for her to get to the

point.

His sister took a long sip from her mug, then asked, “Well, aren’t you going to do something about it, Matt?”

“Sure,” he agreed. “Right now, I’m trying to help her. You heard about all those lies her ex-husband told that celebrity website?”

“Of course. Everyone has,” Lily said, falling onto his sofa and propping her sandaled feet up on the coffee table. “With all the hullabaloo, color me surprised that no one’s contacted Theresa Botticelli yet for her side of the story.”

“Theresa?” Matt asked, his interest piqued. “Is that the name of Phillip’s mistress? The one he had the secret family with?”

“Yup.” Lily looked at him. “I heard all about it when I was working with Summer on The Yummy Cowboy Diner’s website last winter.” She shook her head. “I always thought Autumn’s husband was a stuck-up creep, but he turned out even worse than I expected.”

“Theresa Botticelli. In New Jersey,” Matt mused. “You wouldn’t happen to know what city she lives in, would you?”

“Princeton. That’s where the pharmaceutical company Phillip works for has its headquarters.” Lily grinned up at him. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Wasn’t it obvious?

“I’m thinking you were right,” he told his sister, who preened visibly. “*Someone*—that would be *me*—is going to call Ms. Botticelli to get her side of the story. You just saved me hours of research trying to figure out who she is and where she lives.”

“Good for you!” Lily said, her green eyes lighting up eagerly. “If Theresa goes public, it’ll totally destroy Phillip’s story. And I bet that same website that published his interview will be interested in interviewing Theresa, too. Those celebrity gossip sites are all about attracting eyeballs, and I’m sure she has a few bombshells to drop.”

Matt nodded. “Yup. Looks like I have a call to make.”

Lily hopped to her feet and touched his arm. “But Matt, is getting revenge on Phillip really enough? Or are you just distracting yourself from what you *really* want?”

Matt gritted his teeth. Sometimes he hated that his little sister could read him like a book.

“Look, everyone knows you’re still in love with Autumn,” Lily pointed out. “Everyone except Autumn, I’m guessing.”

Matt remained silent.

“Thought so,” his sister said triumphantly. “You haven’t told her!” She waited a beat, and when Matt refused to confirm or deny, she added, “Look, if you don’t fight for her this time, you’re gonna lose her forever.”

Matt ran a hand through his hair. “I know.”

“So, what’s stopping you? You know we all like her. And she’s good for you.”

Matt sighed. “I just don’t know if she feels the same way about me. But you’re right, I have to try.”

Lily smiled. “Wow, you admitted I was right twice in the same conversation! That has to be some kind of world record.”

Matt groaned. “Drink your coffee and get out of here,” he ordered. “I’ve got work to do.”

○○○○○○

To his frustration, Lily lingered, trying to pry out details of his relationship with Autumn.

He stubbornly stuck to the official story: that he and Autumn were house-mates and friends, and that they’d been faking a relationship, hoping to get Phillip to stop trying to win Autumn back.

When he realized Lily had no intentions of leaving before he talked to Theresa, Matt surrendered.

He did an online search and quickly found Theresa Botticelli’s address and phone number. They matched the information he’d gleaned about her, so he picked up the phone and called.

“Hello, Ms. Botticelli?” he asked when a woman answered the phone.

“Yeah, that’s me.” Theresa sounded wary. He heard a baby crying in the background. “Look, whatever you’re selling, I ain’t buying.”

“I’m not selling anything,” Matt assured her. “My name is Matt Parker, and I’m a deputy sheriff in Snowberry Springs, Montana. I was wondering if you knew a man named Phillip Garthe.”

“I sure do,” Theresa answered, her tone bitter. “He’s a two-timing, lying snake. Whaddy wanna know about him?”

Matt talked to Theresa for a half hour. She had a lot to say about Phillip, none of it good. After the first two minutes, he grabbed a notepad and pen and began scribbling notes.

As he listened to Theresa, he paced back and forth between the dining room and living room, the floorboards creaking beneath his boots. Lily listened intently from her perch on the couch, nursing a second mug of coffee.

“Okay, so you talked to Theresa, and she’s promised to contact that Red Carpet Rumor Mill site,” she said after the call ended. “What’s next?”

Matt stopped pacing and rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know. Hopefully, this will be enough to help Autumn.”

“Not *that*, you moron,” Lily chided him. “What’s next for you and Autumn? You can’t let her leave Snowberry Springs, Matt. You need to fight for her.”

“I want to,” he confessed, running a hand through his brown hair. “But what if she doesn’t want to stay? She seemed pretty

convinced that moving to Seattle for this new job is the best thing for her and Jayden.”

“Only one way to find out,” Lily replied, setting her coffee down and standing up. “Talk to her, Matt. Tell her how you feel. Show her you’ll be here for her and Jayden, no matter what.”

He grunted.

She scowled ferociously at him. “I swear to God, Matt, I’ll slap you upside the head if you let her get away again!”

Chapter Eighteen

Sisterhood

That evening, Autumn stood in front of the mirror, brushing her hair and dabbing on a touch of lipstick. She had a dinner date at The Yummy Cowboy Diner with Summer and Winnie to discuss her job offer. She hoped her sisters could give her some advice about moving to Seattle, since Winnie used to live there.

