



Pushing

CORRUPT COWBOYS BOOK 5

LIMITS

EMMA CREED

PUSHING LIMITS

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BOOK FOUR

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Pushing Limits

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First Edition

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AUTHOR NOTE

*****Warning*****

Pushing Limits and all books in the Corrupt Cowboys series are a work of fiction and contain adult content. Due to the nature of the series you should expect to come across various subject matter that some readers may find disturbing, and it is intended for readers 18+

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WHATEVER IT TAKES



“You look great.” Maisie places Garrett’s hat on his head before stepping back and admiring the way her husband looks in a suit.

“You look like a dick.” I shake my head and laugh at him, picking up my own Stetson from the desk and making my way to the door.

“Hey, that’s not the kind of attitude we need right now.” Maisie throws me a look over her shoulder. I like Maisie a lot, she’s great for my brother and this family, but her Little Miss Sunshine vibe can be draining.

“Cole’s right, I can’t pull this off. I’ve gone over that speech that Harvey sent me over a hundred times and I can’t make it sound right.”

Ever since Harvey Marston came here and laid down his fuckin’ law, I’ve wanted to put a bullet down his throat. He’s got a real fuckin’ nerve. Carson men have been runnin’ Fork River since before he was a scratch in his daddy’s nut sack. Still, he’s somehow managed to get us trapped between a rock and a hard place. I’d be all for making this easy and just killing the bastard, but Garrett assures us we gotta play the fucker’s game for a while. Of course, that pisses me off, but when I think about what Garrett has to lose, I can understand it.

“Forget about his speech.” I march back over toward my brother, reach into the chest pocket of the suit jacket he’s wearing, and take out the speech that’s been written for him. Maisie gasps in horror when I tear it up.

“Speak from your heart. Speak like a man who’s grown up in this town his whole life, intends on going nowhere, and

wants to raise his kids here. Hell, if you fuck it up, the whole votin' system's rigged anyway." I dust off his jacket and pat his cheek. "This stupid election campaign is faker than Cora's tits were."

"Cole! That was my mom, remember?" Maisie looks at me in shock.

"Oh God, rest her soul," I dismiss her sarcastically before getting back to my point. "Garrett, you don't even have to give a speech today. Harvey wants you to be his mayor so we already know it's gonna happen. The least you can do, for your pride and self-respect, is be yourself." I tug at the tie he's got wrapped around his neck until it comes loose, then after stripping it away I undo his top button. "This town already treats you like a leader, so go out there and give 'em what they really want."

My brother nods his head back at me and smirks 'cause he knows I'm right. "I'll be in the stables doing real Carson man work if ya need me." I wink at him before I move toward the door again.

"Wait." Garrett stops me. "Ain't you comin'?"

"And watch that shit show? Not a fuckin' chance. At least I know what I'm gettin' with the horse shit I've got to deal with, out there." I snigger before heading out to get some work done.

The yard is quiet today, most of the bunkhouse boys are out on a cattle drive. I should have gone with 'em but something told me to stay close to home. I can't put my finger on what it is, it's just a sense. And one I seem to be gettin' a lot of these days.

I get to work replacing the wood slats that the horse, Wade's been breaking, smashed the fuck outta yesterday. These stables have been here so long, the wood's starting to rot, so it needed replacing anyway.

"Not going to the big speech rally?" I hear Savannah's voice and tell myself not to look up. It's only gonna put a sting

in my chest and a test on my restraint. Still, temptation is a strong fuckin' power.

"Ain't my kinda thing." My eyes glance up. She looks hot as hell today, with her long, red hair flowing free, and wearing a pretty, little dress that shows off far too much of her milky thighs. Thighs I wanna spread wide open and put myself between.

"Ain't exactly my idea of fun either, but family solidarity and all that." Savannah shrugs as she comes a little closer, taking a seat on one of the crates and crossing her legs. She's got those cowgirl boots on that scream *fuck me* and a smile that matches 'em too.

"You ain't part of this family," I remind her coldly before getting back to work.

"Ouch." Savannah clutches her chest, looking pained and rolling her eyes at my attempt to hurt her. I should know better, this girl's made of strong stuff.

"Garrett wants you there, he's just too proud to ask." She leans back on her hands, sticking her chest out just enough for it to get my full attention.

"And since when did you become an expert on *my* family?" I grip the hammer I'm holding a little tighter in my hand.

"What can I say, I'm an observer and a listener. I also have the God-given talent of picking up on people's vibes."

"Then why ain't ya gettin' the vibe to leave me the fuck alone?" I ask, feeling my breath come through my nostrils. This, right here, has been going on far too long. The looks she gives, the way she keeps popping up outta nowhere. She's constantly trying to make me bite and it's my own damn fault for kissing her last month.

Savannah stands up and slowly steps toward me, taking the collar of my shirt in her dainty, little fingers and straightening it up.

"Because Cole Carson... that is not the vibe you are giving me. You can try and hurt me with your words." Her mouth is

dangerously close to mine. So close that I can practically feel her lips. “But your eyes tell a different story.”

I swallow hard and cling to my fuckin’ nerve. I can’t give in to her. I ain’t like my brothers, I’ve lost too much to believe that love is anything other than a hindrance. I need to end this once and for all.

Dropping my hammer I take her by surprise when I reach around, lift her up from under her thighs, and slam her back against the stable wall. She’s been baiting me for a reaction ever since she came here and now, I’m gonna give her one.

“I’m warnin’ ya, don’t push me,” I tell her firmly, lifting one of my hands and clutching it around her pretty, little throat to pin her into the wood behind her.

“Seems it ain’t just your eyes that are telling me something different.” The cocky, little bitch looks down her nose to where my cock is hard and pressing against her through my jeans.

I don’t seem to care that she feels it, in fact, I think I like it. What I’d really like is for her to feel it all the way up inside her. But that can’t ever be an option.

“Any ideas ya got about this bein’ a thing, get ‘em outta ya head, darlin’. We ain’t gonna happen.” I release her and let her feet fall to the ground before turning my back and storming out.

“You’re a chicken, Cole Carson,” she calls after me with a tiny giggle that sets a fire under my skin, and I ignore her, getting in my truck and driving out the yard to somewhere that ain’t here.



“Great speech, Mayor Carson.” I applaud when he steps down from the podium in the town center and heads toward us. I gotta give it to Garrett, he has a way with words. He just made standing up there and talking in front of the whole town about his hopes and fears for its future look easy.

“Thank Christ that’s over.” He takes off his hat so he can swipe his hand through his hair.

“I thought you did amazing.” Maisie is practically bouncing with excitement as she leaves Teresa in charge of the stroller so she can throw her arms around him.

Leia’s not showing the same enthusiasm as the rest of us. Her eyes are still focusing on Old Man Mason, who is eyeballing her right back with pure hatred. He’s going head-to-head with Garrett for the title, and the smug old bastard really thinks he’s got a chance.

“Hey, don’t let him get to ya.” Wade wraps his arm around Leia’s shoulder and coaxes her to turn her back on him. I can see what he really wants to do is go over there and beat the crap out of him, but we all have to be on our best behavior.

“It’s not just him, Wade. It’s everyone. I can feel them looking at me. I’m starting to show and they’re all bound to think it’s Caleb’s. They’re judging me for not grieving my adoring husband and shacking up with the enemy.” She looks around her warily and pulls the cardigan, she’s wearing, tighter around her body to hide her cute, little bump.

“Well, you shouldn’t care what they think.” I put my ten cents in on the situation. “*They* aren’t the people who matter.”

“Savannah’s right.” Maisie drops her arms from around Garrett’s neck. “None of them know what he did to you, if they did, it wouldn’t be you they’d be judging.”

“I still got knocked up by someone else while I was married,” Leia points out under her breath.

“Yeah, well they don’t know that either, do they?” I smile, noticing the frustration on Wade’s face.

He doesn’t want the town thinking he’s raising another man’s child. He wants the world to know the baby she’s having is a Carson. The only reason he’s playing along with all this is for Leia’s sake, which I guess is kinda chivalrous.

“Maisie, these babies are getting cranky, why don’t I have Tate drive me home with them? You can stay here and do your mayor-wife duties,” Teresa suggests.

“I ain’t mayor yet,” Garrett reminds everyone, looking across at Mason who is putting on a show and shaking hands with some local kids.

“I can feed and change them over at the diner, they seem alright to me.” Maisie peeks into the stroller to check them, and when she sees Jack fidgeting she lifts him out so he doesn’t disturb the others. “It still doesn’t feel right being away from them.” She smiles awkwardly at her mother-in-law before grabbing the handle of the stroller and steering it toward Dolores’s diner.

“I should go give her a hand.” Garrett goes to follow, but Teresa steps in front of him.

“Let me. You have to talk to your people.” She smiles proudly. “I like helping.”

“Like I said, they ain’t my people yet,” Garrett tells his mother.

“No, but they will be.” She taps her hand against his chest before she follows Maisie.

Garrett’s got a sad look on his face when he turns back around to face the rest of us. He doesn’t want any of this, he

may have done one hell of a speech up there, but it's written all over his face now.

"Whatcha looking so sad about? You nailed it." The deep voice that never fails to make my stomach flutter comes from behind me and when Cole steps up beside me I swear I feel those fingers curl around my neck all over again.

"Thought you weren't coming." Garrett tips his chin at his brother.

"Wasn't gonna miss my big brother makin' a fool of himself in front of all these people now, was I?" Cole tells him, avoiding eye contact with me when I look up at him. I hate myself for how needy I become around him. I put it down to the fact I'm used to getting what I want. I know from what Maisie and Leia have told me that Cole has loved before. What happened to Aubrey was tragic and anyone can see he's not over it. Still, I find it hard to imagine him being affectionate with a woman. His eyes are always so cold and that kiss he gave me on the porch wasn't at all romantic, it was possessive and angry. Not a day has gone by since that I haven't thought about it though and it's pathetic how desperate I am to have him do it to me again.

"I'm gonna go sit with Maisie, maybe grab myself some of Dolores's apple pie while I'm in there." Leia kisses Wade on his cheek, then blushes when one of the girls who works at the hair salon shakes her head at them as she passes.

I scowl hard at the bitch. I don't know who she *thinks* she is, but I'm pretty sure I heard Dalton tell Tate she got double-dicked at one of the River Boys' parties.

"Ignore them, they're jealous. These Carson men are the hottest catch in town," I tell Leia, and Wade proves he gives no fucks either when he grabs her and kisses her the same way Cole kissed me.

It leaves Leia a little wobbly on her feet when he releases her, and she smiles back at him dreamily before she heads into the diner to join Maisie and Teresa. When she's gone I notice the way all the men's eyes turn to me and I laugh at them. "You don't honestly expect me to follow in and participate in

that mothers' meeting, do you? Not when all the action is out here?"

"There'll be no action from us. We're on best behavior until this election is over." Garrett looks guilty as his eyes waver between his brothers.

"So, does that include me? Because I'd quite like to grab Little Miss Judgey over there by her pretty, pink streaks and bounce her head off the sidewalk." I say it with a smile on my face as I look across at her. Like most fake-assed bitches, I'm sure she can sense I'm talking about her.

"Much as I'd like to see that, yes, that includes you. You're stayin' at the ranch, therefore when you're around town you're representin' us." Garrett sniggers.

"It also means you're gonna be in church tomorrow," Wade informs me.

"Garrett, who made this guy your election manager?" I cross my arms and wait for his answer.

"He's right, and that goes for everyone. We're all in church tomorrow. You included." He points his finger at Cole.

"Halle-fuckin'-lujah," Cole grunts under his breath.



“So I looked him square in the eyes and I said, ‘*No one* speaks to a Carson like that,’” Dalton explains to us all with his chest puffed out proudly.

“And did ya say it with that excited, little puppy look in your eyes?” Garrett lights up his smoke and smirks.

“Just. Like. That.” Dalton points his finger at the ground to illiterate his words.

“Which is why ya got yourself a split lip and one helluva shiner.” Garrett chuckles.

It’s not been all that long since we found out Dalton is one of us but it don’t feel strange. Maybe, it’s because he’s always been around. Dalton’s been known as Mitch’s nephew since he came here as a kid. He wears the brand and we’ve been teasing him like a little brother for years anyway.

“Black eyes and split lips aside, I put you in charge of that cattle drive and you got the job done.” Garrett gives him his dues, reaching his hand out for Dalton to slap, and the kid smiles a little shyly as he smacks it. “Maybe next time don’t throw ya weight around with the biggest guy in the bunkhouse. You know Jonah’s a miserable bastard. Jonah doesn’t fuck around. He knows his job and he likes to get it done.”

“So why d’ya call us all out here?” Tate asks, knocking back his beer and looking curious.

“I got a favor to ask y’all.” The look on Garrett’s face turns the atmosphere serious. “You know what’s goin’ down with Harvey Marston right now, and I got my suspicions that he’ll be keepin’ a close eye on us one way or another. I’m gonna be busy keepin’ up with all this phony election crap, and I won’t have my wife feel like a prisoner in her own home. Which

means we have to take precautions. I want eyes on the girls at all times.”

“Even the feisty little redhead? ‘Cause I already got my eyes on her,” Finn speaks up and makes me wanna ram my fist down his mouth.

“Yes, even her.” Garrett lights himself a smoke. “If, for any reason, me and Wade can’t be around, the girls’ safety becomes your number one priority. It takes rank over any chores around the yard, ya hear?”

“I hear ya.” Mitch nods his head along with Tate, Finn, and Dalton.

“Who’s with ‘em now?” Finn asks, knowing that the line camp where we meet is a good distance away from the house.

“Jonah, He may not wear the brand but he’s trustworthy. He can watch the girls for times like this. But no one, barrin’ the men sittin’ around this fire, are to know why.”

“Gotcha.” Finn nods his head.

“Is the meetin’ over now, Garrett? I kinda got somewhere I need to be,” Dalton asks, scratching the back of his head awkwardly.

“Where you gotta be this time on a Saturday night? Got yaself a date or summat?” Tate laughs.

“Matter of fact, I do.” Dalton pulls his shoulders back and puffs out that chest again.

“A date with who?” Wade takes off his hat and brushes the rim. I can tell by the smirk on his face that whoever Dalton names, he’ll have something clever to say about it.

“I could tell ya, but you ain’t gonna like it.” Dalton shrugs.

“Try me.”

“Karina Walker.”

“As in Leia’s sister, Karina Walker?” Wade gets thrown sideways.

“That piss you off?” Dalton checks.

“Not as much as it will Zayne, that boy’s got one helluva thing for her, has done for years,” Tate points out.

“Yeah well, Zayne ain’t ever had the balls to ask her out, has he?” Dalton makes a fair point back.

“Speakin’ of the River Boys, where are they tonight?” Mitch changes the subject.

“Havin’ one of their parties, I assume. I didn’t need them here for this. It’s you guys that are here around the ranch and the girls, and it’s you guys who need to be alert on this.”

“You still trustin’ them in all of this? We can’t forget that they worked for Harvey way before they worked for us.” I shrug, toking back on my cigarette.

“And let’s not forget that they wear the brand.” Garrett looks pissed at my suggestion. “They don’t work *for* us, they work *with* us. Anyone else here got their doubts?” he asks the men around us, and all their heads shake.

“I got no doubts, so can I—”

“Get the fuck outta here,” Garrett interrupts Dalton before he can finish, then waits for him to get in his truck and drive away before he looks toward Finn and Tate.

“I thought I told ya to speak to the bunkhouse boys and explain that they listen to him.”

“We did,” Finn answers for them both. “It was all going well until he threw his weight around with Jonah.”

“Well, next time make it a little clearer. He’s a Carson, he gets treated like one, okay?” Garrett warns.

“Ya want me and Finn, here, to give Jonah a taste of his own shit?” Tate asks.

“Nah, lessons like that won’t hurt the boy.” Garrett shakes his head. “Besides, I figure you’re gonna wanna be headin’ to this River Boys’ party yourselves?” Garrett checks with the two of them.

“It has been a long week, Boss.” Finn winks.

“Then I guess this meetin’ is over.” Garrett stands up to stomp out the fire while Tate and Finn clear up the empty bottles, putting them into the box on the back of the truck.

When we get back to the yard, I offer to check on the horses so Garrett and Wade can get back to their women. Jonah nods at us as he steps off the porch where he’s been sitting and heads back toward the bunkhouse. I wait until my brothers are through the door before I follow after him, grab the back of his shirt, and drag him between the stable and the haybarn.

“What the...?” He looks scared when I push my forearm up against his throat and pin him to the wall.

“I’m tellin’ ya this because I happen to like ya,” I start, using my free hand to take out my Swiss Army knife and flick up the sharp blade so I can press it on his cheek. “You ever lay a finger on my brother again, I will cut out your eyes and make ya swallow ‘em. Ya got that?” I wait for him to nod before I release him and march off to check the horses.

It’ll be pointless headin’ back to the bunkhouse now. Mitch ain’t been there since Jimmer sent that girl here from Colorado, Tate and Finn are heading to the lake house, and everyone else in there is too scared to speak to me. All I’d end up doing is lying on my bunk and thinking about Savannah. So instead, I find myself some jobs that will keep me out here.