As she smoothed out her dress, she found herself torn between excitement at this huge career advancement, and regret at the thought of leaving Snowberry Springs... and Matt.

It was crazy how quickly they'd fallen back into their old friendship. She'd missed having a man in her life she could trust. Who had her back. And who knew exactly how to please her in bed.

She'd had some of the best sex in her life this past week. It had been the one bright spot in the dismal days after Phillip's interview hit the Internet.

She remembered Matt's hurt expression when she'd told him she'd have to move away for her new job. *Damn.*

If only Karla's offer had included remote work, it would be perfect.

But every good thing in her adult life came with a hefty price tag. She should be used to it by now.

“Jayden, sweetie, time to put on your shoes. It’s almost time for dinner with Aunt Summer and Aunt Winnie,” she called.

“Okay, Mom,” Jayden replied from his room.

She heard him sniffle and felt like the world’s worst mom. She knew what was upsetting him.

Things had gotten complicated very fast. Everything was awkward at Matt’s house today, and of course her son had picked up on the tension between Matt and her.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked, kneeling down to help Jayden tie his shoelaces.

“Mommy, I don’t wanna leave.” Tears welled up in his big blue eyes. “I want Matt to be my new dad.”

Guilt squeezed Autumn like a python’s coils. “I know change is hard,” Autumn said, hugging him. “But sometimes, life takes us places we never thought we’d go. And that’s how we find good things we never expected.”

“Okay.” But he didn’t look convinced.

As they walked hand in hand to The Yummy Cowboy Diner, Autumn couldn’t help but take in the sights and sounds of her hometown. Her months here had been so healing after the traumatic end to her wounded marriage.

She wouldn’t just miss her family and Matt. While working to publicize the town, she’d grown to appreciate everyone here and the powerful sense of community they all shared. The

future looked bright for Snowberry Springs, and she regretted she might not be around to see what happened next.

“Tell you what,” she said, giving Jayden’s hand a gentle squeeze. “You know I’ve taken lots of pictures of everyone, right? What if I put together a memory book of our time here in Snowberry Springs?”

“That sounds good,” he agreed in a lackluster tone.

“And we’ll be back for Thanksgiving and Christmas at the ranch with Grandma and Grandpa and everyone else.”

“But it won’t be the same!” Jayden pointed out.

Autumn sighed. “I know. But I’m sure you’ll find a lot to like about Seattle. As will I.”

He nodded, but silent tears began rolling down his cheeks.

Guilt settled around her shoulders like a cape made of lead. She wondered if she’d just become a super-villain in Jayden’s universe.

They reached the diner a few minutes later. As she opened the door for Jayden, she plastered on a sunny smile for her sisters.

“Hey, you two!” Summer greeted them with a warm hug. “Winnie’s already here. She told me we have lots to talk about!”

“We sure do,” Autumn replied as they settled into their seats.

Over the past nine months, the three of them had gotten together for a monthly Sisters' Dinner. She was going to miss doing this with Winnie and Summer.

But I can't afford to turn down this offer. Not if I want a better life for Jayden.

"Jayden, do you want your usual?" Winnie asked, trying to distract him from his tears.

"Uh-huh," he nodded, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

"All right, one kids' burger and fries coming right up!" She waved at Terri, who waited tables after class and during high school vacations.

After they placed their orders, they chit-chatted while Terri brought their drinks and a printed paper cowboy placemat with a box of crayons for Jayden.

As Jayden began coloring in the cowboy's horse, Summer told them about their planned dining room expansion to the building next door.

The project had been bogged down in a construction permit kerfuffle for months, but was moving forward at last. Last week, she and Brock had met with an architect, who presented three different ideas for the new space.

Winnie vented about the tile warehouse who had delivered someone else's order to them, and delivered their order God

only knew where, setting back the tiling work in the bathrooms and kitchen by at least two weeks.

“Ooh, and here’s dinner! Served by my very own yummy cowboy,” Summer announced with a wicked grin as Brock emerged from the kitchen balancing three steaming chicken pot pies and a plate with a kid’s cheeseburger and fries.

Autumn’s throat tightened at the sight of the pot pies.

Was it just last week when she’d made them for Matt?

She’d felt so content in that moment, like they were a real family. Not just her and Jayden, but Matt, too.

Now, it seemed she’d ruined everything. Their breakfasts together had cooled to an awkward chill over the past two mornings.

“You keep flattering me like that, and I’ll be forced to comp dessert for you three lovely ladies,” Brock told them as he slid the dishes onto the table. “The handsome young man here is already getting his very own ice cream sundae.”

“Yay!” Jayden finally perked up. “Can you put sliced banana on it like last time, Uncle Brock? And an extra cherry?”

“Sure. One sundae with extra banana, extra cherry. Got it,” Brock assured him cheerfully.

“Will you bring us some of those huckleberry-apple turnovers if I kiss you?” Summer asked in an arch tone.

Brock grinned down at her. “You know I will, cupcake.”