“Sure you don’t wanna come? Your girl’s gonna be there.” Finn pokes his head around the door, he must have sprayed on some cheap aftershave ‘cause he don’t smell like he’s from round here, anymore.

“I don’t got a girl,” I remind him, patting Rebel’s nose and wondering what the hell Savannah’s doing going to a River Boys’ party.

“Bullshit. I know that little speech you gave us all about her bein’ off limits when she first got here didn’t come from Garrett. I asked him about it.”

“And what *was* your business askin’?” I bore my eyes into his.

“Because she’s hot as fuck,” he answers me square on without any apology and I figure I’m making this far too easy on him.

“Then why ain’t you takin’ her out tonight? Even Dalton’s got the balls to ask the girl he likes on a date.”

I take a brush and start brushing Rebel’s neck. It don’t need doing again, but it gives me something to do with my hands rather than smash them into Finn’s skull.

“This ain’t about me not havin’ the balls and you know it. This is about me respectin’ my brand. What *you* gotta remember, Cole, is that there ain’t many men in town who wear it, and right now that girl ya like is at a party with no idea how you feel about her and lookin’ for a good time.”

“She ain’t my girl,” I correct him again, getting even more frustrated.

“Whatever ya say.” He slaps his hand against the stable door before he heads toward his truck.

I continue to groom Rebel, taking my anger out on the long, sharp strokes of the brush while I let Finn’s words sink in. I can’t help picturing her there. Everyone knows what goes on at River Boys’ parties, girls go wild, and the guys go wilder. It’s all drugs, liquor, and free fuckin’ game. Eventually, I give up trying to distract myself, switching off the lights and closing up the stable for the night. My blood is pumping as I storm across the yard toward the bunkhouse. The bunkhouse I now sleep in so she could have my room. Since Mom came back into our lives the house has been far too crowded, up to now I’ve always liked the idea of Savannah sleeping in my bed. I don’t like the idea of her sleeping in my bed after she’s been fooling around with another guy. The idea of that makes me want to throw things. I pause when I get to the bunkhouse door, closing my eyes and taking in a deep breath.

“Fuck!” I ball up my fists as I admit defeat, then turning my ass around, I head for my truck.



“You’ve never been to a River Boys’ party before, have you?” The guy standing beside me laughs when he notices me looking a little overwhelmed.

Finn warned me it would be wild here, but what I’m seeing in front of me is beyond what I imagined. There’s a girl over by the stereo system getting her pussy licked, maybe that wouldn’t be so crazy if she wasn’t sucking another guy’s cock at the same time. Blow is being served around like canapes and the whole room is filled with a cloud of weed-infused smoke.

“Is it that obvious?” I shrug awkwardly.

People from around here assume that me being from L.A. makes me used to this kind of thing, but the truth isn’t even close. I’ve been sheltered my whole life and had every decision made for me since the day I was born. Looking around the room I can almost understand why my parents were so strict.

“Here, knock this back. It won’t seem so overwhelming.” The guy grabs me a shot from the tray one of the half-naked women passes us with and I do as he suggests, enjoying the way it burns its way down my throat.

“So, who pays for all this?” I ask, looking around for any sign of the River Boys.

“Noah, I guess.” The guy shrugs

“Noah?” I laugh. I see him around the ranch from time to time when he visits Garrett, he may not be a cowboy, but I know he has the Carson brand burned into his chest.

“Yeah, rumor has it he inherited a small fortune after his father died, guess this is what he’s chosen to do with it. But, I don’t wanna talk about him. I wanna know ‘bout you, sweetheart. What brought you here tonight? I ain’t seen you around before.” The guy rests both his palms on the wall behind me so I’m caged in.

He’s handsome in a frat boy kinda way, nothing like Cole, who’s mature with a rugged kinda handsome look that is all I seem to focus on these days.

“I’ve been in town for a while, staying with a friend. Tonight, I thought I’d let my hair down,” I tell him casually. Though coming here alone tonight felt a little terrifying. I love the girls, but staying in and helping Maisie take care of the babies and hearing Leia whine about how her favorite pair of jeans no longer fit her is not my idea of a good Saturday night. I left L.A. to seek some adventure. I could feel life going straight past me and figured it was time for me to find my own way.

“Well, I’m glad you did.” The guy smiles as he takes another shot from a different tray and encourages me to knock it back.

My phone is buzzing in my purse, but I ignore it. I know it will be Dad again, maybe even Mom—if she’s drunk enough vodka martinis. They called and demanded I go home last week. I think sometimes they forget that I’m twenty-three years old. Partially, it’s my fault since I’ve allowed them to spoil me like a brat and rule my life in the process. There’s no way I’m ready to go back. I left to look for adventure and so far, Fork River has provided plenty of it.

I can handle my liquor, plenty of my father’s high-class parties have trained me well. Sneaking drinks at them was the only *fuck you* I could give to my parents, and I learned from a young age what my limit was.

Taking the blunt, that the guy’s friend comes over and offers me, is a little different. I’ve smoked normal cigarettes before, but this is a little different. It makes me choke when I

first take it back, and it's much harsher than I expected. The effect from it comes a lot quicker than I anticipated.

I don't know at what point I stop giving a fuck that I'm in a room full of people giving each other sexual favors, or when I decided it would be a good idea to show everyone here how good I can dance, but I'm pretty sure the stuff I've been toking back on had something to do with it.

"You're lookin' good, girl." One of the boys spurs me on, holding my hand as I stand myself up on the glass coffee table and start to sway to the music. "You wanna show us those titties?" He nudges his friend and winks.

I somehow manage to twist my body down so my ass is nearly touching the table's surface, impressed by the crowd my moves have attracted. I lift myself back up seductively, earning me a roar from all the guys surrounding me. I like how it sounds. I like how it feels, as though I'm floating as I lift my hair up from behind my neck and wiggle my hips.

"Come on, babe, show us some more." A hand slides up my skirt and grips around my thigh, and I have no idea who it belongs to.

"Get your hand off her," a voice I know well bellows over the music and when I spin my head and look over my shoulder, Cole is standing front and center, among all the people watching me.

"Cole!" I don't know how long he's been there or how much he's seen but suddenly my legs feel weak and my cheeks are burning. I refuse to give him the satisfaction of my reaction and somehow manage to compose myself. "You wanna see more too?" I tilt my head and bite my lip at him before turning my attention away and continuing to dance.

"You're still touchin' her." Cole steps around the table, his eyes focused on the hand that's currently squeezing my thigh while he breathes through his nose.

"Chill out, man, we were just having some fu—" The guy gets silenced when Cole's fist slams into his jaw, the force of it so powerful that it sends him straight to the ground. Gasps and

sounds of shock come from around us, but Cole doesn't seem to pay them any attention.

“Get down, I'm takin' ya home.” He refuses to make eye contact with me like I repulse him, and not only does it hurt but it makes me fucking angry.

“I'm fine where I am, thank you.” I continue moving to the music and, this time, it's *his* hand that grips around my thigh, *his* fingers pressing so deep into my flesh that I'm sure they'll leave a mark. It sends a spark of electricity all the way to my center.

“I *said*, get down,” he hisses through his teeth, and I keep rolling my shoulders to the music as I lean forward so our noses almost touch.

“And *I* said, no.” I smile at him, flicking the end of his nose and watching his frustration burn from the inside out when he closes his eyes and tenses his jaw.

I don't have time to bask in my victory, not when my feet get swept up from under me and he tosses me over his shoulder. I don't fight back or protest like I should, in fact, I let the haze in my head take over and relax against him like a dead weight.

“I'm not ready to go home yet,” I mumble at him feebly, my body suddenly feeling numb and heavy at the same time. I have no idea how I was holding myself up a few seconds ago, let alone dancing.

“Well, that's where you're goin',” he growls, shocking me back awake when I feel his teeth sink into my ass cheek through the fabric of my skirt.

“Did you just bite me?” I giggle as he lands me on my feet beside his truck, sandwiching me between him and the side gate with his body while he opens the door.

“Did ya take somethin' back there?” He snatches my jaw in his hands and maneuvers my head in all directions while he checks me over, then he stares deep into my eyes as if he's looking for something.

“Did you just bite me?” I ask him again, the words feeling like a real effort to get out.

“Yes, I fuckin’ bit ya, now tell me what you’ve taken.” He sounds real pissed at me. I should be the one who’s pissed, he just dragged me away from having some fun. But instead, I feel a giddy kinda happy.

“Why?” I ignore his question and giggle some more.

“I... I don’t know, I’m angry, frustrated. I...”

“I liked it,” I admit, screwing up my nose and hoping it looks as suggestive as I mean it to. It’s hard to tell his reaction now that I have to keep one eye closed to focus properly.

“Savannah, this is serious, I need to know what you’ve taken so I can go back in there and beat the shit outta Noah for lettin’ ya take it.”

“I haven’t taken anything, I drank a little, I smoked a little.” I throw my arms up, wondering what his deal is. All the bunkhouse boys smoke weed.

“Smoked what? Pot?” He pushes me for more.

“Yes, pot.” I feel my head slump forward and realize he isn’t holding it anymore.

“I’m gonna go in there and—”

“Don’t.” I make a real lame effort to grab his arm. “Stay with me, take me home,” I beg.

Now that the air is hitting me I think I need to get back. I’m surprised when Cole actually stops and turns around. He doesn’t throw my hand away like I expect him to. Instead, he nods his head back at me and lifts me up into his arms in a much more gentlemanly fashion so he can put me in his truck.

“Why you always so mean to me?” I hear the words spill from my mouth like someone else is speaking them, and Cole just ignores me as he drives toward home, keeping his eyes focused on the road ahead. “You’re always so grumpy and rude.” The words just keep on coming.

“How about you sleep for the rest of the ride?” he suggests.

“I don’t wanna sleep.” I shake my head in protest, realizing that somewhere along the journey I’ve leaned over and rested it on his shoulder. “I want an explication... a expel... nation.” I think I got it right.

“I don’t owe ya a damn thing,” he growls back at me, and I feel the tension in his body because I’m lulled against it.

“That’s not true. You kissed me, Cole. A man doesn’t kiss a girl like that unless he means it.” Cole, once again, ignores me but this time I don’t care. I let myself drift off to sleep, with his scent of leather and tobacco and the fact I know I’m right, comforting me.



She barely stirs when I drag her out the truck and carry her onto the porch. Her head is flung back over my arm and her body is a dead weight as I carry her through the door and creep toward the stairs.

“Take me to bed or lose me forever, Cole Carson.” She giggles, her eyes still shut but a wide, cheeky grin on her face. It’s cute, real cute, but not even hearing her quote one of my favorite movies is gonna make me fall victim to her.

“Will you shut the fuck up? If you wake one of those babies, Garrett will kill us both,” I hiss back at her, taking each step up the stairs with caution so we don’t wake the whole damn house.

I eventually make it to my room and when I manage to open the door, the smell of her hits immediately. I ain’t been in here since she took it over, and although all the sides are now covered in her beauty products and her clothes are all over my floor, I like that she’s still got my comforter on the bed she sleeps on.

“I place her down carefully on the mattress, before maneuvering that comforter so I can get her under it.

“Don’t leave me.” She grabs my wrist the same way she did back at the party, her grip is limp and frail, but it’s still fuckin’ wantin’.

“You need to sleep,” I tell her

“I don’t wanna sleep. I want you to kiss me again,” she confesses, taking my hand and guiding it onto her body. “I want you to touch me in the same way you kissed me. Like I belong to you,” she admits, her eyes closed and her face looking like she’s in some kinda pain.

“You’re drunk and blazed.” I shake my head and pull my hand away.

“Yeah, I’m that, but I still want you to touch me.”

“Good night, Savannah.” I shake my head and walk toward the door.

“Wait... Did you bite me?” She gets a new burst of energy and lifts her head off the pillow, her eyes now staring at me with confusion.

“Yeah, I bit ya.” I nod my head back at her, and can’t help smiling. It ain’t the first time she’s asked me that since I did it, and I can’t help concluding that this annoying little firecracker is adorable when she’s drunk.

“That was weird.” She drops her head back down and closes her eyes again.

“Night, Savannah.” I laugh, then, unable to resist the urge, I make a few paces back toward her bed, lean over, and place a delicate kiss on her cheek.

“Night, Cole,” she whispers sleepily as I back my way out of my room and watch her snuggle her cheek into my pillow.

The calm sense of comfort that gives me disappears the second I close the door and head back to my truck.

“Where the fuck were you?” I grab Finn by the front of his shirt and slam him up against the wall when I return to the party.

“What the hell are you talkin’ about?” He stares at me blankly.

“Whoa, whoa! Cole, chill the fuck down. What’s troublin’ ya?” Noah rushes over to intervene.

“What’s troublin’ me is the scumbag assholes here who gave Savannah pot and let her drink too much.” I stare back at him, just about ready to tear someone’s head off their shoulders. Anything could have fuckin’ happened in the state she was in, any fucker here could have taken advantage of her.

“Cole, everyone here’s doin’ pot. It’s the reason they come.” Noah laughs at me so I drop Finn and grab him, instead.

I raise my fist but the brave fucker quickly wraps his hand around it before it can impact, surprising me with his strength when he holds it mid-air. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I may wear your family’s brand, but I won’t have you comin’ into my home and disrespectin’ me.” He shoves me off him. “Now, Finn’s been with me since he got here, we’ve been upstairs playing Texas Hold ‘em with the other boys.”

“Him.” I catch a glimpse of one of the guys who was watching Savannah dance and suddenly lose all interest in Noah. The guy sees me charging toward him but he looks too terrified to move. “Was it you, did you give her the pot?”

“No, sir.” He shakes his head back at me erratically.

“Then who did? Someone here must have seen somethin’.” I follow his eyes when they glance over the table where Savannah had been dancing, and the two guys sitting on the couch beside it. One of them is tapping out a line on the table while the other one, who had his hand on Savannah’s leg, is watching.

“Them?” I question the kid who looks like he’s about to shit his pants.

“They were the ones talking to her all night.” He shrugs before I head on over. The clueless bastards don’t even see me coming as I march over and grab the one closest to me by his shoulder, spinning him around so I can punch him.

He slumps off the sofa onto the floor and his friend quickly tries to make a swing for me, which I manage to block before I slam my forehead hard into his and make him stumble backward. I make sure he hits the deck like his friend when I punch him in the guts and fold him in half.

“You see that pretty redhead again, you walk in the other direction. If you touch, talk, or even *dare* to look at her again, I’ll kill ya,” I tell them both before I curb my anger and walk away.

I'm not supposed to be gettin' into any trouble right now, but assholes like these and the effect Savannah has on me ain't makin' it easy.

"Hey, jerk!" one of them calls out from behind me, and when I spin around to see what the brave fucker wants, I hear Finn shout my name. I catch a glimpse of the shiny, metal blade, the guy has in his hand, coming toward me. Finn somehow launches from the other side of the room in time and crashes him back to the ground, while his idiot buddy quickly picks up the knife that's clattered to the floor and holds it up in front of him defensively.

"You brought a fuckin' *knife* to my house?" Noah comes at them, flanked by the other two River Boys, and without any thought of hesitation, he stamps on the face of the fucker Finn's got his arms wrapped around.

"Don't come any closer." The guy holding the knife can't decide who he should point the thing at. Clearly, he's never been in a fight before, his eyes are brimming with tears and he looks petrified.

"You brought a fuckin' knife to my house?" Noah repeats; dragging the kid, whose head he's been stomping on, up on his feet by the front of his tee.

"Drop the knife before you get fuckin' hurt," I warn his friend, who immediately does as he's told, letting the thing drop from his hand before he backs away.

"You thought you were gonna stab my friend here?" Noah screams at the one he's holding, while the other guy continues to back himself away from the situation, right into Sawyer's chest.

"I think you both need a little lesson on house rules." Noah looks between them both.

"I'm happy to help you make sure that lesson really sinks in." I pick up the knife from the ground and study the blade this little fucker thought he was gonna poke me with. "Hold him up," I order, watching as Finn aids Noah and they each hold one of his shoulders against the wall. The kid is breathing

frantically as I slowly make my way toward him, pressing the point of the knife into my fingertip to test how sharp it is.

“Real men don’t pull weapons on a man whose back is turned. If you’re gonna use a weapon on a man, ya gotta be prepared to look that man in the eyes when ya do it.” I make the fucker jump when I grip his shirt and slice the blade through the front of it.

“My family has an age-old belief that if a man’s worthy, he wears a brand.” I pull down on my shirt so I can show him mine and when he sees it, his eyes widen with fear. Everyone around here knows who the Carsons are and they also know you don’t fuck with ‘em, without consequence.

“Tonight, you pulled a weapon on a branded man, you brought a weapon to a branded man’s home. So, I’m gonna show you what your worth is.” I look the fucker straight in his eyes as I drag the blade through his skin, not deep enough for him to bleed out, just enough to scar him for fuckin’ life. I spell out the word with jagged, uncrafted letters and take in the agony of his screams as his blood drips over the blade and onto my fingers. When I’m done I step back and admire my handy work.

“Pussy.” I spell it out for him. “Lesson one, done.” I turn my back and stroll over to his friend who is frozen still as he looks at the mess I’ve made of his friend.

“Please, please don’t cut me.” He drops to his knees in front of me like he’s praying, causing the River Boys and Finn to smirk.

“I’m not gonna cut ya.” I shake my head and smile at him, waiting for him to sigh with relief.

“Thank you. I—” I cut him off when I grab his hand and slam it flat against the couch beside him, driving the knife I’m still holding through the center of it to pin him there.

“You ever touch that girl again, I’ll *cut* both your fuckin’ hands off,” I crouch down and whisper, slamming my knee into his face on my way back up and heading back out the door.

I fuckin' hate River Boys' parties.



“So, what ya wantin’ me to do about it, Cole? Tell Noah he can’t have parties anymore?” I hear Garrett and Cole talking in the office as I come down the stairs, cautiously pressing my back against the wall near the door so I don’t get seen.

“No, that ain’t what I’m sayin’. I’m sayin’ we stop all the fuckin’ drugs those kids are doin’. It’s outta control.”

“Cole, it was pot, you smoke that shit yourself. You never gave a fuck about what goes down at a River Boys’ party before. Why don’t ya get real and admit that this is because Savannah—”

“Don’t even fuckin’ go there,” Cole cuts him off, sounding agitated.

“What I’m sayin’ is we got a system and it works. Fork River is a clean, quaint little town, we got no drug problems here, and that’s because if wanna do that shit, you go to a River Boys’ party. It’s the opposite of outta control, Cole. It’s *in* our control. Noah spoke to me, he told me what happened. Sounds to me that whatever Savannah did, she did of her own free will. It was a bit of pot, no more than what you boys do in the bunkhouse.”

“She could have... What if...” Cole struggles to get his words out and I can imagine the frustration on his face.

“Cole, I’m not gonna pretend I wouldn’t have acted the same way if that was Maisie, but I can tell ya that it’s her you need to speak to about it. She went to that party last night to have a good time. Maybe you should be showing her a good time in a different way. Take a tip from Dalton, ask her on a date.”

“You want me to *date* her?” Cole laughs sarcastically. “Garrett, have you lost your mind? The girl’s batshit crazy. She’s rude and inappropriate. She... grrrr!” He can’t contain his rage toward me and, although his words cut a little deep, I can’t help like that I have some kind of effect on him.

It sounds like the conversation’s come to an end, so I quickly head back up the stairs when I hear Maisie talking to one of her babies in her bedroom.

“Mornin’.” I peek my head around the door and smile when I see her sitting up in bed feeding one of the boys. Jack is still sound asleep but there’s no sign of Breanna.

“You’re missing one,” I point out as I lay myself out on the bottom of her bed and prop my head up on my hand. It reminds me of the time we lived together, we always liked to have a morning debrief together.

“Teresa took her out for some fresh air. She’s walking her around the yard in the stroller.”

“Mama Carson is really making the effort, huh?” I roll my eyes. Things have been awkward between Teresa and her sons, I guess twenty years of being absent from their lives will do that to a relationship.

“Come on, don’t be mean. She’s being great.” Maisie stands up for her but I can tell she agrees with me.

“But too much,” I say what she really thinks. Maisie should know she can tell me anything.

“A little. I mean, I don’t want to sound ungrateful. We need all the help we can get right now. But there are times when she can be a little overbearing,” she admits.

“Maybe you should ask Garrett to speak to her,” I suggest.

“No way, things have just started to settle between everyone. There is no way I’m stirring things up. It’s a *me* problem, not her. She’s only trying to help and make up for lost time.”

“That doesn’t mean you should sit in silence if you’re not happy,” I remind her.

“Savannah, I couldn’t be happier. I have three beautiful, healthy babies and a hot-as-hell husband. My two best friends currently live with me and...”

“And?” I encourage her when she pauses.

“And the fact my mother-in-law is a little too helpful doesn’t seem like much of a problem, does it? Not compared to all the shit Leia’s dealing with right now.” Maisie lowers her tone in case Leia’s awake and can hear. “You saw the way people were looking at her yesterday, it’ll be the same today when we go to church. I hate that she’s having to deal with that.”

“People are assholes.” I get up from the bed and shake my head. It reminds me that I have to pick out something to wear, and after Cole’s actions last night, I think I have just the thing in mind.

“And what people might that be?” Garrett interrupts when he steps inside the room, carrying a coffee in his hand and placing it on the nightstand, before he kisses his wife and lifts their little boy out of her arms. Smiling contently, he watches him lazily stretch out his limbs.

“Your brother, for a start,” I tell him, watching a different kind of smile pick up on his lips.

“You should be grateful. That’s the way Cole shows people he cares.” He cradles his son in his arms.

“It was him showing he’s a killjoy.”

“What am I missing here?” Maisie picks up her coffee and looks between us.

“Cole turned up at the River Boys’ party last night where I was having a perfectly good time until he dragged me out of there for no good reason,” I explain, watching how Maisie tries to hide her amusement.

“It’s not funny, he punched a guy, then hauled me over his shoulder like I was his latest kill.” The more I think about it, the more it frustrates me. I’ve shown Cole all the signs that I’m interested in him, he chooses to push me away and then he

does things like this. He sure knows how to make a girl feel confused.

“Take it from someone who’s been flung over a Carson shoulder more than once, it’s his way of saying he cares,” Maisie agrees with her husband.

“Well, I don’t want his fuckin’ ‘cares’ if that’s what it means. I was having a good time, and yeah, I got a little buzzed, but I can take care of myself.” I’m being stubborn now because, deep down, I know I lost control last night. I’m not about to admit that to this smiley pair though.

“Well, today’s a new day. And we got a church service to get through. Josie’s fixing up a big ‘Garrett Carson election team’ breakfast for about an hour’s time,” he informs us.

“Guess I better jump in the shower.” I leave them both to it.

“Savannah?” Leia catches me as I walk across the hall to my room. She still looks half asleep and is wearing one of Wade’s rodeo tour tees.

“What’s up?” I smile across the open staircase at her.

“You good? I heard you got wasted last night.”

“Well, doesn’t good news travel fast?” I roll my eyes.

“Finn messaged Wade late last night after Cole went back to the party.”

“Wait... Cole went back?” I drop my mouth in shock.

“Apparently—”

“Darlin’, you need to come back to bed.” Wade quickly rushes out the door and wraps his arms around her waist.

“No, she needs to tell me what she’s talking about.” I fold my arms. “Cole went back to the party?”

“Leia.” Wade looks at his girlfriend and shakes his head.

“I was checking she was okay. River Boys’ parties can get real wild,” Leia defends herself.

“Tell me,” I insist, and Wade blows out a defeated breath, looking a little helpless standing out here in just his boxers with both of us glaring at him.

“It ain’t a big deal. Cole just went back to the party to speak to the guys who got you buzzed.”

“Jesus Christ, I got myself buzzed. I don’t see what the problem is with a girl going out and having a good time.”

“Exactly.” Leia nods her head in comradery.

“What?” Wade turns his attention to her, looking surprised.

“Leia, there’s fun and there’s gettin’ dangerously fuckin’ wasted. Those boys knew what they were doin’.”

“So, what you’re saying is that we can’t look after ourselves?” Leia waits for him to answer.

“That ain’t what I’m sayin’ and you know it. I was just... I was... Fuck this shit.” Wade picks her up and hauls her over his shoulder, slapping her ass as he carries her back inside their room and kicks the door closed after them.

“Fuckin’ Carsons,” I huff as I head off to get ready for the family breakfast I could really do without.



Everyone's sitting at the breakfast table except for one person, and I'm starting to wonder if she's gonna show. She's probably feelin' rough, add to that the fact Wade tells me she's pissed off by my actions last night.

Pissed off that I tried to protect her.

It doesn't help that Wade's girlfriend has a big mouth. There was no need for Savannah to know I went back to that party.

"Great look for the campaign, boys." Wade breaks the silence with a sarcastic comment as he looks between me and Dalton.

The kid who got a swing on me last night has left a bruise on my cheekbone, and my knuckles are scuffed, but Dalton looks a lot worse. His eyes are really swollen from where Jonah cuffed him. Seems Dalton has a lot to learn about being a Carson, the name doesn't make you indestructible, it makes you a target. Jonah reminded him yesterday that respect has to be earned, you don't get nowhere by throwing your weight around. That doesn't mean Jonah didn't get a firm fuckin' warning about what happens to men who touch a Carson. It was just a warning that Dalton will never know about.

"Morning, hope I didn't keep everyone waiting." Savannah breezes into the room cheerily. Far too cheerily for someone who was in the state she was in, last night.

I glance up at her and when I see the tight, black tee she's wearing that rides up her midriff, I almost choke on my breakfast. It has the words *BITE ME* written in bold, white letters across her chest, and the clever smile she's wearing confirms that she's fuckin' with me. Everyone else sitting

around the table is wearing their Sunday best, and they all stare at her as she casually takes her seat and reaches for the jug of orange juice.

“Is something up?” she asks, acting all innocent and naive as she pours herself a glass.

“Don’t you think maybe—”

“What’s with the outfit?” Garrett stamps all over the tactful approach his wife was going with.

“Oh, this?” Savannah looks down at the far too-tight fabric that stretches over her pert round tits, emphasizing how sexy they are. “I went through the obligatory emo phase at college. I kept this one because I liked it.” She shrugs, purposely focusing her eyes on mine across the table.

“It’s a great top, Savannah, I remember it well. But don’t you think it’s a little inappropriate for church?” Maisie suggests awkwardly.

“I think it’s great,” Wade pipes up, earning him a nudge from Leia and a cold glare from me.

“Thank you, Wade. I agree. We are all God’s children and He would like us to wear what we want to His house of worship.” Savannah shrugs.

“That’s a freeing thought, dear, but I don’t think the townfolk of Fork River will agree with you. Garrett is trying to win an election here,” Mom reminds her. She isn’t fully trusted yet, so she has no idea that Garrett is being forced into this mayor thing and is guaranteed the position. She’s just proud that he wants to make a stand for his town.

“What do *you* think, Cole?” Savannah focuses on me, trying to goad me, and it rushes all the blood straight to my fuckin’ cock.

“You can wear what ya damn like, ain’t got shit to do with me,” I tell her before I get back to my plate. I can’t help notice the slight disappointment on her face and instead of making me feel triumphant, it makes me feel like an asshole.

Of course, she keeps the t-shirt on, Savannah ain't the kinda girl to back down when she's making a statement, and seeing how hot her curves look in the top that's way too small for her only makes me wish I'd bitten her a little harder. Hard enough to leave teeth marks on her perfect, untarnished skin. She rides into town with Wade, Leia, and Mom. I could have easily squeezed in with 'em but I'd much rather be on my own. When we get to the chapel that sits on the green in the center of our town, the congregation is outside formed in their little groups, all happily lying to one another about how perfect their lives are. It seems the Masons have taken the same tactic as our family. All brothers apart from the one my brother hung by his fuckin' throat are here to support their father and when Leia and Wade park up and cross the street, sly looks and whispers follow them. I can see it's getting to Wade but he's being cool about it for Leia's sake.

He holds her hand tight as they enter through the chapel doors and Savannah pulls a face at old Mrs. Dudley as she follows behind them. It's one of the things I like about Savannah, she's loyal to her friends. She's not known Leia very long but she's become as equally protective over her as she is of Maisie.

Garrett does his duty making polite conversation with the people he, Maisie, and the babies pass on his way inside. It ain't nothing new, us coming to church. We may not be all that holy in what we do, but we've always stuck with the tradition of it. That's what Fork River seems to thrive on. Tradition and corrupt fuckin' politics.

Everyone eventually makes their way inside and since the only space left on the two pews our family has occupied is the one on the end next to Savannah, it's the one I have to take. There's silence as the minister stands up to his podium and waits for Old Man Mason to be the last person to take his seat. He shifts himself up the aisle, relying on his stick and making sure he has the full attention of the congregation when he pauses and rests his hand on Leia's shoulder, who's sitting straight in front of me.

“I’ll make sure I say an extra special prayer for you,” he whispers under his breath, then lowering his voice and his head he adds something that he intends for no one else to hear, “Whore.” The old man’s final word has me and Wade up on our feet ready to strike him down before God and the whole damn town. Garrett stands up with us when he realizes something’s wrong, and just before Wade shifts to knock the old fucker to the ground Leia stands up and uses herself as a block.

“It’s fine,” she tells him calmly, before turning around to me and giving me the same shake of her head.

“No, it ain’t fine, Leia. I won’t have him—” Leia silences my brother when she calmly steps out into the aisle herself, passing Old Man Mason as she walks up to the front of the church where the minister is standing.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to say a few words,” she requests and the minister looks a little shocked as he nods and steps back so she can take his place.

“I’m sure most of you have an opinion of me.” Leia addresses everyone in front of her bravely, and when I glance to my left and look at Savannah she’s nodding her head and wearing a real proud smile. Leia’s mother, on the other hand, makes a huge overdramatic huff and exits the church with a loud tap of her heels.

“I don’t really care what that opinion is. I’m happy. For the first time in a long time, *I’m happy*,” she repeats with tears in her eyes. “I’ll clear up any questions you people think you deserve the answers to, very quickly and very simply, so Mr. Fisher here can get to his sermon. I never loved my husband,” she admits, and the gasps and breath holds that surround us are nearly as dramatic as Veronica Walker’s exit.

“My husband abused me from the day we got married until the day he died, and I’m very thankful to say that this child I’m having isn’t his. Wade Carson is the father of my baby, and yes it was conceived while I was still married to Caleb. Yes, I did have an affair. And no, I don’t regret it. I never wanted to marry Caleb, he blackmailed my father into making

me ‘cause he thought he could gain something, and I did what I thought I had to, to protect my family. You can judge me for what I did and whisper behind my back, you can call me a whore like Mr. Mason just did. But it won’t stop me from being happy or make me have a single regret. That man...” Leia points to Old Man Mason, who is still standing in the middle of the aisle with a dumbfounded look on his face. “That man knew what his son was doing to me, he not only condoned it, but he encouraged it. Maybe, I’m not the one you should all be judging.” Leia smiles sweetly as she steps down from the altar looking like she just gave the valedictorian speech at high school.

“Good luck with the election,” she whispers under her breath as she passes Mason and takes her seat next to Wade again.

My brother’s got a shit-eating grin on his face as he welcomes her back by wrapping his arm around her shoulder and kissing her cheek.

“Well, I guess that, um...” The minister clears his throat. “A hymn, we should... Mrs. Dudley.” He looks desperately toward the organist. “Hymn number 62. All Things Bright And Beautiful.” He grins awkwardly as he opens up his hymn book.



“That was incredible.” I swing the door to Dolores’s diner open, still praising Leia on how she handled things back at the chapel. Wade and Dalton start rearranging the tables so we can all sit together and, despite my excitement, I can still feel a whole lot of tension between me and Cole. I swear he thinks he’s some kinda hero for how he handled things last night and if he’s waiting on a thank you, he’ll be waiting a long time.

“Isn’t this nice?” Teresa takes a seat and acts like this is a novelty and we weren’t all just sitting around a table together a few hours ago.

Coming here was her idea, she said the Carsons’ should show face and be present, not run home and act ashamed after Leia’s act of courage. She’s right, but for Cole, that means there’s no escape from being around me and the irritation that gives him is prominent on his face. I keep catching his glances, he’s looking at me like he hates me, so I annoy him even more with the seductive and playful smiles I know drives him crazy.

The bell above the door rings and Leonard Mason and his pals step inside. I’m sure Leia told me he was the same age as Wade, far too old to be hanging out in a diner with his little gang of buddies. Which is why I suspect he’s come in here to try and get a rise out of Garrett. Leia’s little revelation in church today would have set Old Man Mason a few steps back in the race he thinks he’s in to become Mayor, and I’ll bet Leonard is here to goad these Carson men into a fight so his father will be back in the running.

“What a fine spectacle.” Leonard laughs with his pals as he takes the milkshake he just ordered off the counter and sucks

hard at the straw. “Guess knocking up your little step-sister really gets you places,” he scoffs, leaning back on the counter and making no attempt to hide his intention.

“Don’t bite.” Maisie places her hand on Garrett’s knee, starting to look worried.

“I thought Carson men weren’t meant to take no shit.” Leonard steps a little closer, making sure he’s heard.

“I’d walk out that door while you still have the ability to.” Garrett keeps his focus straight ahead, refusing to turn his head for the man.

“See, I hear the threat but I don’t see it.” Leonard crouches down so his head is almost resting on Garrett’s shoulder, and I see the look all four brothers give each other across the table, realizing that Dalton really is one of them now.

“I’m just tryin’ to have a nice dinner with my family.” Garrett continues to keep his cool.

“In other words, why don’t you piss off.” I’ve taken about all I can of this jerk’s bullshit. I notice how Cole drops his head and shakes it, and I’m pissed off that he can even be angry at me for sticking up for his family.