Autumn’s brother-in-law had been the star of the high school football team, and it showed in his fit, broad-shouldered frame. He was a little rough around the edges, but one of the sweetest men Autumn knew. She adored him, and so did Jayden. Best of all, he made Summer very, *very* happy.

“You okay, sis?” Summer asked when Brock had vanished into the kitchen again. “I noticed you looked kind of upset when you came in. Did Phillip do something else?”

“Ugh, that guy,” Winnie groaned. “I really wish—” She shot Jayden a look, and stopped. He was busy swirling his fries in the paper ketchup cup and appeared oblivious to the conversation. “I mean, I wish your ex would just behave like a decent human being.”

“No, there’s nothing new on the Phillip front,” Autumn said. “And thank God for that. He’s done plenty this week, don’t you think?”

“He always struck me as an overachiever,” Summer said, her tone as tart as a chokecherry. “Okay, if it isn’t Phillip, then what’s going on?”

Autumn hesitated. Should she confide her conflicted feelings about Matt? Or would that only make leaving harder?

“Come on, tell us what’s bugging you,” Winnie prodded gently.

Autumn sighed. Her sisters knew her too well to let this go. “It’s just... when I told Matt about the job, he seemed really

disappointed. Hurt, even.”

Winnie and Summer exchanged a knowing look.

“And that bothers you because you have still feelings for him? Seeing you two together, we figured you guys haven’t been completely faking your relationship,” Summer said.

Busted! thought Autumn. She wondered how many other people had guessed she and Matt weren’t exactly platonic house-mates.

“Can you blame him for being upset?” Winnie added, blunt as always. “You two have always had something special, Autumn. If you’ve gotten back together again, don’t throw it away for some job. Even a great job like the one that HomeRenoTV is offering you.”

Summer nodded in agreement.

Autumn stared down at her plate. She knew her sisters were right, but the fear of making the wrong decision again gnawed at her insides.

“Maybe you’re right,” she admitted. “But I need to do what’s best for Jayden and me.”

“I like Matt’s house, and I don’t want to leave,” Jayden said with surprising vehemence. “I *hate* Seattle!”

“You’ve never been there,” Autumn said, as gently as she could. “How can you know you hate it?”

“I just *know!*” Jayden lifted his head and glared at her. “It’s a stupid place really far away from everyone! Uncle Spring can’t give me riding lessons there! And Matt won’t be there, either!”

“Sweetie, I’m sorry,” Autumn said, guilt sliding like a sharp dagger between her ribs. “But this is something we have to do.”

She turned to her sisters, who were watching the exchange with compassionate expressions.

Do they think I’m being cruel to Jayden?

“This job is my big break!” she protested. “A chance to prove I’m more than just the charity-case sister.”

“Autumn, you know that’s not true,” Summer said, her brow furrowing in concern. “You’ve done so much for this diner, it’s not even funny.”

“Exactly,” Winnie chimed in. “And Karla didn’t hire you out of pity. You’re talented and hardworking and you’re amazing at what you do. But this job... is it *really* worth losing Matt and everything you’ve built here?”

Autumn didn’t have an answer for that.

“Maybe there’s another way,” Winnie continued thoughtfully, stabbing at a piece of flaky pot pie crust. “I’ve worked with Karla for years on my shows. She’s really nice and a reasonable person. Why not negotiate for the ability to work remotely?”

Autumn chewed and swallowed her mouthful of pot pie. Despite Matt's praises of her version, Brock's were still the best she'd ever had.

"It's a good idea," she admitted, "but Karla told me that Lisa Maiffret likes face-time with her direct reports, and that relocation was non-negotiable for this position."

"They always say that." Winnie's tone was cynical. "But if they want you badly enough, pretty much *everything* is negotiable."

And that was the sticking point.

"But I'm not sure how badly they want me," Autumn said. "What if I play hardball with Karla and Lisa, and they withdraw the job offer? If I refuse to relocate to Seattle, they might think I'm not committed enough to my career. Or that I don't really want the job."

"I get it, sis." Summer reached over and patted Autumn's hand. "But you know what? Sometimes you have to take big risks for the things that really matter. The real question is: is your relationship with Matt—and staying in Snowberry Springs with all of us—worth the risk of losing out on this job?"

"Exactly," agreed Winnie. "You can't let fear dictate your decisions. Think about what would make you the happiest, and use that as your starting point in the negotiation."

Autumn caught her breath. *What do I really want? And if I go to Seattle, will it be because I'm running towards something, or running away from my problems here?*

“Maybe you can find a middle ground for the job.” Winnie added, “If you show them you’re passionate about the job but need to stay close to your family, maybe you can offer to fly to headquarters for weekly or monthly meetings. Or maybe video conferencing is the way to go.”

Autumn mulled over their words, her mind racing with possibilities.

But she couldn’t help worrying. If she tried to negotiate the job terms, would Karla and Lisa think she was some kind of high-maintenance diva and pull the plug?

“Listen,” Summer said gently, leaning in. “I won’t lie to you, Autumn. I think you’d be making a huge mistake if you moved away. But I’ll support whatever decision you make. No questions asked.”