“And who the fuck are you, darlin’? Which Carson is gettin’ up in you? The bastard one who Billy didn’t want, or the one who lost his woman to my brother?” Cole’s head snaps back up and he stares at the guy like he’s gonna go for him at any second. “Hell to monogamy, it clearly means fuck all to these Bastards. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were fuckin’ ‘em all. One big happy fucked up family.”

Garrett stands on his feet so fast his chair throws back, and Maisie tugs on his hand begging for him not to react.

“Please sit down,” she begs him, but he doesn’t budge.

“She’s right. Sit down, Garrett.” Cole stands up, slowly and calmly starting to unbutton the cuffs of his shirt before rolling them up his forearm. “This guy came in here lookin’ for a fight. The future Mayor of this town ain’t gonna lower himself to those kinda behaviors. But I’m more than fuckin’ willing to take you and any of your little buddies who wanna

stand beside ya, out of this diner, away from these ladies and little ones, so I can beat the fuck outta ya.” Cole doesn’t wait for a response; he walks out the door onto the street and waits for them out there.

Leonard isn’t quick in following him, though the glances he gets from his friends pressure him enough to follow on out. They all leave the dinner together but only two of them actually offer him any form of support. The others get in their cars and screech away.

“Maybe you should go out there too, there’s three of them,” Leia tells Wade as she watches nervously out the window.

“Nah, Cole’s got this.” Wade slouches back in his chair like he’s about to watch a show, while Garrett keeps his focus on what’s going on out the window behind me.

“So what’s everyone gonna have?” Maisie tries to distract everyone, and Leia and Teresa at least try to join her by picking up their menus.

All the action is happening behind me, which makes it easy for me to ignore until a loud thump against the window makes me jump. When I turn around I see one of Leonard’s friends with his bloody face squished against the glass.

“Guess Leonard caught him on the wrong day.” Dalton shakes his head as I give in to temptation and spin around in my chair so I can join in and watch Cole beat the crap into him.

“Aren’t you gonna stop it?” Maisie looks at Garrett desperately.

“Why would I stop it? Cole’s winning.” He smirks as Cole gives Leonard a chance to get up from the ground and amuses himself by tossing his friend against Wade’s truck.

Leonard stumbles back onto his feet and makes a feeble attempt at an attack, but Cole sits him back town on his ass for the final time, before dusting off his hands and heading back inside to join us.

“Did I miss the specials?” He looks up to Dolores as he takes his seat, and she’s too busy staring out at her bloody window to answer.

“Oh I’m sorry about that, I’ll have one of the boys head straight out here to clean that up for ya.” He nods at her politely.



When we get back to the ranch I head straight into the bunkhouse for a cold shower. Kicking the shit into Leonard and his friends didn't seem to cure the fuckin' itch Savannah's put inside me. She's so fuckin' hard to understand.

Last night when I put her to bed she seemed almost grateful for what I did. Today she's treating me like I did something wrong by protecting her.

Thankfully, the bunkhouse is empty so I head straight inside the shower and hope it will do something to cool my rage. I spend far too long there, and too much of that time thinking of her. I stroke my cock while I picture her in that tight black top, then imagine how it would feel slipping my shaft between those hot round tits of hers. That's the image that has me blowing my load all over the tiles.

I spend more time under the spray of water, thinking about why I let her in my head so much. Usually, I can blank out my thoughts, it's why people accuse me of being cold. But with her, it seems impossible. After cleaning up my mess I wrap a towel around my waist and head back toward my bunk, and that's when I see her sitting on the table in the center of the room. Still wearing that fuckin' top and looking like she's got something she wants to say.

"You shouldn't be in here." I walk past her, keeping my head low like whatever it is she came here for ain't gonna be important to me. I know once I'm past her, her head will turn and she'll see my back. But I don't care. She should see for herself how hideous I am uncovered.

"I..." She pauses when she notices the ugly, angry scars on my back. "I got something I wanna get off my chest," she

continues, surprising me that she doesn't question them. Usually, she's all about asking inappropriate questions.

"That top should be the first thing," I growl as I scramble through my locker to find a clean shirt. I gotta give it to the girl, she knocks me on my ass and has me speechless when I turn back around and see that she's taken my words far too literally.

"That's not what I meant." I rush toward her when I see her standing in just her jeans and a black lacy bra that pushes her tits tight together and makes them look far beyond even what I was imagining.

I can't see the top she had on now, she must have tossed it over her shoulder somewhere, so I take the shirt I got in my hands and drape it over her shoulder, clutching it around her body before anyone comes in and sees her.

"This is a communal living space, ya know," I remind her.

"And you think this is just for you?" She laughs at me, which makes the rage inside me burn even hotter.

"No, I'm just tellin' ya, you should have a little more respect for yourself."

"I came over here to tell you that I don't need you to interfere with my life. I don't know why you feel the need to act like you fuckin' own me. But let me make this clear. I am not owned by anyone. I don't need you to come running to my rescue, and I sure as hell don't need your shirt." She shrugs it off her shoulders, balls it up, and shoves it into my chest. Spinning on her heels and marching out the door just in time for Jonah, Tate, Finn, and the rest of the boys to return from their ride up to Grid 4. Naturally, they all whistle and whoop as they make a path for her to strut through, and every single one of their eyes follow her out.

"Well, someone just got fuckin' lucky." Tate grins as he tips his hat at me.

"The only ones who have gotten lucky are you fuckers. You know the rules. You look at her like that again and I'll beat every one of your asses. I shove on the shirt that's in my

hands and turn my back on them, wanting to tear out my brain for what that girl does to me.

It's been hours since Savannah stormed out of here, and I'm fed up with staring at the ceiling and thinking about all the things I wanna do to her. It took all my strength not to chase her out of here and prove that she's wrong, but I know that it's exactly what she wants outta me.

She's always trying to get a rise and cause a reaction and the longer I lie here thinking about it, the more I feel I'm losing that strength that's been holding me back. I tell myself that it's a bad idea as I get out of bed and throw on my jeans and some boots. I tell myself that I'm only playing into her game as I pick up the tee she threw off from my nightstand and clutch it in my fist as I cross the yard toward the house. I tell myself all those fuckin' things but I don't listen.

Instead, I let myself inside with the key we keep hidden on the right-hand rafter of the porch and I make my way up toward my room where I know she's sleeping. I open the door as silently as I can, then step up to the foot of the bed where she's sound asleep. She looks peaceful with her eyes closed and her breathing steady. Nothing like the fireball of destruction she is when she's awake. With the moonlight shining through the window and decorating her face with its glow, I can't remember a time when I've ever seen her look more beautiful.

I take the comforter from the bottom and slowly drag it off her body, revealing more and more of her, and admiring how the oversized tee she's wearing has gathered up around her ass and shows the cute pink cotton panties she has on underneath. Savannah stirs a little, turning on her other side and trying to find the warmth she's lost. Her eyes are still closed and I watch her for a while like that, peaceful and not causing me any pain. I don't question if me being here is a good idea or not, because somewhere in between her throwing my shirt at me and me lying there thinking about how her words fuckin' hurt, I discovered that I have to change the way she thinks.

“Cole.” She looks startled when she wakes up and sees me towering over the bottom of her bed in the darkness.

“What are you doing in here?”

“You left this behind.” I grip the shirt she left in the bunkhouse tight in my fist.

“Well you didn’t have to return it right now, it’s gotta be...” She picks up her phone from the nightstand to check, “2.13. What the fu—”

“Turn around,” I demand with no patience left in my tone.

“What?” She stares at me as if I’ve lost the plot.

“Turn around and get on all fours,” I tell her, twirling my finger.

“Cole, if you think you can just—”

I don’t give her any more opportunity to protest. I grip her hips myself and flip her onto her front, then drag them up into the air making sure that peachy round ass is presented in front of me just how I want it.

“Cole, what are yo—”

“Shut the fuck up,” I snap, hearing her gasp when I take the back of her panties in my hand and scrunch them in my fist, tugging hard enough for the front of them to cut into her sensitive flesh.

“Cole.” She says my name again and I like how it sounds too much.

“I’m fed up with your games, Red. I warned you to stay away from me and you just don’t listen. You pushed and you pushed, and then when you got me caring, you pull in the opposite direction.” I slide the hand I’m still holding her tee in up her back, dragging up the one she’s wearing and exposing her skin as I bend over her.

“I don’t play games.” I kiss the base of her spine, before crawling over her and biting on her shoulder. She gasps again, her hips already rotating against mine before I’ve even gotten started. I lower myself back down her body, pressing delicate

kisses all the way across her spine. Her body tingles and the goosebumps rise under her skin. She remains silent until I get to her juicy ass and sink my teeth into that too. I bite down hard and unforgivingly. I don't know if the moan she makes is out of pain or pleasure, but when I pull away I see from the little light that's shining into the room from outside that I've left a mark, and I like the way it fuckin' looks.

I use the hand I'm squeezing her panties with to hook them to one side and she jumps when I spit at her soft skin and tilt my head as watch my saliva slide between her ass cheeks and drip against her tight little hole.

"Bite on this." I toss the tee she left in the bunkhouse in front of her.

"Bite down real good, Red. Because I'm gonna make you come so hard that you're gonna wake the whole fuckin' house."

"Cole." She says my name again, and I quickly reach back over her, picking up the top and stuffing it harshly into her mouth.

"I'm in control now," I warn, resting my knees on the floor and spreading open her ass cheeks so I can get to work.

I start by slowly teasing her with my tongue, front to back. Her moans are muffled through the fabric, and her hips push back desperately, seeking out more of my tongue. She jumps again when I slap her ass, my tongue now moving faster against her clit as I squeeze one of her cheeks in my fist so tight it matches the color of her hair. It doesn't take long for her exasperated breaths to become out of control, and when her pussy spills all over my tongue and her head crashes forward into the pillows like she's exhausted, I can't help feeling victorious.

"Fuck me, Cole," she manages in between heavy breaths, keeping her ass up in the air for me. I flip her onto her back and climb over her body, letting her feel that hard cock she's craving press between her legs.

“I came here to get a few things off *my* chest,” I tell her, hovering over her and feeling my cock stiffen to the point of pain when I think about how it would feel to be inside her. Her head moves to follow my lips as if she wants to kiss them.

“I don’t care if you don’t want my protection. That’s something you have whether you want it or not. You can show off these tits to whoever you want...” I pause and squeeze one under the tee she’s still wearing. “But if I ever see another man look at ‘em again, I’ll take his eyeballs before I take his soul. And you can try telling yourself all you want that you don’t belong to me, but we both know that’s not true. You are mine. You have been since I kissed ya out on that porch.”

“Then kiss me again,” she taunts, fidgeting her body under mine to get the friction it needs.

“Prove it to me, Cole.” A victorious little smile tugs at her lips and has me giving in to all my temptations. I clasp her jaw in my hand and slam my lips onto hers, forcing my tongue into her mouth and making her taste her pleasure off it.

“I don’t know what this is, Red, but I’m warning you that it’s dangerous.” I release her and drag myself away before I take things any further. I’ve given the girl enough to think about for one night.



“We need to talk.” I storm into the stable where Cole is saddling up his horse.

I don’t know how it’s possible to feel so fulfilled and so frustrated all at the same. He came to my room last night, performed some kind of fucking wizardry with his tongue then left me hanging. *Then* he has the audacity to ignore me over breakfast.

“What about? The part where you came all over my tongue or the part where you begged me to fuck you?” He’s got a cocky assed grin on his face that is unfamiliar, and I have to push to the back of my head how good it looks on him and force myself to be angry again.

“Yeah. What was all that?”

“I told you what it was about, were you not listening?” He stops what he’s doing and rests his elbow on the saddle he now has secured around Rebel.

“I... I... I...”

“Cat got your tongue?” He raises an eyebrow as if he’s getting a kick out of my frustration.

“Cole, what happened last night, we can’t let anyone know about it. Me and you...”

“Fine by me.” He shocks me when he shrugs.

“I mean, I’m different to Maisie and Leia, I don’t want commitment or a relationship I certainly don’t want babies...”

“Like I said, fine by me.” He makes jumping up onto his horse look easy and annoys the shit out of me when he lifts his hat to me and trots on out of the stable.

“Cole,” I call after him, hating myself for sounding far too desperate. And when he turns around I can’t help appreciating how hot the man looks on a saddle.

“We...” Fuck, I’m pathetic for what I’m about to let come out of my mouth. “We’re gonna do it again, right?”

“Oh, you can count on it.” He winks at me before digging his heels in and riding toward the gate that leads out the yard.

“Savannah.” I hear Garrett calling me and follow his voice out to the other side of the yard where he’s about to get in his truck.

“What’s up?” I try to act normal, though I don’t know what normal is anymore. I’m confused more by my own feelings than I am by Cole’s actions. I have perfectly good reasons for wanting to keep what happened just between us, so why am I disappointed that he made no protest or intrigue as to why?”

“Savannah?” Garrett must notice that I’m deep in thought because he waves his hands in front of my face.

“Sorry, what were you saying?”

“I was asking if you noticed a change in Maisie lately. Mom spoke to me last night and said she was worried about her.”

“Maisie?” I frown at him.

“Yeah, Mom said she’s being forgetful and over-sensitive. She’s worried.”

“Garrett, she has five-month-old triplets and a husband who’s running in a fake election. I’m surprised she can remember her own name.”

“You’re right.” He shakes his head at himself. “I guess what I’m asking is for you to keep a closer eye on her. Leia and Wade are focused on getting the cabin ready, and I got all this Harvey shit to worry about, she could really do with you right now.”

“I got your back, Jack.” I slap his shoulder the same way his brothers do before heading back into the house.

Everyone around me is acting normal, which seems strange after what happened last night. I want to speak to Maisie and tell her about it. She's always been good at putting things into perspective, but I don't want her to think that this is going to become something when I know there's no chance it will. I also don't want to hear the warning she'll give me about it all heading for disaster.

"You need anything? I'm heading into town," I ask, having no idea what I'm gonna do when I get there but I'm in desperate need of some breathing space.

"We're all good." Maisie is rocking one of the babies in a bouncy chair with her foot while typing something out on her laptop. Whatever she's doing looks important.

"I could do with running a few errands, I'll come with you," Leia calls out from over the banister.

So much for being alone.

"Maybe we could get our nails done?" She wiggles her eyebrows at me as she comes down the stairs. "Those bitches at the salon probably have plenty they want to ask after yesterday." I am loving her new attitude.

"I think that's a great idea. Maisie, you in?" I look at her.

"I wish, these guys will need feeding again in an hour and I have to read through all these reports for Garrett. His uncle got one of his members' girlfriends to get the lowdown on Harvey and all his investments. There's heaps to get through.

"Shouldn't Garrett be doing that?" I look at her sternly.

"He was up most of the night doing it. He's highlighted everything he thinks could be useful. I'm just checking it over."

"Don't they use Zayne for this kinda thing?" Leia leans over Maisie's shoulder and looks at the screen.

"We do, but what Maddy can do is beyond Zayne's reach. She's pretty incredible."

"So you got anything juicy?" I rest on the couch beside my friend.

“No this is all investment stuff, properties, businesses he owns. The man’s very clever. Look how much he donated to charity last year. She swivels the screen so I can see and the figure is ridiculous. And that doesn’t include what he donates to his local college.”

“Is he single?” I wink.

“Like you need a Sugar Daddy.” Maisie nudges me playfully. She’s fully aware of how rich my parents are. She’s been to the house and met them herself. When we lived together on campus my parents paid our rent and made sure the apartment was fitted with every mod con you could think of.

“I’m not that girl anymore,” I snap because right now money is a sore subject.

Since I got here my parents have been begging for me to go home. They think I’m having some kind of mental break. I’ve spoken to them a few times and they’ve tried everything from bribery and guilt to convince me, but now they are hitting me where it hurts and are cutting me off from my allowance. I only have a couple hundred left in my savings account and that’s not gonna last. I really need to make a decision about what I do next.

“I didn’t mean it that way.” Maisie looks upset to have offended me.

“I know ya didn’t.” Wrapping my arm around her I squeeze her tight so she knows I’m not. Though something I *am* gonna have to do if I want to stick around is get myself a job. I can’t expect to stay here for free.

“Come on, let’s head into town.” I stand back up and grab Leia’s hand dragging her toward the door.

“Did you see the look on her face when you started talking about how Wade uses his rodeo skills in the bedroom?” Leia giggles as we step out of the salon onto the street. It was worth the money I can’t really afford just to see her smiling again.

“It’ll give the uptight little bitches something to talk about.” I look over my shoulder and see two of the girls watching us from the window and show them their handiwork when I stick my well-manicured middle finger up at them.

Suddenly Leia comes to a halt, and the smile slips off her face when she sees a woman on the sidewalk attaching a missing persons poster to the back of a parking meter. I watch her reach out, grab one of the posters closest to us, and stare at the pretty girl in the photo.

“Have you seen her? Have you seen my daughter?” the woman runs toward us when she notices us paying attention to it.

“No, I’m sorry.” Leia shakes her head, suddenly looking very pale.