“Right,” Winnie said. “Because that’s what sisters do. We’ll be here for you, Autumn, no matter what you decide.” She smiled at Autumn. “If you end up going to Seattle, I can recommend some great neighborhoods to live in.”

“Thanks, guys,” Autumn whispered, choking back tears that threatened to spill over. Her sisters’ support felt like a warm cashmere shawl on a snowy night. “I just don’t want to mess this up. ”

“Give yourself some credit, Autumn,” Winnie encouraged, her eyes shining with pride. “I can’t remember the last time you messed up anything.” She raised an admonitory finger when Autumn tried to protest. “And before you say it, marrying Phillip doesn’t count. He tricked you into thinking he was a decent guy.”

“He gave me Jayden,” Autumn said, smiling across the table at her little boy. “The best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Jayden stopped coloring and grinned up at her.

“And you’re not nineteen and naïve anymore,” Winnie continued. “You’re a smart, tough woman now and you’ll be a huge success at whatever you choose to do next.”

“Remember,” Summer added. “Sometimes the hardest decisions are the ones that lead us to where we truly belong.” Her smile was wry as her gaze moved to the diner’s kitchen door. “Been there, done that.”

And sometimes we have to make tough decisions, even if our hearts don’t agree with them, Autumn thought.

“But *why* can’t Matt be my new dad?” Jayden asked suddenly. “Why don’t you marry him, Mommy? Then he’ll *have* to come to Seattle with us!”

He sat back with a triumphant look, as if he’d just solved a difficult puzzle.

Winnie and Summer stared at her. *Crap.*

I knew it! Summer mouthed at her over Jayden’s head.

“Jayden,” Autumn choked out. “It’s not that simple. Matt has been an amazing friend to us, but we can’t expect him to drop everything and follow us to a new city.”

“Did I do something wrong? Is that why he doesn’t want to be my dad?” Jayden’s eyes filled with renewed tears.

“Of course not, honey,” she reassured him, longing to give him a hug. “It’s just a complicated situation. Matt really likes being a deputy sheriff here. And he loves his new house. Moving away with us is a lot to ask of him. He’s done so much for us already. I don’t want to pressure him like that.”

“But you haven’t even asked him!”

As Jayden stared at her accusingly, Autumn silently cursed herself for the mess she’d created.

She desperately wished she had better answers for both herself and her son. The idea of turning down a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity left her feeling trapped and uncertain.

“Jayden, listen to me,” she said with as much determination as she could muster. “No matter where we end up, I promise you we’ll be okay. We’re a team, aren’t we?”

“Y-yeah.” But he looked away.

Autumn sighed, poking at the remaining half of the pot pie on her plate. She’d lost her appetite.

She suddenly wished she hadn’t agreed to this dinner. Her sisters meant well, but they didn’t really understand what Autumn was going through.

This job offer wasn’t just about her career ambitions or even the money, breathtaking as that number was. It was about

proving to herself that she could still succeed on her own terms without relying on family ties for her paying gigs.

“Look, I promise I’ll consider everything very carefully before I talk to Karla on Friday,” she told all of them.

Chapter Nineteen

Just Desserts

Thursday, August 27

The next day, Matt slouched on his sofa, the weight of impending heartbreak pressing heavily on his chest.

Time was running out. How the fuck was he supposed to convince Autumn to stay when she was working so hard to avoid him?

I should've said something earlier. That's what I get for being such a fucking coward.

Last night, Autumn had been deep in thought after she returned from dinner with her sisters.

Matt had hoped to use their usual “porch talk” time to tell her how he felt. But she'd spoken to him in monosyllables, her expression closed and unreadable, then vanished into her own room right after Jayden went to bed.

He'd lain awake for hours, hoping against hope for her knock on his bedroom door. But no luck.

Then she and Jayden had left the house early again this morning before Matt woke up.

Sitting alone at the breakfast nook table, he'd decided he officially hated eating breakfast by himself.

Now he was scrolling through his tablet. He hit the RedCarpetRumorMill.com site and saw a new video posted on the front page. The headline read:

Shocking Twist in Snowberry Springs Scandal

Phillip Garthe cheated on TWO women at the same time!

Exclusive BOMBSHELL interview below!

In the video preview, a young woman's tear-streaked face filled the frame. She looked like she was barely out of high school, and she could've passed for Autumn's younger twin.

Guess Phillip has a type, Matt thought grimly as he tapped the Play icon.

The video opened in an apartment living room cluttered with brightly colored plastic toys and a zoo's worth of stuffed animals.

Theresa Botticelli sat on an overstuffed couch, her heavily made-up eyes reddened and watery, and a box of Kleenex sitting on her lap.

"I can't believe I fell for his lies," she said, dabbing at her eyes. "If I had known Phillip Garthe was still married when he asked me out, I *never* would've..."

She trailed off, shoulders shaking with sobs.

"Can you tell us how you and Phillip met?" asked a sympathetic female voice off-screen.

“Yeah, sure,” Theresa sniffled. “We met when I was a student at Mercer County Community College. I went out for drinks with my BFFs and this handsome older guy comes over and buys me a drink. We hit it off right away. One thing led to another, and he asked me out for a date. He told me he was separated from his wife and she lived in another state. They were just waiting for the divorce paperwork to come through.”

“And you believed him?”

Theresa nodded tearfully. “Thing is, the guy’s a charmer. Comes across as real sincere, ya know? And with me thinking he lived here in Jersey, and his wife still on the other side of the country... well, it seemed like he was telling the truth.”

As the interview continued, with one damning revelation after another about Phillip’s lies and emotional abuse, Matt clenched his jaw and ground his teeth.

He finally understood how expertly Phillip had targeted and then manipulated Autumn, before she grew too old for him and began pushing back on his attempts to control her.

That snake. And then that SOB had gone and dragged poor Theresa into his web of lies, too.

“The final straw was when I discovered Phillip married me six *months* before his divorce was final,” Theresa confessed, her voice cracking. “All I wanted was for our baby not to be illegitimate! I didn’t even know he already had a kid!” She wiped away more tears, then looked straight at the camera. Her eyes pleaded for understanding. “Autumn Snowberry, if you’re watching this, I am so fucking sorry. I didn’t know he was cheating on you. Honest!”

“And there you have it,” declared the voiceover as the video ended on the close-up of Theresa’s devastated expression. “It looks like we’ve exposed the *real* scandal behind the uproar currently rocking the hit TV show, *Reviving Snowberry Springs!* Don’t forget to like or comment below!”

A few days ago, Matt had cautioned Autumn not to read the comments. Now, curiosity got the better of him.

How were people reacting to these new revelations? Were they even sorry they’d trashed Autumn with so many vicious insults?

Sure enough, the video had over 300,000 views in the short time since it was posted.

Matt couldn’t help but feel a grim satisfaction as he scrolled through the long list of comments. Most viewers appeared outraged at Phillip’s blatant lies and hypocrisy.

But unlike the universal condemnation heaped on Autumn, Matt found an odd mix of sympathy, outrage, and even some humor in the posted comments.

One person joked that Phillip must have taken tips from a soap opera villain, while others called for harsher penalties for his crimes.

Then he saw an embedded link to a press release from the pharmaceutical company where Phillip worked. He clicked on it and read the contents with disbelieving joy.

****PRESS RELEASE****

For Immediate Release: August 26

****RE: Termination of Mr. Phillip Garthe, Vice President of Rocky Mountain Region Sales****

In light of recent revelations and in response to the flood of inquiries regarding the scandal involving Mr. Phillip Garthe's personal life, we at ZenithMed Solutions have conducted a comprehensive internal review of Mr. Garthe's business trip expenses to the states in question. Our thorough investigation has unveiled massive fraudulent activities tied to his expense reports.

We hold our employees to the highest ethical and professional standards. Based on our findings and the gravity of the misconduct, we have made the necessary decision to terminate Mr. Garthe's employment from his position as Vice President of Rocky Mountain Region Sales, effective immediately.

Furthermore, our commitment to corporate transparency and accountability demands that we address such improprieties with the utmost seriousness. As such, we have turned over all relevant evidence to law enforcement authorities. In collaboration with them, we will be pursuing criminal charges of embezzlement against Mr. Garthe in the state of New Jersey.

We deeply regret the impact that Mr. Garthe's actions may have on the reputation of our company. We assure our clients, shareholders, and the public that we remain dedicated to upholding the highest standards of ethical business practices.

Thank you for your continued trust and understanding.

Contact:

E. Bingley, Corporate Communications Department

ZenithMed Solutions

Email: communications@ZenithMedSolutions.com

Phone: (555) 456-7890

Matt's phone buzzed, interrupting his thoughts. He picked it up to see his brother's name on the screen, and answered. "Hey, Gabe."

"Matt, you're not gonna believe this," Gabe said, excitement bubbling in his voice. "Phillip checked out of his Airbnb this morning and caught a flight from Bozeman to Newark, New Jersey."

"Really?" Matt leaned forward, his heart pounding. "Did he file for amended child custody with Park County Courts before taking off?"

"Nope, I checked with the court clerk right after I heard he skedaddled," Gabe confirmed.

Relief washed over Matt. From now on, Phillip would be too busy trying to stay out of jail to use the court system to harass Autumn any further.

"Thanks for the heads-up, Gabe," Matt said, and ended the call.

No matter what happened now, at least he'd kept his promise to protect Autumn and Jayden.

The front door opened, and Autumn walked in. She was alone, so Jayden must still be with his grandparents at the ranch.

It was the perfect opportunity to talk to her. His throat went dry.

"Hey," he croaked.

"Hey yourself," she replied as she entered the living room. Her gaze fell upon his tablet, which was still displaying the RedCarpetRumorMill.com home page. "I just got off the phone with Theresa. She told me you were the one who called her and encouraged her to do the interview."

"Autumn, there's something I need to tell you—" Matt started, but she held up a hand to stop him.

"Theresa was furious about Phillip trying to take Jayden away from me," she continued. "She said if I need her to testify on my behalf in court, she'd be happy to fly out here to do it."

He sensed this was the right moment to tell her.

Matt took a deep breath and looked directly into Autumn's blue eyes. "I called Theresa because I love you," he blurted out, his voice thick with emotion.