“She went missing four years ago from right here in this town. She was backpacking and this was the last place she visited. Look, this picture was taken right over there.” The woman points to the Welcome to Fork River sign that the girl is proudly posing next to.

“I’m sorry, I’ve never seen her before.” Leia’s eyes seem haunted by the girl, who looks a little younger than we are. She’s pretty with long wavy blonde hair, and a bright excited smile.

“How about you?” She looks at me desperately. The poor woman looks like she hasn’t slept in the four years her daughter’s been missing.

“I’m afraid not. Four years is a long time ago.” I try to sound as tactful as I can about the situation.

“I know, I’ve been trying to get the local PD to reopen the investigation but they won’t. I know she’s alive, and I can’t stop looking for her. She was here, this is the last picture she sent to me.”

“Who was she traveling with?” I ask, curious as to how someone can just vanish.

“She was traveling alone. Me and her dad begged her not to but she didn’t listen. She was taking a gap year in between

high school and college and wanted to explore Yellowstone Park. Her last transaction on her card was for a bus ticket here, after that there's no trail. I couldn't just sit at home anymore waiting for her to walk through the door. My husband thinks I'm crazy. He left me because he says I'm living a fantasy. But I know she's not dead." It's hard to see the woman in pieces, even if she is a stranger.

"Are you here alone?" I ask, noting the way Leia is remaining silent.

"Yes, me and my husband separated six months ago, he said I was making it impossible for him to get over losing her. But we haven't lost her. She's still alive." The poor lady in front of me looks so adamant.

"Did you try the guest house? I imagine a lot of backpackers who come to town stay there?"

"Yes, the couple were very helpful, they went through all their logs from around the date she disappeared but found nothing."

"She's really pretty." Leia passes the photo to the woman and moves on.

"Leia, wait." I rush after her to find out what's got her spooked, but there's also something tugging at me to help this woman who looks like her whole world fell apart.

"Don't go anywhere," I call back to her as I chase after Leia, catching up with her outside the Garage that Zayne's Dad owns.

"Leia, what the hell was that all about?" I ask, forcing her to still when I grab her arms.

"That girl's dead," she whispers, looking down at the floor and letting her tears flow.

"What? How do you know that? Do you recognize her?"

"No, I've never seen her before, but the last place she was seen was this place and my dad liked young pretty girls, didn't he?" She looks up at me with a pained look on her face.

"Leia, you don't know that—"

“No, I don’t, but now I’m always gonna wonder. That girl could be another one of his victims.”

“She could also have run away from home, or have been mauled by a bear. You heard her mom, she was traveling alone.”

“Maybe.” Leia shrugs. “But I can’t help thinking that what my dad did to Aubrey and Breanna was just a fraction of what he was capable of. I don’t know how to live with that.” She wipes her eyes.

“I got a good way.” Taking her hand in mine I drag her back toward the woman who’s standing helplessly on the sidewalk.

“I’m Savannah, and this here is Leia. We’d very much like to help you find out what happened to your daughter.” I hold out my hand for her to shake.

The guesthouse is dead silent when we step inside the front door, and Leia has a new sense of determination as she moves toward the reception desk and hits the bell.

“One second.” The woman who runs the quaint little place with her husband steps out from the door that leads back to a pokey office.

“You stay right there, Matthew.” She points her finger back through the door at the little boy who’s sitting at the desk surrounded by coloring pencils.

“Hey, Leia,” She smiles familiarly when she sees her.

“Hi, Fiona. We cam—”

“I think what you did in church yesterday was mighty brave. I want you to know that Graham and I never judged you.” She smiles as her eyes dart up instinctively toward the crucifix on the wall.

“I appreciate that—” Leia smiles, avoiding eye contact with me in case that smile turns into a snigger.

“Of course, and it’s nice to have someone in town who’s expecting too.” She smiles as she looks down at the bump she has under her sweater. “Though I’m finding this time much harder with little Matthew to run around after.” She strokes her tummy affectionately.

“I had no idea. Congratulations.”

Fiona is much older than us, she must be in her forties, and she isn’t exactly glowing in the same way Leia is.

“Thank you. We’re hoping for a girl this time, but the Lord will bless us with what he sees fit. Another little boy will be just as loved.”

“Fiona.” I quickly get to the point of why we’re here. “A woman came in here today looking for her daughter.”

“Yes, she did, awful, isn’t it?” She leans over the desk and lowers her voice. “But if a young girl is gonna go backpacking on her lonesome—”

“Yes, it’s awful and her mom is in pieces. She has very little money and really needs some form of closure. I was wondering if you could offer her a room for a few nights, I don’t have much money right now, but I promise I’ll square up the bill. She just needs—”

“Of course.” Fiona takes a key from the hook behind her. “Here, she can take room 3. I cleaned it myself this morning. It has a town square view.”

“I appreciate that.” I smile at her and Leia smiles at the little boy when he pokes his head around the door. I’ve never been much of a fan of kids but they seem to always like me so when he smiles at me too, I grin back.”

“I just wish there was more we can do. I’ve gone through our books and there was nobody here around that time. I suggested the town’s CCTV but it happened so long ago it’s all been erased. You’d think the Sheriff would be more helpful. I don’t know what’s happening to this town. First Cora, then Aubrey. It feels never-ending. Do you think the same killer took that poor girl?” Fiona looks sadly at the picture she has pinned up on the noticeboard behind the desk.

“No,” I tell her firmly as I tug Leia back out the door.

The woman, whose name I’ve learned is Caroline, waits anxiously beside her fully packed station wagon when we come back out.

“We got you a room.” I toss her the key and watch her lips pick up into a smile.

“Really?”

“Fiona and Graham are good people,” I assure her, leaving out the part where I’m gonna have to find the money to pay them. I don’t know why but I feel the strongest urge to help this woman. I may be putting my own parents through hell right now but at least they know I’m safe and with friends.

“I can’t thank you...” Caroline flings her arms around us both. “This is a small town. I’ll bet I could speak to everyone within a few days. Someone here must know something.” She doesn’t sound sad anymore, she sounds full of life.

“Let’s hope.” I smile at her. “Here’s my number.” I take the phone she’s holding in her hand and type in my number. “You can call anytime. Now, how about we let you get settled then we meet for lunch at the diner tomorrow? We’ll show those Police how to get an investigation done.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Caroline smiles and as we leave her to pin up more posters and head for Leia’s car, I feel like I’m achieving something, and the look on Leia’s face tells me she’s feeling it too.



“It’s a terrible idea. Tell her what a terrible idea it is, Garrett.” I hear Wade shouting in the kitchen when I step through the front door and when I head in and see that Savannah is the person he’s angry at, it makes me twitchy.

“What’s the problem here?” I interrupt, noticing that Savannah seems completely unfazed by my brother’s anger. She’s sitting at the kitchen table with her arms folded under her tits and the look of a delinquent child on her face.

“It is a terrible idea.” Garrett ignores my question and agrees with whatever Wade is yelling about.

“What the fuck is going on?” I bellow over the top of them, causing the room to fall silent and Savannah to look a little stunned.

“Savannah here seems to think it’s a good idea for her to involve herself and my pregnant girlfriend in a missing persons case,” Wade explains with the vein in his temple looking like it’s about to pop.

“Course she did.” I shake my head and laugh.

“It ain’t funny, Cole, this girl’s been missing for four years and Leia’s got it in her head that her dad might have killed her.” He shoves his finger on top of the missing poster that’s on the kitchen table. “She shouldn’t be thinking about shit like this, not now. Not fuckin’ ever. It’s not good for her.”

“Wade. Leia needs this. She feels helpless for what happened to your sister and to...” Savannah’s eyes lift up to me and I hate seeing the fuckin’ pity in them. “She’s just trying to be useful and help this woman find out what happened to her daughter.”

“Okay, and what happens if she finds out her father did hurt this girl?”

Wade hisses, deciding to get right up in Savannah’s face, and I move faster than my brain can catch up.

“Don’t fuckin’ speak to her like that.” I shove him away from her, making the refrigerator rattle when I pin him against it.

Wade shakes his head and laughs at me, so I slam him back a little harder.

“I mean it, Wade. Speak to her like that again and I’ll—”

“Whoa now. Don’t be turning on each other.” Garrett steps in between us to force us apart, and the wise assed look Wade wears makes me want to knock his head off his shoulders.

“Now I agree, this is a terrible idea. But this ain’t Savannah’s fault. She’s just trying to help. We all know Leia’s been struggling, maybe this *is* what she needs.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard.” Wade shakes his head. “Can you honestly say that you don’t think the Mayor would have been capable of killing her too? The man had no soul. He killed our sister and then he killed Aubrey because she knew the reason why.” Just hearing him say her name feels like another punch to the gut. “Hell, if he didn’t have that solid alibi I’d say he killed Cora as well, we all know he was fuckin’ her.” Wade makes a solid point.

“With Bree and Aubrey, he had a reason, this happened four years ago to a girl who was just passing through, what would his motive been with her?” Garrett questions.

“How about the fact that he was a perverted fucking narcissist. That reason enough for ya?” Wade snarls. He always gets real touchy when we talk about Leia’s dad.

Garrett’s right when he says she’s been affected by the truth she uncovered. Leia loved her father; she even married a man she didn’t love to protect him. Killing him must have left a mark on her soul. But he gave her little choice. I hate to admit it, but I can see where Savannah is coming from.

“Just cool it, Wade. Let your girl help with this. Sounds to me like it’s a cold case. People go missing all the time, especially hikers,” Garrett points out, steadily releasing the grip he has on both our shirts.

“Am I free to leave now?” Savannah gets up from her chair. “I promised I’d help Mother Teresa with the babies while Maisie does some work in the studio.” She smiles at Wade sarcastically before she leaves the room and Wade waits for her to be gone before he speaks up again.

“I’m telling you now, Walker did it. Girls don’t just vanish without a trace, not pretty ones like that. She would have been on his radar.”

“Walker wasn’t a serial killer, Wade, he was a desperate man. He didn’t just have us to fear after he...” Garrett can’t even finish his sentence, which is just as well, because I don’t wanna fuckin’ hear it.

“He had Harvey to fear too. Harvey likes his puppets to be well-behaved, and since I’m one of those puppets, right now, this whole family has to watch how they act. That includes you beating up Masons for fun,” Garrett points his finger at me.

“They were goading you, you would have snapped eventually.”

“Not when my family are in jeopardy, Cole. I gotta hold back way more than my nerve right now, at least until we find a way out of this.

“You heard what Uncle Jimmer said at Thanksgiving. This is gonna be a long game, but we are gonna win it. Just don’t make it any harder for me to be a player.” He storms out the kitchen like he has the weight of the world on his shoulders and leaves me and Wade alone.

“You really think he did it?” I pick up the photo of the girl from the table and stare into her eyes. It was brave for a girl her age to travel alone and says a lot about her character. It’s the kinda thing I can imagine Savannah doing. She don’t seem to fear much about the world either.

“You really think he didn’t?” Wade looks back at me.

“In this town, I don’t rule out a damn thing.” I place the poster back on the table before I head outside.

As I pass through the living room I hear Savannah talking to the baby whose diaper she’s changing, she’s softened her voice for him and is pulling stupid faces. Seeing it puts the most ridiculous thought in my head, one that I have to quickly shake away.

There was a time once when I thought about being a father, that all changed when the only woman I imagined being my kids’ mother married another man. Aubrey was soft and gentle. The kind of woman that made a man like me think that maybe he could settle down and be a Father.

Savannah’s so different from her, she’s fiery and unpredictable. She’s bursting with fucking energy and she irritates the hell outta me. So the fact seeing her playing with my nephew is making me wonder if I could be that man again is beyond fuckin’ stupid.

I don’t know how long I stand and watch her, but Savannah notices me when she lifts the baby up into her arms, and she stares right back at me until it becomes so tense I have to turn and walk away.

“You weren’t at dinner?” I hear her voice come from behind me as I’m chopping through some logs.

“I ate at the bunkhouse.” I don’t stop swinging the ax and smashing it through the wood because I don’t want a conversation with her right now.

“I wanted to thank you. For standing up for me earlier.” She creeps up a little closer behind me and I focus on the log, clutching the ax even tighter.

“Wade was being an asshole.” I shrug like it ain’t a big deal, before taking another swing.

“He was, but it still meant something that you had my back.” I can sense her shifting even closer.

“It didn’t mean a thing.” I turn to face her, dropping the ax so it sticks into the sawn-off trunk by my feet. “Savannah, last night didn’t change anything.” I need to make that point very clear. When I told her what was between us would be dangerous I didn’t just mean for her, I meant for us both. I ain’t got it in my heart to love again. The fact I can’t get her outta my head is proof that she has that kinda power over me.

“I know.” She looks a little sad about it. “I just wanted you to know that I’m grateful.”

I step back when she starts moving closer and when my back hits against the log store and she’s got me cornered, she smiles as she slides her fingers under the waistband of my jeans.

“What ya doin’?” I sound nervous as that smile grows wider and her hand wraps around my cock.

“I’m returning last night’s favor.” Savannah’s lips rub together. You gonna help me out by loosening these jeans a little?” Her head tips sideways while she waits for my answer. I should say no. I should force her away, but instead, I decide to remind her who’s in charge.

“What I did last night was no fuckin’ favor.” I twist my body around hers so she’s the one with her back to the wall, then pressing myself tight against her, I make sure I crush her hand between us.

“You promised you’d do it again though.” She reminds me of what I said this morning, looking up at me through her lashes like a real little temptress.

“No good is gonna come of this,” I warn her, closing my eyes when she starts to slide me through her palm.

“*Fuck,*” I hiss outta pleasure and frustration.

“I didn’t come here lookin’ for good, Cole,” she whispers, her lips so close to mine that I can almost feel them. Just as I’m about to reach the little bit I need to take them, the girl dismisses me and drops to her knees.

“Savannah, what the fuck you doin’?” I glance over my shoulder to check there’s no one around, we’re hidden round a

corner but the yard's still busy and anyone could come from the pastures behind us.

"I'm gonna put your cock in my mouth." She looks up at me with a mischievous grin on her face.

"Right here?" I swallow heavily as she slides my belt from its buckle.

"Right here," she confirms, popping the button on my jeans and delving inside to release me. I haven't decided what her game is yet but it's obvious that she's playing on my weakness. I won't have that.

"You do that and I'm gonna choke the fuck outta ya." I take my cock in my own hand and grip at her wavy red hair with my other, then making a trail around her lips with the tip, I tease her with it.

"You wanna taste this?" I question her, and she does a real shit job of hiding her desperation when she nods back at me. Denying the chemistry we have between us is hard enough without her laying out fuckin' bait.

"Yes." Her tongue darts out to catch the pre cum I've already got dripping for her, but I pull it from her reach and bend my body so we're nose to nose instead.

"Be ready at 8, Red, and wear those cute little boots." I tuck my cock back into my jeans and leave her on her knees, heading for the bunkhouse to take a *real* cold shower.



“You look fancy.” Maisie smiles at me when I come down the stairs, and suddenly I feel the eyes of everyone in the room on me.

Wade is sitting on the armchair by the fire with Leia reading on his lap, while Maisie is lying on the floor with two of her babies kicking their legs at their play gym.

“It’s just jeans and a sweater.” I laugh nervously.

Teresa comes down the stairs behind me carrying Breanna, who smells gorgeous after her bath.

“One clean and beautiful baby girl.” She kisses her granddaughter’s head before she passes her down to her mom. “Now I think Grandma’s earned a drink.”

“Where ya goin’?” Maisie asks, fussing over her little girl before she lays her beside her brothers.

“I don’t know.” I shrug casually, deciding to join Teresa for that drink. For some ridiculous reason, I’m nervous. I feel like a sixteen-year-old girl going to prom.

“Okay... who you goin’ with?” Leia catches on, placing down her book and giving me her full attention.

“Is it so scandalous that a woman might want to take herself out in this town?” I take the bottle of Vodka from Teresa and pour myself a good measure.

In all fairness, I don’t even know if I am going out. Cole just told me to be ready for 8. He could mean be ready to go behind the bunkhouse and blow him for all I know.

“I think it’s very good.” Teresa shows me some support and I let her know I appreciate it by chinking my glass against

hers. It's 8 pm on the dot. I should head out to the yard. I down my drink ready to get moving and just as I place down the empty glass, the front door opens.

Cole steps inside wearing clean black jeans and a black tight-fitting shirt that shows off his huge arms, broad chest, and shoulders. Suddenly all the eyes that were on me, are on him.

"Did someone die?" Wade sniggers as Cole takes off his hat and slides his hand over the rim.

If I didn't know Cole Carson better, I'd say he was nervous too.

"Not yet." He eyeballs his brother, who buries his head into his girlfriend's neck so he can hide the smirk he's making.

"You look real smart." Teresa goes over to her son and studies him more closely. I've noticed how the brothers have become a little more welcoming to their mother's affection since I've been here. Although Cole is still by far the coldest toward her.

"Has anyone seen my... Whoa, who died?" Garrett asks, his feet coming to a halt when he steps in from the office and sees Cole.