"Matt," she whispered, her eyes widening in surprise.

“I never stopped loving you during all the years we were apart. I’ve been so happy ever since you and Jayden came to stay with me,” he continued in a rush. “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted in a girlfriend.”

“I came here to—” Autumn started, her cheeks flushed.

“Wait, let me finish,” Matt said quickly. “I can’t lose you again, Autumn.” To his horror, his voice cracked as he plowed on. “If you’re serious about moving to Seattle, I’ll quit the Park County Sheriff’s Department and apply for a law enforcement position in Washington State. I’d be happy working as a game warden or a regular police officer as long as it means being with you.”

Autumn went up on tiptoe and flung her arms around his neck.

“You don’t have to do that! That’s what I wanted to tell you! I’ve spent these past few days thinking really hard about what to do about the job offer. And no matter how hard I thought, I couldn’t imagine leaving you. Or Snowberry Springs.”

She paused for a moment as he reeled from the impact of her words. Her warm breath brushed his throat. Then she continued.

“I just finished a video interview with Karla and Lisa Maiffret at HomeRenoTV headquarters. I told Lisa I’d take the job on one condition—that I get to work remotely from here. Lisa agreed on the condition that I travel to Seattle once a month to meet with her and the rest of her management team in person.”

“Really?” Matt asked, holding her tight.

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. It felt too much like he was dreaming of a perfect world.

"Really," Autumn declared, a hitch in her voice. "I love you too, Matt, and I love my hometown. I came to tell you I'm not going anywhere."

Their lips met, tentatively at first. Then Matt's hands slid into her hair as he deepened the kiss. She clung to him fiercely, mouth hot and seeking against his.

Her fingers fumbled at the buttons of his shirt, practically ripping them open.

When they finally broke for air, foreheads touching, he rasped, "I need you, Autumn. Right now."

"Me, too," she whispered.

He reached for the hem of her pretty floral summer dress, pulling it over her head in one smooth motion. She fumbled with his belt buckle as he trailed kisses down her throat, his hands roaming greedily over her velvety skin.

They left a trail of discarded clothes across his living room floor as they stumbled towards his sofa, frantically kissing and stroking every inch of exposed skin. He pushed her down against the cushions and drank in the sight of her flushed cheeks, kiss-swollen lips, and blue eyes dark with desire.

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her hungrily, tongues twining and hands exploring.

Then he kissed his way down her body, leaving a trail of warmth and pleasure. His hands explored each curve, teasing and stroking, before finding their way lower.

Finally, he dove between her thighs, inhaling the sweet musk of her arousal as he used his tongue to circle her sensitive clit in an ever-increasing rhythm.

Autumn shuddered with pleasure as his touch grew more intense. Each moan she made shot straight to his straining cock.

He stroked the slick folds of her pussy and slipped his fingers inside her. Her entire body convulsed with pleasure as he continued to lick her.

It wasn't long before she quivered and cried out in her release, her inner walls pulsing around his fingers. His mouth moved back up to capture hers while his fingers continued to draw out her orgasm until she relaxed against the cushions, panting.

Then Matt entered her slowly, his hands shaking as he held her hips. He went deep and started to move, savoring her every gasp and sigh. She felt so damn good; her passage was tight and slick, caressing every inch of his cock with heat and firm pressure.

But it wasn't long before need took over, his rhythm growing fast and frenzied. She clung to him, her short nails digging into his shoulders as she pleaded breathlessly for more, harder, faster.

She cried out, body arching against his. He felt her second climax pulsating around his shaft, and that sent him over the edge.

His release exploded out of him in spurts of white-hot pleasure that started at the base of his spine.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured, collapsing on top of her in a sweaty, satisfied heap.

They made love twice more before dozing entwined on the sofa. Her head was pillowed on his chest, and his fingers trailing lazily up and down her spine.

He pressed a kiss to her temple, suffused with unbelievable happiness.

Autumn had come home at last. To him.

Chapter Twenty

A Holly, Jolly Christmas

Snowberry Springs, Montana Christmas Eve

Autumn stood back, admiring the twinkling lights on the tall pine tree. Its tip nearly brushed the ceiling of the cozy living room.

She usually didn't wait until the last minute to decorate. But her new job had been frantically busy this month, especially since she was still handling Summer and Winnie's social media feeds.

Nevertheless, she'd loved every minute of it, and Lisa Maiffret had given her a generous Christmas bonus along with a glowing 90-day performance review.

She was actually having fun this holiday season. No more stiff holiday parties with Phillip's colleagues. No more passive-aggressive comments about her decorations or cooking. No fighting about buying decorations or making everything perfect to impress other people.

Just joy and pleasure of working together with her boyfriend and her son as a playlist of classic Christmas music drifted from Matt's surround-sound speakers and the vanilla-and-sugar fragrance of baking cookies filled the house.

In the kitchen, Matt and Jayden were rolling out a second batch of cookie dough, cookie cutters scattered on the counter, while Summer stood at the breakfast nook table, decorating the first batch of baked cookies with colorful royal icing.