"Nobod... Jesus Christ, why does everything around here have to be made such a big deal outta?" Cole places his hat back on his head and opens the door.

"You coming?" he asks, holding it open for me to step through and I ignore the looks I'm getting as I strut toward him.

"Oh, I hope so," I whisper as I pass him at the door.

Cole slams the door behind us and storms in front of me so he can open the door of his truck. I take the hand he offers to help me inside and smile in the way I know really grinds on his nerves. He doesn't react, just shuts the door and rounds the hood before hopping into the driver's seat and starting the engine.

“So where are you taking me?” I ask, buckling up and waiting for him to explain.

“Don’t get the wrong idea about this, Red. It ain’t a date.”

“No, this doesn’t feel like a date at all.” I raise my eyebrows sarcastically.

“Get those kinda ideas outta ya head. I ain’t that kinda guy, but I also ain’t the kinda guy who plays games. I’m taking you to Cahoots so we can have a drink and discuss how this is gonna work, away from everyone else.” He twists the grip he’s got on the wheel.

“So you decide to take me somewhere the whole town will be instead.” I shake my head and try to make sense of the man. “Cole, you don’t have to worry. I’m not gonna fall in lo—”

“That word is banned,” he interrupts, clearing his throat and focusing on the road ahead to avoid eye contact.

“Okay... I guess what I’m saying is that we don’t need ‘the talk’. I know what this is.”

Cole surprises me when he slams on the brakes, stopping us in the middle of the road.

“Oh yeah, and what is it?” he asks, his eyes staring into mine as he waits for his answer. My mind races through all kinds of ideas. None of which I wanna admit to him.

“It’s... ermm. It’s... It’s two people who have a sexual connection allowing themsel—”

“Cut the crap, Savannah.”

“Will you stop interrupting me and let me fini—”

“I told you this was dangerous.” He completely ignores me and makes me even more irate. “But for some reason, you keep on—”

“Whoa. Let me just remind you that you are the one who came to my room the other night. You are the one who suggested we do whatever this is tonight. You know what, Cole, for a man who doesn’t play games you sure as fuck like

to bend the fucking rules.” I unbuckle my belt and open the door.

“Wait, where ya goin?” I hear him yell as I slam it shut and start walking back the way we came. I don’t care that it’s dark or cold. I won’t be made to feel like this is all on me.

“Savannah.” Cole gets out the truck and comes after me.

“Sav—”

“Leave me alone.” I spin around and scream at him, letting out all my frustration before I start to walk away and when he races to catch up and grabs me from behind, I act on impulse, turn around, and slap his face. Cole moves quickly, grasping under my chin in his strong hand and gripping tightly to my jaw. There’s a look in his eyes that’s both unpredictable and terrifying, and I wonder if this time I’ve taken things too far. I swear to God, if this man raises a hand to me I will knee him in the fucking balls.

Instead, he hits me with a different kind of blow. Shock, when he drags me onto his face and slams his lips against mine. He growls into my mouth as he kisses it, and the vibration it sends down my throat makes my whole body hum with that desperation he triggers. I don’t push him away, in fact, I wrap my arms around his neck and allow him to lift my feet off the ground, carrying me back toward his truck and slamming my back against the tailgate. His tongue rolls around mine as his hand grips my thighs and I rub myself against his solid body like a needy whore.

“We need boundaries, Savannah,” he whispers when he eventually pulls away, and all I can do is nod at him as he places me back on my feet and then moves around the truck to open the passenger door.

When we step inside the bar, all heads turn, and except for the music, the whole place goes quiet. Cole seems unfazed as he leads me to the back of the room, pulling out a chair for me to sit at around one of the few empty tables. It seems busy in here for a Monday night and when I look around, I see that

Caroline has been in and put up more pictures of her missing daughter.

“Hey, Cole.” A female voice distracts me from paying attention to them and wondering what’s become of her. I look up and see a tall, beautiful waitress fluttering her fake eyelashes at him and it makes me want to tear them off her face.

“I’ll get two beers, please, Iris.” He nods his head before taking the hat off his head, placing it on the table, and running his hands through his almost black hair.

“So, you gonna lay down the ground rules or shall I?” I decide to get things started before we start drinking.

“You can start.” He frowns and tips his head for me to continue.

“Okay. If you’re fucking me you aren’t fucking anyone else.” I feel my cheeks heat a little and I don’t know if it’s out of pride or frustration when I glance my eyes back to Iris who clearly wants to fuck him, if she hasn’t already.

“I’m good with that.” His eyes remain firm and deadly serious as he stares at me across the table.

“Like I said before, this stays between us.” I can’t help wondering how the hell that’s meant to happen when he made it very clear back at the ranch that we were going out together tonight, and the fact that we’re in the most public place in Fork River together right now.

“I’m good with that too,” he agrees.

“Those are my only limits.” I rest back in my chair and wait for him to give me his terms and conditions.

“Why are ya here, Red?” He narrows his eyes at me. “And I want the real reason, none of that looking for adventure bull shit.”

“That *is* why I’m here.” I laugh.

“We don’t lie to each other.”

“What?” I shake my head in confusion.

“It’s one of my hard limits. We don’t lie to each other. We remain honest and upfront, that way neither of us get hurt.”

“You scared I’m gonna hurt ya, big boy?” Cole stops the smirk from reaching my cheek when he quickly slams his hand over mine.

“No fuckin’ lies, okay? I wanna know why you’re here. You can trust me. I won’t tell anyone.”

“I came here because life in L.A. was boring. It was safe and I don’t like to play things safe.” I give him a partial truth at least.

Cole seems to accept my answer and slouches back a little before Iris returns to the table with our drinks. He nods his gratitude as she places them in front of us and then waits for her to be gone before he talks again.

“No catchin’ feelings.” He lays down his next rule and I ignore the fact it puts a bitter taste in my mouth. I won’t even contemplate that it might be a little late for that.

“Not a problem.” I paste on a smile for him.

“And that. That right there, it needs to stop.” He points at my face.

“What?” I laugh at him again.

“That smile you do, you know it fuckin’ grates on me,” he hisses through his teeth, and I roll my tongue around my cheek and lean across the table to get closer to him.

“It only grates on you because you like it so much,” I taunt him a little more.

“Don’t make me break your second rule.” Cole shakes his head.

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“You want this to stay between us, right?” He leans forward so we’re almost touching.

“Yeah.”

“Well, that would be pretty hard to do after this entire bar full of people see me fuck that smirk right off your face right here on this table.” He winks before taking a sip of his beer and relaxing back again.

“Okay, I got another one.” I make an attempt to recover myself.

“Shoot.” He shrugs.

“No fighting.” This one I know is gonna hurt him. I’ve seen Cole throw more punches since I’ve been here than I’ve seen anyone else do in my entire life.

“I can’t promise that.” He shakes his head. “If someone comes at my family, they’re getting dropped.”

“And what about if they’re coming at me?” I ask far too quickly.

“Darlin’, if they’re comin’ at you, they ain’t gettin’ back up.”

“Very defensive for someone who ain’t gonna be catching no feelings,” I point out before taking a sip of my drink.

“Just because we ain’t gonna be feelin’ shit, don’t mean I won’t get territorial about what’s mine.”

“So I’m yours now?” I cuss myself for the giddy little smile that I allow to creep up onto my cheeks.

“I thought we covered that the other night after you came all over my tongue.” Cole takes out a packet of cigarettes and places one between his lips.

“Isn’t this a no-smoking establishment?” I glance to the other side of the room where there’s a no smoking sign and Cole shrugs his shoulders carelessly.

“So is that the rules dealt with? Can we actually get to the having fun part?” I check.

“Almost.” He tilts his head away from me so he can blow his smoke away from my face.

“This one is the most important one. So you listen good to it, and if you can’t adhere to it then this...” He waves the

fingers he's holding his cigarette in between us. "It ends right here."

I hold my breath curiously while I wait to hear it.

"If I tell you something or somebody ain't safe, you take my word on it without hesitation. If I ask you not to do something, you don't question me. Things in L.A may have been too safe for you, Red, but that ain't the case here. Can you do that for me?" I nod my head, taking in what he's telling me and the fact it contradicts all he's said about us not falling for each other.

It almost sounds like this man who vows he will never love again cares for me.

"Okay, so we're set?" I feel that longing in the pit of my stomach when I think about how close I am to getting what I want.

"No, I also wanna know why you haven't asked me about it yet?" He looks down at the table.

"Asked you about what?" I think I have an idea but I want him to confirm it before I give him my answer.

"That night in the bunkhouse when I got out the shower and you were waiting for me. You'd have seen the scars on my back. You can probably guess what caused 'em too. Why ain't ya asked me 'bout it?" He doesn't seem ashamed or embarrassed, just curious.

"I figured if you wanted to tell me, you would."

Cole says nothing, just nods his head gratefully before he gets up and excuses himself to the bathroom.



“What are ya doin’?” I ask my reflection as I stand in the bathroom. “What the fuck are you doin’?” I scrub my hands over my face and growl. This is a bad idea. It’s only gonna end in hurt and yet now, at the point where I could stop it from happening, I’m about to leap in feet first.

“Cole.” The door slams against the wall and when I look back into the mirror I see Zayne standing behind me. I didn’t even notice he was here and I can tell from the expression on his face that whatever he’s got for me ain’t good.

“Look, Kid, if this is about Dalton takin’ out Leia’s sister...”

“What. Dalton took out Karina?” The way his eyes widen has me assuming this is news to him.

“Yeah, or summit like that.” I turn around and move past him to get to the door.

“Wait, it wasn’t that I needed to speak to you about. It’s about that girl.”

“What fuckin’ girl?” I ask, getting frustrated.

“The one whose face is plastered all over town right now.” He slams his palm into the missing poster that’s stuck above the hand dryer. “You can’t look fuckin’ sideways without seeing her.”

“What about her?” I still have no idea why Savanna is so hell-bent on helping Leia solve this case, she never had me down as the good Samaritan type.

“I remember her. I saw her. I... Cole, I had her in my car.”

“Jesus Christ, Zayne.” I shake my head and close my eyes.

“No.” He screws up his face and shakes his head at me. “Not like that. It was years ago. I got a call from Karina, she was at some party and needed a ride home like she always does. When I got there to pick her up the girl was with her.”

“And where did you take ‘em?” I find myself gettin’ invested in this too. Savannah’s right, girls don’t just disappear.

“Back to the Mayor’s place. They were both wasted, she had her bag with her. I don’t know how she ended up at the party or what happened to her after I dropped her off, but I’m kinda feelin’ like me and Karina should tell the police?”

“Will you keep your fuckin’ voice down? You ain’t speakin’ to no police. Have you forgotten who you are?”

“Cole, her mom’s in town lookin’ for her. I may have done some pretty fucked up shit over the years but I’m not heartless enough to let an innocent woman suffer when I got information.”

“Zayne, you could have been one of the last people to see that girl alive. That ain’t gonna be good for you. You did the right thing telling me, I’ll look into it, but this has to stay between us, and word can’t back to Leia about the fact she ended up at her father’s place either. You call up Karina and you tell her that right now.” I just hope we’re not too late in getting to her. Wade is angry enough about Leia and Savannah helping this woman, the fact Leia’s concerns might be true is only gonna add to that anger.

“Just sit on this until I can figure out what happened and put some damage control in place.” I slap his shoulder before I attempt to get back to Savannah.

“Cole,” Zayne calls after me again.

“It wasn’t me, I would never hav—”

“I know.” I nod my head back at him. I’ve always been cautious of trusting the River Boys, they may have become branded men a few years ago but on paper, they still work for Harvey. Still, they’ve never given me a reason to doubt ‘em, each one of ‘em has shown us nothing but loyalty.

I head back out, and when I see Savannah waiting for me at the table, she has a sparkle in her eyes that makes it hard for me to regret the agreement we just made.

“You took your time.” She smiles up at me.

“Come on, we’re getting out of here.” I place some dollar bills on the table and drag her up by her arm. I’m surprised at how willingly she comes. Maybe she’s taken on board what I said about listening to me and she intends on being complacent. I march us toward the door and just as I’m about to open it, I feel her tug me back.

“Cole, wait.”

And we were doing so well.

I look back over my shoulder and I see that sparkle in her eyes has turned to rage as she stares at the missing poster that’s pinned to one of the wooden pillars. A huge pair of fake tits have been drawn on the girl’s body with a black pen and the word slut has been written across her forehead.

“Who did this?” She tears it down and looks around the room.

No one says a word, but I notice how a few sets of eyes peer over toward the pool table where some of the Mason bunkhouse boys are hanging out.

“Come on, darlin’. Don’t worry about it.” I take her hand again so I can get us out of here. I intentionally never made the promise that I wouldn’t fight. The fact she made it one of her requests tells me she doesn’t like it when I do.

“No, Cole. I will worry about it.” She snatches her arm away and starts marching over toward the rowdy bunch.

Knowing this is only gonna head one way, I take a breath and follow after her.

“Which one of you jerks did this?” She slams the poster onto the pool table and waits for an answer.

I recognize the one about to make his shot, he was at the diner on Sunday with Leonard and one of the first to get in his truck and get the fuck outta there the second shit got real. He

ignores her presence and makes his shot before straightening up his back and smiling at her.

“Was just a bit of fun is all.” He shrugs like it ain’t a big deal.

“Fun?” Savannah laughs sarcastically. “That girl is missing, has been for years. Her mother has had her heart ripped out of her chest ever since. What is wrong with you?” She goes to step closer and I quickly wrap my arm around her waist and lift her off her feet. “Come on now, you made up the rule about fightin’,” I whisper into her ear.

“Fuck the rule for this asshole.” Her eyes glare at him.

“That’s right, Carson. You keep her on a leash. At least until your brother’s done playin’ politician.” The guy tries to goad me.

“Come on, Red,” I tell her in a much firmer tone.

“Not wantin’ to fight today, huh?” That fucker just keeps on comin’ at me

“No, I don’t wanna fight.” I turn back around to face him. “But I will if I have to. Now I figure if you make the first punch, all I’m doing is defending myself. You just gotta ask yourself if you’re man enough to throw it?” I stare back at him and watch the cocky smile drop off his face when all his buddies take a slight step back.

“Thought not. You touch another poster or talk disrespectfully about that missing girl again, and it’ll be your face that’s plastered on a missing poster all over town.”

“Sounds like a threat to me,” he calls after me once I’ve turned my back and started guiding us toward the door.

“Carsons don’t make threats,” I yell back at him.

“You handled that real good,” she tells me once I’ve started up the engine and we’re heading toward home.

“Yeah, well it wasn’t easy. I really enjoy beating up Mason employees.” I just about manage a smile for her but she

doesn't return it, she's too distracted by the poster that's still in her hand.

"It's just awful, isn't it?" Her words come out weakly.

"Yeah, it's awful," I agree, thinking of all the years we spent wondering why Breanna threw herself off Blackdrop Point. I still don't know what's worse, all the torture of not knowing, or actually knowing the truth. Sometimes I see my sister in my sleep, reaching her arms out to me as she falls. I never get to her in time. There's a constant burn in my chest because I wasn't the one who got to kill the man responsible for taking her and Aubrey away from me.

"If I told you somethin', could ya keep it from Leia?" I ask, knowing the information I got from Zayne could potentially throw some light on this case that is clearly important to her. I also know that Wade doesn't want Leia getting stressed. She's been through enough.

"Depends what that something is." She shrugs.

"It's something that would upset her, and you know how Wade feels about that happenin'."

Savannah nods her head, still seeming a little distant. Am I actually missing that sassy, clever mouth of hers?

"Zayne approached me tonight. Told me that he recognized the girl in the poster. Apparently, he picked her and Karina Walker up from a party, and he..." I pause because as soon as I say the next part, the can of worms is gonna be opened.

"Cole..." There she is again. Her eyes burning into mine like fire, daring me not to finish my sentence.

"He dropped them off at Walker's place," I inform her, watching her chest sag and that fire in her eyes fade to helplessness.

"Shit... Someone needs to speak to Karina."

"I've asked Zayne to call her and make sure she doesn't talk to Leia about it yet. This could be nothing, no point making her worried."

“But it could be something.” Savannah stares at the picture again and smiles sadly as her fingers touch over the girl’s face.

“This is real important to you, ain’t it? I get Leia’s reasons for wanting to help but I’d like to know yours.”

“Maybe one day.” She leans back into the head rest and offers me another sad smile. “Not today.”

I’m about to tell her that’s okay, but she interrupts me instead.

“Cole Carson, are you gonna take me somewhere where you can fuck me? Because you’ve made me wait long enough.”



Anticipation mixed with nerves and excitement build higher as Cole pulls up in front of the cabin he likes to hide out at. Everyone calls this place the line camp. I don't know why, it's one of the many things I don't understand around here.

"You want somethin' to drink?" he asks as he opens the door to let us inside. It's pretty basic here. There's a double bed with a nightstand and an armchair beside it, a wood-burning stove in one corner, and a basin in the other.

"Sure." I nod, watching him reach into the closet and take out a bottle.