“Hey, Autumn,” Matt said, stepping into the living room a few minutes later with a plate of freshly decorated cookies. “I’m glad Spring and our sisters took over hosting duties for the holidays. It’s nice of you guys to take the pressure off our moms this year.”

“Yeah, we kids all got together over drinks at Thanksgiving and decided that it was time to pass the torch.” Autumn had brought Matt’s sister Lily in on the discussion as well, since the Parkers and the Snowberrys had decided to celebrate a joint Christmas.

Each set of parents would still host Thanksgiving, but the siblings would then take turns doing Christmas Eve dinner and Christmas Day brunch.

Autumn moved to reposition an ornament on the tree, smiling. “It’s a new tradition I’m excited to be a part of.”

“Sounds like a great plan,” Matt said, handing her a warm cookie. “Now, do you need any help finishing up the tree before everyone gets here?”

“Hey, tall guy, could you put the star on the top, and maybe a few more ornaments on the upper twigs?” Autumn took the offered treat and bit into the sweet, crisp, buttery goodness.

As she savored the taste, she couldn’t help but think about how far she’d come since this time last year.

Three hours later, the tree was looking perfect and the savory smells of roasting turkey and garlic mashed potatoes had replaced the scent of baking cookies.

The doorbell rang and Autumn hurried to welcome the first guests.

It was Winnie and Nick, stomping snow off their boots. They carried bags brimming with colorfully wrapped gifts.

“Ho, ho, ho!” Winnie called out cheerfully. “Nick brought his homemade eggnog! Do you guys have any brandy?”

Next, Grandma Abigail bustled in, cheeks pink from the cold, and carrying a large Yule log cake. “Let me see that handsome boy!” she exclaimed, bending to kiss Jayden.

Matt swooped in and rescued the cake as it threatened to slide off the heirloom crystal platter engraved with poinsettias.

Autumn’s parents arrived a few minutes later, along with Spring and his two girls. They shook snowflakes out of their hair as they shed coats and scarves.

Finally, Matt’s parents came in, with his mom carrying a green bean casserole, and his dad and Lily hauling a Santa-sized sack of presents between them.

The house filled with laughter and chatter as Matt poured drinks for everyone and she pulled the golden-brown turkey out of the oven to rest before carving.

They all gathered around the dining table, which had been extended with an assortment of folding tables covered in borrowed tablecloths and serving platters, and surrounded by mismatched chairs. It was anything but picture-perfect, but the

warmth radiating from the people seated there made it the best Christmas dinner she could imagine.

Phillip would've hated the clashing decorations and lack of coordinated place settings. But he wasn't here, and thank goodness for that!

Her Christmas this year might not be Instagram-perfect, but Autumn loved it because everyone looked happy to be here.

Over heaping plates of food, her family swapped stories and inside jokes. The meal tasted all the more delicious for the company.

As she helped herself to more stuffing, Autumn realized this Christmas mattered more than any picture could capture. The love around this table was the greatest gift of all.

I'm so glad I didn't move to Seattle. I would have missed out on so much.



After dinner, the family gathered in the living room. The fire crackled merrily in the fireplace as the kids eagerly eyed the pile of colorfully wrapped gifts beneath the Christmas tree.

“All right, time for presents!” Dad announced.

It was a long-standing tradition that everyone got to open a single gift on Christmas Eve.

The kids cheered and scrambled to grab a gift, shaking boxes and speculating wildly about the contents.

The adults weren't any better. Autumn watched Winnie weighing two boxes in her hands, trying to guess which held the better present.

"Just pick one, Winnie," her husband Nick told her, laughing. "You'll get to unwrap the other one tomorrow morning."

One by one, they each opened a gift, oohing and ahing over new toys, clothes, and books. The living room filled with the sounds of tearing paper and exclamations of delight.

Then it was Autumn's turn. As she went over to the tree, she noticed Grandma Abigail, Mom, and her sisters watching her with avid interest, nudging each other and exchanging conspiratorial grins.

Her curiosity piqued, she cocked an eyebrow at them, silently demanding an explanation.

"Later," Winnie mouthed, then winked at her.

Puzzled, Autumn selected a medium-sized box wrapped in silver paper. As she returned to her seat, she noticed her mom and sisters trading dismayed glances and shaking their heads.

"She picked the wrong one!" Winnie stage-whispered.

"What do you mean, the wrong one?" Autumn asked, eyeing the present on her lap suspiciously.

The living room fell silent. Something was definitely going on.

Matt cleared his throat. “I was hoping you’d open my gift tonight.”

He handed her a shoebox-sized present tied with a red ribbon. She untied the ribbon and cracked open the box. Inside, a tiny velvet jewelry box nestled in a mass of tissue paper.

Her breath caught. Hardly daring to hope, she lifted the velvet box with trembling fingers. She opened it to reveal a dazzling Edwardian diamond ring she’d admired in the window of an antique store in Livingston several weeks ago.

Her jaw dropped. *It can’t be!*

Then Matt got down on one knee in front of her. “Autumn Snowberry, I love you more than words can say. Will you marry me?”

Overwhelmed with emotion, Autumn threw her arms around Matt’s neck. “Yes!” she exclaimed through joyful tears.

“Way to go, Mom!” Jayden shouted, running over to hug her tightly.

The room erupted in cheers and applause from her delighted family.

Autumn gazed down at Matt, hardly able to believe this was real. The diamond sparkled in the glow of the Christmas lights.

After everything she'd been through this past year, she finally had everything she had ever wanted—a loving partner, a great job, and her family. It all felt too good to be true.

“I can't believe this is really happening,” she said in a choked voice. “I never imagined...”

Matt smiled and bent to kiss her. “I've loved you since we were teenagers, Autumn Snowberry. I'm the luckiest man in Snowberry to get a second chance with you.”

Autumn leaned into his embrace and kissed him back. “I love you, Matt.”

Jayden interrupted the moment by tugging at Matt's sleeve. “So, can I get a puppy now? Or one of Daisy's kids? If we had a goat of our own, we wouldn't have to mow the lawn anymore.”

Laughter rippled around the room.

Matt grinned down at Jayden. “Whoa there, buddy. You know how I feel about those dang goats.” He winked at Autumn. “But I think we can adopt a puppy in the next few months. What do you say?”

“I think a puppy is definitely a better choice for this neighborhood than a goat. Especially if Daisy's kids are anything like her,” Autumn said, smiling at them both.

She'd found her happily ever after right here in Snowberry Springs.

And it wasn't just in the arms of the man she loved, but in the warmth and laughter of the family that surrounded them.

As the evening wore on and the festivities continued, Autumn couldn't help but feel like this was the beginning of something truly magical.

With Matt by her side, Jayden's laughter filling their home, and the love of their family wrapped around them like a cozy blanket, she looked forward to a lifetime together of joy, adventure, and most of all, love.



Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed Autumn and Matt's story!

Want to attend their wedding? [Sign up for my mailing list](#) and receive a free bonus epilogue for this book!

Just one more Snowberry sibling left to go, and that's Spring!

[Wounded Cowboy \(Snowberry Springs Ranch Book 4\)](#)

When a near-tragedy strikes the heart of Snowberry Springs Ranch, it thrusts two lonely souls together in a dance of desire.

After a collapsed treehouse injures his daughters April and Abby, widower Zach "Spring" Snowberry finds himself unable to balance his new job as ranch manager with being a single dad. Unfortunately for him, the only solution to his dilemma appears to be feisty Kelsey Armstrong. She's an

experienced nanny with a reputation for taming even the wildest of kids.

Forced to share close quarters, the two are at odds from the get-go. He's the stoic Marines veteran guarding the wounds of his past, and she's the spirited caretaker determined to find her place in Snowberry Springs—even if it means working with the guarded and hostile Spring Snowberry.

Spring is determined to keep his heart shielded in ice, but Kelsey's warmth might be the very thing to melt the frost around it.

Return to Snowberry Springs for this tale of love, loss, and second chances!

The End

Books by Ophelia Sexton

Snowberry Springs Ranch

- [*Yummy Cowboy*](#)
- [*Flippin' Cowboy*](#)
- [*Protective Cowboy*](#)
- [*Wounded Cowboy*](#)

Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Books

- [*Heat \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 1\)*](#)
- [*Smolder \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 2\)*](#)
- [*Ignite \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 3\)*](#)
- [*Flame \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 4\)*](#)
- [*Burn \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 5\)*](#)
- [*Ash \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 6\)*](#)
- [*Smoke \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 7\)*](#)
- [*Blaze \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 8\)*](#)

- [*Ember \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 9\)*](#)
- [*Christmas in July \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters holiday novella\)*](#)
- [*Inferno \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 10\)*](#)
- [*Scorch \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 11\)*](#)
- [*Sophie's Christmas Dad \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters holiday novella\)*](#)
- [*Spark \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 12\)*](#)
- [*Combust \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 13\)*](#)
- [*Sear \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 14\)*](#)
- [*Rob's Holiday Honey \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 15\)*](#)
- [*Holly and Ice \(Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book 16\)*](#)

Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Book Bundles

- [*Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Boxed Set #1*](#) (Books 1-6)
- [*Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Boxed Set #2*](#) (Books 7-9, plus novellas and short stories)

- [*Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Boxed Set #3*](#) (Books 10-12, plus novellas and short stories)
- [*Bearpaw Ridge Firefighters Boxed Set #4*](#) (Books 13-16)

Rocky Mountain Smokejumpers

- [*Hard Landing \(Rocky Mountain Smokejumpers Book 1\)*](#)
- [*Jump Point \(Rocky Mountain Smokejumpers Book 2\)*](#)
- [*Free Fall \(Rocky Mountain Smokejumpers Book 3\)*](#)

Beast Warriors (co-authored with Bliss Devlin)

- [*Fugitive: A Werebear + BBW Paranormal Romance \(Beast Warriors Book 1\)*](#)
by Bliss Devlin and Ophelia Sexton
- [*Hunter: A Werebear + BBW Paranormal Romance \(Beast Warriors Book 2\)*](#)
by Bliss Devlin and Ophelia Sexton
- *Leader: A Werebear + Dragon Shifter Paranormal Romance (Beast Warriors Book 3) – coming soon!*