"I'll light the fire," he tells me as he hands it over and sets straight to work. I unscrew the lid on the whiskey and take a seat on the edge of the bed, starting to feel nervous again.

But this is what I've been waitin' for. We have rules set in place, it couldn't be any simpler. Yet when Cole twists the wood burner door shut and stands back on his feet, I can't help thinking things are about to get real complicated.

"Stand up." Cole's got a completely different look on his face when he turns around to face me. It's the same look he had when he came to me the other night. I like it, and that's why I do as he orders.

"Take off your sweater." Even his whisper comes out commandingly, and he studies me hard as I lift it from my waist and up over my head. His eyes continue to analyze me while his finger strokes over his bottom lips and the way he tilts his head makes me wonder what he's contemplating doing to me. "Now the boots." He frowns, almost in confusion when I do as he requests and kick them off. I know what he's doing,

he's testing me. He wants to know if I will give him full control of my body the way I did the other night.

I pick up the bottle from the nightstand and knock some more back when the tension around us starts to draw in tighter. "You're gonna need to lose those jeans too." Cole steps forward and takes the bottle out of my hand. His eyes scorching my skin as he takes some back for himself.

"Now turn around and bend over the bed."

"Cole?" I stare up at him, confused.

"No questions," he reminds me.

I decide to put my trust in him because I want so much more than just his eyes on my body. I undo my jeans and drag them down to my ankles, kicking them away before I turn my back to him and lean forward, resting my palms on the mattress.

"I need you to stick to those boundaries we talked about, Savannah. There can't be any pushing limits with me, it's dangerous. Do you understand that?"

"I understand," I whisper, sensing him closer behind me, and I gasp when his callous palm carefully strokes circles over one of my ass cheeks and makes my stomach flutter. It's so stupid that I feel deprived when he takes it away.

"Ouch," I yelp when he brings it back down hard. His strike causing a sting of pain and a bite of thrill. "You've pushed too many of my limits already." His hand strokes the sting he created in slow, soothing circles and his cock presses tight through his jeans against me. He deals me another blow and, this time, I cry loud, gripping the comforter in my hands so I can sustain it.

"Do you like a little pain, Red?" He leans his body over mine and whispers in my ear. "What are your limits? You gonna take all I got for you?" His hand reaches under me and grips my throat.

"Yes." I rub myself against the erection I can feel pressing into my back.

“Even if it hurts?” he asks, and when I nod my head he laughs at me.

“Good girl.” His teeth clamp down on my ear lobe and cause my nipples to harden.

My legs feel weak, my stomach feels hollow, and this is just the beginning. He releases my throat and there’s a strain on my panties before he rips them from the seam and tosses them onto the floor. Flipping me over, he lays me on my back in front of him. He looks as if he’s mad at me as he unbuttons his shirt and shrugs it off his shoulders, then when he pulls the belt he’s wearing out of the loops on his jeans, he holds it in his hands like he’s considering using it. I don’t quite know how I’d feel about that, but my body seems to ache for whatever he’s contemplating. Cole smiles darkly as he drops the belt to the floor and rips open his jeans. My eyes focus on his cock when he drags it out and starts to fist it through his palm.

“You on somethin’?” he asks as he guides it to slip between my pussy lips, stroking over my soft, sensitive flesh in painfully slow thrusts that feel so good I forget to answer.

“Red, I asked if you’re covered because I gotta be inside you and I don’t want to be feelin’ the inside of this pussy through a rubber.”

“The pill. I’m on the pill.” I scramble the worlds together as he continues to add weight to the tension building in my stomach. We’ve waited far too long for this to happen and now it feels so intense I don’t know how much more I can withstand.

“Fuck me, Cole.” I rotate my hips and beg him, wondering how and when I became a fucking slave to this man’s mercy. I’ve never felt like this before. I shouldn’t allow myself to be so weak, yet I get a strange sense of comfort in letting him take control.

“You look real pretty when you beg.” He strokes his thumb over my red-hot cheek.

“Cole. Please...” His thick head sliding against my pulsing clit makes the emptiness I’m feeling inside me unbearable. I don’t care how big his cock is or how it could hurt, my pussy is clenching for him to fill me with it.

“Please...” I’m going to come, I feel it, and just as my toes start to curl and I reach the edge, Cole pulls himself away from me.

“Look how wet you’ve made me, Red. I haven’t even got inside you yet.” He strokes himself slowly through his palm, enjoying every second of my suffering as that heavy weight of pleasure remains locked inside me.

“Cole.” I go to touch the ache he’s left behind, but he smacks my hand away and tilts his head as he watches me fidget against the mattress to find some kind of relief.

“How long have you wanted this?” he asks, taunting me by leisurely pulling himself through his fist.

“Since I came here.” I swallow heavily and try not to focus on how needy this man is making me.

“Show me.” He takes my hand and lifts it up to replace his, holding my wrist and guiding me as I take over his strokes. I sit up on the bed feeling a little dizzy and when I steer him toward my mouth and take him between my lips, I feel like I’ve taken a little of the control back. I start by licking around his tip, looking up at him, and watching him take pleasure in my tongue. I make the mistake of attempting to take him all the way, to the back of my throat. Of course, he’s far too big to fit and I end up gagging and spluttering.

“That sounds real good, Red. Keep going,” he tells me, fisting at my hair and using it to guide me at a steady pace, ensuring that he pushes me a little too far every couple of thrusts so he can hear it again. The way he groans and how his fingers tense tighter shows me how much he likes it and it makes me even more desperate.

“I could come all over these tits.” He drags himself away from my mouth and fists one of my tits through the lace of my bra.

“Would you like that?” He knocks back more whiskey, then taking my jaw in his hand he lifts up my head and squeezes my cheeks so I open my mouth. The whiskey pours out of his mouth and into mine, and I quickly swallow it before he bites my bottom lip and forces me back onto the mattress.

“I don’t know how you do it to me,” he growls, taking my thigh in his hand and raising it up to make space for himself between my legs. “I wanna punish you for the thoughts you put inside my head.” I want to ask him what kinda thoughts he means, but when I feel him press against my entrance, I remain silent and hold my breath while I wait for him to push inside me.

“Are you scared?” It seems a strange question to ask at this moment and I wonder if it disappoints him when I shake my head.

“You should be,” he tells me before dropping his head and watching himself slowly push inside me.

His cock is a lot to take, and when it’s fully seated inside me he holds himself still and allows me to stretch around it. He doesn’t flinch when my nails dig into the scar tissue on his back, instead, he breathes heavily and grips hard at my hip.

“You’re tight, Red. So tight that it fuckin’ hurts a little.”

“Maybe you’re just too big,” I whisper, reminding myself to breathe too.

“You got an argument for everything.” He lifts up his head and challenges me, and when I smile back at him he shakes his head and smirks a little himself.

“Do you wanna come for me now?” he asks, as if that’s a serious question.

“I’d have come five minutes ago if you’d have let me,” I remind him.

“Just imagine how good it’s gonna feel when I do.” He slides out of me and then pushes agonizingly slowly back inside. “You’re fuckin’ wild, but I don’t wanna fuckin’ tame

ya,” he admits, forcing me to look at him with his grip on my face. “You confuse me. You toy with me.”

He slowly fucks me, driving me crazy and building me closer to that edge again.

“I wanna hurt you and protect you all at the same time,” he whispers before his lips press over mine and he fills me with his tongue too.

It feels so good to kiss him again, to have his full attention. I’m not that kind of girl, I can’t remember a time where I’ve ever felt this way about anyone, but something about Cole turns me into a desperate, wanting wreck. It can’t be healthy but I don’t care, not when us being together like this feels so good.

“Come,” Cole speaks against my lips and clasps his fingers tighter around my jaw, triggering me to unleash, and as the ecstasy works its way through my body and floods my brain, I feel myself cling to him like I’m petrified. Cole freezes, clutching me back just as firm as he empties inside me, and my walls contract around him, holding on to him like a vice. I feel every pulse and throb of him. Even our heartbeats seem to be in sync, and for the longest moment, he stares at me like he’s the one who’s become afraid.

“You okay?” He eventually breaks the silence, surprising me when his hand tenderly strokes the hair off my face. I’m a sweaty, exhausted mess and can’t imagine how awful I must look.

“Yeah,” I whisper, still trying to catch my breath.

Cole slowly pulls himself out and, in his absence, I feel the real discomfort of his size.

He almost seems embarrassed by what just happened when he stands back up and drops his head.

“Are *you* okay?” I prop myself up on my elbows and check.

“Yeah.” His whisper comes out gravelly. I wish I could know what’s going through his head. Something’s definitely got him disturbed.

“You wanna go back to the ranch?” I check.

“No.” He shakes his head and frowns, almost like he doesn’t understand his answer. Then reaching forward he lifts me up off the bed and kisses me again.

“I wanna stay here a while,” he breaks away to tell me, pulling back the comforter and resting me back down so my head is on the pillow. Climbing in beside me, he wraps me tight in his arms and rests his chin on the top of my head.



We both lay in complete silence, and I stare up at the ceiling trying to decide if I feel more relieved or guilty. I haven't been with anyone since Aubrey. Ain't no one who I wanted until this sassy little redhead showed up on our ranch. I've held myself back, told myself I didn't need what my instincts were telling me, but what just happened came too easy.

For the time I allowed myself to wholly focus on her, all those dark thoughts in my head went away. So did the hate. It felt good not to be weighed down by the burden of it. But I gotta question how it could have been so simple. I loved Aubrey, I based my whole world and the future I had in it around her. I lost her. Then I lost her again, and my whole world crumbled. She shouldn't have been so easy to forget in those moments me and Savannah just had.

"I can see why you like it here." Savannah's voice drags me away from my thoughts, and I can't help liking the way her fingers trail over my chest so delicately. Everything about the girl is delicate and soft, apart from her fuckin' mouth.

"It's peaceful. You got everything you need." She reaches over me to grab the bottle from the nightstand and takes a sip. "And..."

"And what?" I roll on my side so I'm facing her.

"I know you like your own space." Her fingertips slide through my hair and she looks as though she feels sorry for me.

"Don't do that," I warn her.

"Do wha—"

“Look too deep, this can’t be deep.” I shake my head. Hard as it is for me to admit, I like this girl’s spirit, the last thing I wanna do is break it.

“I’m not going deep.” She laughs at me cutely. “I’m trying to understand you.”

“Well stop tryin’. I don’t even understand myself,” I tell her honestly. “We just gotta take this for what it is.”

“And what is it?” She creases her forehead together.

“It’s two people with a physical attraction to each other who ain’t gonna let it get beyond that. I told you that you can’t fall for me, Savannah.” I hear a slight fear in my voice and hope she doesn’t pick up on it.

“Maybe you should worry more about your own feelings. I’m a very loveable person. I’ll bet you fall first.” The smile that twitches onto her lips softens the tension I’ve created. “I’m gonna teach you how to have some fun, Cole Carson.”

“Oh yeah? And how ya gonna do that?”

“Just wait and see. Be prepared for the unexpected.” She kisses my lips before I can argue, then slowly presses her lips over my neck, sinking lower and lower down my body until her head disappears under the covers. I gasp in shock when I feel her teeth slightly graze against my already hard cock and have no doubt in my mind that this girl can read my fuckin’ mind. It scares the hell outta me, but I’ve never been one to run away from fear.

I pull up at the ranch just before sunrise so we avoid getting seen and when she steps up onto the porch, she smiles when she reaches the door and notices me lingering.

“You got something you wanna say?” she asks, looking mighty pleased with herself.

With the full intention of wiping the clever grin off her lips, I march onto the porch, grab her face, and pull it onto mine, kissing her the same way I did the night I started dropping my defenses with her.

“I could get used to these cowboy kisses,” she tells me, rubbing her lips together as I pull away.

“Good night, Red.” I slowly back off the porch and head toward the bunkhouse, hoping not to wake anyone up as I strip off my clothes and get into my bunk.

I slide my hand into the inside of my pillowcase and pull out the picture I have of Aubrey from inside it. It’s one that got taken of us both when we were teenagers and she was mine. It ain’t surprising that she’s smiling in the photo. Aubrey was always smiling back then. It was a time in her life when she’d never known tragedy and shared the same dreams for the future as I did. I got swept up in all that happiness for a while, she made me forget how cruel the world could be. Which is why when everything shifted, it felt more painful than ever. I won’t be led into that false sense of security again.

Tucking the photo back inside my pillowcase I rest my head, hoping that I’ll find better strength tomorrow.



“You must have been late coming home last night, I didn’t hear you come in.” Leia rests her ass against the kitchen counter and takes a bite of her toast

“I wasn’t too late.”

“I take it you both had a good time?” She continues to scrutinize me while I stir the eggs in the pan. “Come on, you have to give me something. I can’t imagine Cole on a date.”

“It wasn’t a date.” I roll my eyes and feel relieved when Wade steps into the room.

“Mornin’, ladies,” he greets us cheerfully. “Mmmm, what are we having?” He helps himself to a bite of Leia’s toast and then pulls a face.

“What the hell you got on that?” He swallows hard and then attempts to rub the taste off his tongue.

“Mustard.” Leia frowns at him as if that’s a perfectly normal thing to spread on toast.

“Mustard?” he repeats.

“Yeah, mustard.” She kisses his cheek before taking a seat at the kitchen table. “I thought maybe we could spread our search a little wider today, knock on some doors on the outskirts of town, and ask if anyone saw Esme around the time she disappeared.” Leia folds out the huge map onto the table. “There are some really good viewpoints north of town, then there’s Gallard Lake on the west, that’s usually popular with tourists too. There are some houses nearby we could visit.” The smile drops off Wade’s face and he gives me some stern eyes as Leia starts circling some locations with a marker pen.

“I can’t do anything today, but if you keep marking out some places, we can go tomorrow.” I throw a sarcastic grin back at her boyfriend. He may have a point about Leia’s Dad, but she’s feeling helpful right now and it’s having a positive effect on her. I’ll speak to her sister today and see what happened the night Zayne took them home, hopefully, I can clear any doubt that the Mayor was involved in this.

“You need help with anything?” She looks up.

“No, this is something I gotta do by myself.” I plate up the eggs and take them into the dining room where Garrett is sitting at the head of the table reading the paper.

“Morning, Mr. Mayor,” I snigger as I tuck into my rubbery eggs. “When’s Josie back on breakfast duty?” I ask when he ignores my attempt at a little humor over breakfast.

“Josie’s helping us with something else right now.” He folds down his paper and takes a sip of his coffee.

“Ahhh yes, the mysterious crazy chick Mitch has hauled up in the secret cabin,” I point out, giving up on the eggs I’ve made. I’m much more of a baker than a cook.

“How d’ya... you know what, I don’t even want to know.” He shakes his head at me.

“Your wife tells me everything, and I mean everything.” I wink playfully. “You know if you needed help, I could spend a few hours with the girl too.” I guess it would help to pull my weight around here, the Carsons have been good to me.

“No, the girl needs a slow introduction into normality. She has Josie during the day while Mitch works the ranch, then he’s there at night. That’s enough for her to get used to for now.”

“Makes you realize how lucky we are.” I sigh, pushing the eggs around my plate. I can’t remember a time when I’ve ever gone without anything in my life. My parents had house staff, and when I moved out and lived with Maisie, she was so grateful that my parents insisted on paying for everything that she did most of the chores around the house, including keeping

us fed. All I was ever good for was making brownies and cookies. I've got to get out of that mindset now.

"You're right there," Garrett agrees with me.

"Garrett, can I get a word?" Teresa walks into the room carrying one of the babies and dumps it onto his lap.

"Yeah, sure." He kisses his little girl on her head before looking up to hear what that word is about. Teresa's eyes dart across to me and she makes it very clear that she wants that word to be private.

"I best get goin', I got something I need to take care of." I lift my plate up and head back toward the kitchen where Wade has Leia's ass resting on the table and the pair of them are making out.

I push the fact that I wish me and Cole could be like that to the back of my mind. We have rules, and keeping our interactions secret was one of my own.

"I need a car," I interrupt them.

"You can take mine. Keys are hung up by the door," Leia tears herself away to tell me.

"Perfect, I'll be back soon." I leave them to it, grabbing the keys to her car on the way out the door.

My feet come to a standstill when I get onto the yard and look across to see Cole inside the Corral. He's with one of the horses Wade has been working on breaking in. I guess since Wade has upped his tempo in building the cabin for him and Leia to move into, Cole has taken over the job. I watch him for a while, surprised at the patience he shows the stubborn beast. I wonder what he's saying to it when his lips move and his hand strokes his back steadily but firmly. Then I think about the way he commanded me back at the line camp last night and feel that flutter return to my lower stomach.

I don't know if Cole senses me watching him or if it's a coincidence, but he looks over his shoulder at me. My heart pools into my stomach when he raises his lips into a smile and lifts his hat a little off his head. It's a smile that reminds me that we share a secret, and with the tingle of it making its way

straight to my panties, I quickly smile back and get into Leia's car before I rush over there and give that secret away.

I park a little up the road from the Walker mansion after I drive by and see that Veronica Walker is home, then I wait at least an hour until she pulls out the gates and heads off toward town. I get out of the car and make my way up to the house on foot, then ringing the bell I wait, hoping that Karina's in. I have to get this dealt with today because not being able to tell Leia doesn't seem fair.

"Hey." Karina rubs the sleep out of her eyes as she opens the door to let me inside. I've met her a few times and she seems a nice girl. Now, I really hope she's going to be an honest one.

"I take it you're here because of what Zayne told Cole?" She sighs as she leaves the door open for me to step through and leads us toward the kitchen. She flicks on the coffee machine and yawns.

"I need to know what happened to that girl." I take a seat on one of the stools while she reaches up to the cupboard and pulls down two mugs.

"It wasn't my dad if that's what you think," she tells me, her voice already trembling. It makes me wonder if she knows a little about the man her father was before he died. I don't recall Leia telling me she'd spoken to her about what he did.

"I just want to know what happened," I tell her calmly.

"I met her in the diner earlier that day. She'd come here to take some photographs for a project she was working on and was supposed to be meeting a friend she'd met online. That friend hadn't shown up and she was upset about it. I told her about a party I was going to and invited her along. She was nice." Karina's eyes go a little watery as she places a steaming mug in front of me.

"This friend she was supposed to meet, was it a guy or a girl?"

“A girl, she’d been talking to her for months, they had arranged to do an exchange. She was gonna show her around all the viewpoints here and then go back to Utah with Esme so she could do the same.” Karina shrugs.

“And she never said who this girl was?”

“Yeah, she asked if I knew her, and since the town was so small I figured I would. But I never heard of her. Said her name was Lexi, I think.”

That’s something I can look into, I guess.

“So what happened at the party?” I ask curiously.

“Nothing much, it was over in Billings, we got a ride there together with a guy who was into me, we danced, we drank.”

“Did you do any drugs?” I check.

“No.” Karina shakes her head at me as if I’ve offended her.

“I told you, she was a nice girl, a decent girl.” She wobbles her head at me.

“Why did you leave?”

“Because she decided she still wanted to take her photographs the next morning. She wanted to make an early start and since the guy who took us to the party was being a jerk, I called Zayne to pick us up.”

“Why Zayne?” I’m fully aware of the way I’m shooting questions at her now, but I’m eager to get to the truth.

“Because I can rely on him. Always have,” she tells me defensively.

“Anyway, he brought us home, she stayed here the night and left the next morning. She was heading for the lake I think, I told her it would be risky to go alone but she had a postcard picture of the view and wanted to shoot it for herself.”

“And that was it, the last you saw of her?”

“Yeah.” Karina nods with a haunting look in her eyes, I guess that’s a huge weight to carry.

“And why didn’t you go to the police when you found out she was missing?” Karina quickly drops her eyes from mine.

“Karina. Why?” I sense there’s something she doesn’t want to tell me.

“Because my dad told me not to,” she admits sadly.



I'm walking past the storage barn when a hand comes out of nowhere and drags me through the old wooden door.

“What the fuc—”

“Surprise,” Savannah whispers, her fingers already starting to undo my belt as she uses it to pull me toward the old Cadillac we got stored in the corner.

“You wanna... In here?” I question, the place is dusty and full of old crap.

“Why not?” She works fast to shimmy her jeans off her hips.

“I'm filthy.” I look down at myself, I'm covered in dust and dirt from tryin' to catch some of the steers that strayed from the herd.

“Just how I like ya.” Her hands reach around me and cup my ass before she thrusts our bodies tighter together.

“You're crazy,” I laugh at her, wondering how she's managed to instantly get me in a good mood. “Do you know Tate and Finn are right outside?”

“Better make it quick then,” she teases, circling her finger around the tip of my cock after she's taken it out.

“Jesus Christ.” I shake my head and lift her off her feet. When I place her ass on the hood of the Cadillac, she rests back and looks up at me daringly as she spreads her legs wider.

“You just focus on being quiet.” I grip her thighs and pull her down to meet my cock, watching her mouth stretch open as I fill her all the way.

She looks so beautiful with my cock fully seated inside her, and that irritating smile that I'm actually starting to like remains on her face as I thrust in and out of her. I take her face in one of my hands and when she nuzzles into it, I slip my thumb between her lips and she sucks it seductively. Her pussy is clutching my cock so tight, I'm startin' to worry this'll be over too quickly.

She looks up at me, her eyes peering into mine and telling me that she feels it too. What we have is too intense to be dictated by rules, we're gonna end up breaking them all, and each other. Her breaths are getting louder and harder for her to control, her pussy is soaked and feels like it was fuckin' made for me. I can see she's desperate to come so I lift my other hand from her thigh and wet my thumb with my tongue, rubbing it against her exposed clit and making her thrash and moan.

"Cole, I'm gonna come." She looks up at me desperately. Panic on her face as her cheeks flush pink.

I nod my head, giving her permission because instinct tells me she needs it. Then twisting the hand I'm cradling her face with, I squeeze it over her mouth as I fuck her pussy harder. Her loud cry is muffled by my hand and that desperate look in her eyes gets overcome with pleasure. I can feel my heart beating out of my chest as my own climax comes and I quickly lean over her body, replacing my hand with my mouth and growling as I grip her wavy red hair tight in my fist and empty inside her.

"Told you I'd show you how to have some fun." She giggles when we both get our breath back.

"So did Karina say why her dad told her not to tell anyone about the girl?" I ask, buckling my belt and taking in everything Savannah's been telling me while she's getting dressed.

It's hard not to be distracted by how hot she looks after being fucked by me. She's put her hair up in a messy bun, and

knowing I have everything to do with the fact she looks so flustered gives me a real sense of satisfaction.

“Yeah, he thought it would be bad for the family’s reputation. Her going to parties with older guys, and bringing home the girl who went missing the next day isn’t ‘*mayor’s daughter behavior*,’ apparently.” She shrugs back at me.

“He did it. That fucker did it.” I point my finger at her and feel my anger for him push through my veins.

“We don’t know that, I have other leads to go on. There was a girl who she was—”

“What do you mean, you have leads? Savannah, you ain’t a detective. Maybe Wade’s right, you need to leave this alone. Walker’s dead, he can’t do any harm now,” I tell her what everyone around here keeps telling me. Doesn’t stop me dreaming about all the ways I’d have liked to end him though.

“And what do you suppose I tell that poor girl’s mother, Cole? ‘*Sorry we think the mayor probably killed her but don’t worry, he’s already dead*,’ she bites back at me.

“That ain’t what I’m suggesting, but what I do know is that you can’t tell Leia about this. It’ll set her right back and Wade will lose his shit. That girl already knows far too much about what her father did, she don’t need to add anything to his list of sins.”

“What do I do, Cole?” She shakes her head and looks up at me helplessly.

“You try and get that woman to leave town, she’s not gonna find her daughter here. We both know that.” I drop my head, wishing I had a better option for her.

“I promised Leia I’d go on a door knock with her tomorrow. Esme’s Mom is speaking to the local authorities and seeing if they can look back into some old rescue cases. I can’t just make this stop, they both really want to find her. They aren’t ready to give up hope.”

“Well eventually, hope runs out. Do what you have to do with Leia, but you make sure she doesn’t get any kinda inclination that her father was a part of this.” I hate protecting

the man, he deserves every ounce of his daughter's hate, but at the same time I know how important Leia is to Wade, and that outdoes my petty needs right now.

“And what if someone we speak to tomorrow did see something?”

“Savannah, if someone saw somethin' they would have spoken up about it four years ago.”

“Karina didn't.” She frustrates the hell outta me by making a very good point.

“Okay then, you tell Leia what you know about this girl she was talkin' to online and you tell her that she was heading south to take those pictures. That way you will be avoiding anyone who might have felt obligated to keep information to themselves. You'll have to let Karina tell her sister everything about the day she met her in the diner, so she can know about the girl. But that's where it ends, no parties, no going back to her house, and no mention of her dad. Okay...?”

“I hate lying to Leia, she's become a friend,” Savannah admits, and something tells me that barring Maisie, she hasn't had many friends before. Maybe that's something we do have in common.

“I know it's hard, but keep in mind that you're doing this for her.”

“It's a good job I'm good at keeping secrets.” Savannah bites her lips as she steps closer to me, her hand reaching up and stroking over my bristly jaw, the comfort it brings don't fuckin' belong and yet I allow myself to take it in.

The barn door opens and when I look around and see Dalton, I quickly clear my throat and put some space between us.

“You folks okay?” My brother looks between us with that dumb assed smile on his face.

“Yeah, we're good, I just caught something in my eye is all.” I rub my finger into my eye socket and watch from my other as Savannah finds humor in my awful acting skills.

“Well since you got it handled I better head back to the house. Someone’s gotta pick up the slack for Josie not being around.” She sways her hips as she passes Dalton and steps back outside.

“You know what, Cole, I think you do got something in your eye.” Dalton takes a closer look at my face. “Looks like horse shit to me.” He smirks before grabbing the rope he came in here for and throwing it over his shoulder.

Mitch seems different to usual when I meet him out in the yard. His horse is saddled up and ready to go and he’s barking out his orders to the bunkhouse boys that are working around the yard. Finn gives me a strange look when I join them, one that tells me he’s picking up on the same thing.

“You ready to ride out?” I place my hand on Mitch’s shoulder and he’s looking real tired when he turns his head and nods back at me.

“What’s up?” I ask once we’re both out the yard and heading for grid 2 where the cattle are.

“Spread too thin as usual,” he answers.

“You know, if taking care of the girl’s becoming a problem we could get Finn or Tate to take a shift.”

“Me and Josie are coping just fine,” he tells me firmly.

“Josie is only there for a few hours a day while you help run the yard. You are stuck up in that cabin for far too long with a girl who’s batshit crazy. You don’t look like you’ve slept in days.”

“That’s because I haven’t. The girl doesn’t sleep, she has night terrors that sound like she’s being dragged into Hell, but she ain’t crazy. She’s damaged.”

“Like I said, we could...”

“No more people, Cole, she’s been through enough. Josie’s good with her, that fancy Doc Jimmer pays for visits three times a week. She can’t handle much more than that. I appreciate the offer but this is a promise I made to Jimmer, and

she ain't a burden," he mumbles that last part like he don't really want me to hear it.

"And what if there ain't a happy ending to this? What if the girl really is too damaged to fix?"

"That ain't an option, Cole, the girl's far too young and far too fuckin' beautiful." He kicks his horse into a trot, letting me know the conversation's over, and I hold Rebel back and let him get ahead.

I've known Mitch my whole life, and not once have I heard him talk about a woman that way. Something tells me the man needs some space to figure out the thoughts in his head.

It's almost dark when I get back to the ranch. Mitch rode straight back to the cabin where he's looking after the girl, Everleigh, we're watching for Uncle Jimmer. When we were done making our checks, I stuck around after to check all the fences were secure before I headed back. I take my time putting Rebel down for the night and when I step back out the stable, I look through the dining room window and see everyone seated around the table. I know there will be a space laid out for me, there always is, and despite not really being in the mood for company I decide to join them anyway. I won't admit to myself that the reason for that is because I wanna see Savannah.

Everyone looks a little shocked to see me when I trudge in and take my seat.

"Cole, nice to have you join us." Maisie smiles at me warmly, while Josie heads to the kitchen to grab me a plate.

Savannah waits until I'm seated before she smiles at me too. And this time it doesn't irritate me at all. How can it, when it belongs to me?



“**S**hall we try here?” Leia pulls the car to a stop at the bottom of a long track road that leads to an old-fashioned three-story house. “I wonder if he’ll follow us down there?” She giggles when she looks in her rearview mirror at the black van Finn is trying to hide the fact he’s following us in.

“Place looks like it’s been abandoned for years,” I point out.

“Perhaps she stayed here instead of the B&B in town.” Leia nods her head toward the *Guest House* sign that now only hangs by one chain.

“I don’t think anyone has stayed here in decades.” I laugh. “But I guess there’s no harm in trying.” I can see an old car parked outside one of the outbuildings. Maybe someone still lives here after all.

Leia turns the wheel and starts driving up the long, overgrown track. We pass a rusty old truck with no doors that looks as if it gave up working years ago, and the whole vibe of the place is already giving me the heebie-jeebies.

“Surely, no one lives here. I doubt the place even has electricity.” I get out the car and lift my head to stare up at the windows. The frayed net curtains are a dull gray, and when the breeze picks up from behind us it makes a creepy whistle sound as it wraps around the house.

“This place is creepy as hell.” I stare at Leia over the roof of the car, but she’s still far too distracted to be freaked out by our surroundings.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. She’s been quiet ever since Karina showed up this morning and told her about the girl Esme was

supposed to be meeting. Like Cole suggested, she omitted the rest of the events from her story.

“I don’t know why Karina didn’t say all that stuff to the police all those years ago. I remember the police going door to door, just like we’re doing now. Mom asked us both if we’d seen her and Karina said no. If she had said about this girl back then, maybe more could have been done.

“It’s not your sister’s fault, she was young back then, maybe she was worried about getting into trouble.”

“I thought we told each other everything. It’s not like her to keep things from me.”

“Well, you’re keeping a lot from her right now, and you know that’s only for the greater good. Not all lies are bad ones.” I have to trust my own words when I feel the weight of what I’m keeping from her become a little heavier.

“Come on, let’s see if Norma Bates is at home.”

“I’m pretty sure that was a motel.” Leia manages a laugh before she follows me onto the porch.

The wood beneath our feet is almost completely rotted, and the windows are so dirty you can barely see through them. I bang the cast iron door knock and wait for a response that I’m pretty sure we aren’t gonna get.

“Leia, once we’re done here, I think we should go home. You heard what Caroline said when she called. The local authorities said nothing from around that time was reported, but it doesn’t mean an accident didn’t happen. That girl could have slipped and fallen into a ravine, she could have been attacked by a wild animal. Not everything that happens around here has to be murder. We’ve knocked on just about every door in a three-mile radius, we aren’t gonna find anything in this old place,” I point out. “Maybe you should be focusing on something else. Something exciting.” I glance my eyes down to the bump that sticks out over her jeans.

“Hello.” Leia bangs the door a little harder and when she gets no answer, she drops her face into her hands and sobs.

“Leia, listen to me. I want as much as you to find this girl. But...”

“Don’t say it. Don’t say that she’s dead.” Leia takes a seat on the porch step. “If she’s dead it means he did it. What if Dad was really the girl she thought she was talking to, what if he lured her here so he could hurt her?”

“They’re all maybes, Leia, you can’t let maybes tear you apart, not at a time in your life when you have so much to look forward to.”

“How can I look forward when those innocent girls are dead? What if I could have saved them? How do you live with a murderer and not know it?” She looks up at me for answers that I simply haven’t got.

“You’re not to blame for what your father did. You...”

“What if I’m like him, Savannah? I’m a killer too, remember?”

“You killed him because he was going to hurt you and your baby. In that moment you saw him for what he was, and you weren’t going to be his next victim. You are nothing like your father.” I take her hand in mine and squeeze it tight. “Stop blaming yourself and thinking you don’t deserve this. You got a boyfriend who’s crazy about you and is building you the perfect cabin. The two of you are about to have a beautiful baby. Focus on that,” I tell her, relieved when Leia smiles and pulls me in for a hug. The wind picks up again, raising up the leaves that have fallen on the ground around us and when we hear a crash, we both jump.

“Let’s get the hell outta here.” I drag her up off the step so we can race back to the car and head for home.

“Where is everyone?” I ask Maisie when we get back to the ranch, she’s sitting out on the porch, rocking on the chair and looking a little spaced out.

“Maisie, are you okay?” I wave my hand in front of her face.

“I’m just tired.” She shakes herself out of whatever trance she’s been in and focuses on us with a half-hearted smile. “Everyone’s gone out to the grid to build windbreaks, there’s a storm coming in a few days and they wanna protect the herd.

“Maisie, you look real pale,” Leia points out. “If you’re not getting any sleep, me and Wade can help with the babies through the night?”

“It’s not that. They’re all pretty much sleeping through now. I just feel exhausted. I put the boys on the floor a second ago to play and I just dropped off, that’s why I came out here. Teresa thought the air would do me some good. I have this nasty taste in my mouth too, I can’t describe it but it won’t go away, not even after I brush my teeth.”

“Oh my god. You’re pregnant,” Leia announces, causing me and Maisie to look up at her in shock.

“I can’t be pregnant I’m breastfeeding.” Maisie shakes her head. “No. Let me rephrase that. I can’t be pregnant because I just had *three* babies and my husband is running for mayor.”

“Maisie, the breastfeeding thing is a total myth, trust me, I’ve read just about every book on pregnancy and parenting there is to try and prepare me and Wade for what’s coming. All of them say the same thing. They also say that after giving birth, a woman is at her most fertile.

“Oh my god.” Maisie stands up, slamming her hand over her mouth and letting the blanket she’s got around her shoulders drop onto the chair. “Why didn’t anyone tell me all this? I need to get to the pharmacy right now.”

“I’ll drive you.” Leia rushes back toward her car.

“Savannah, can you help Teresa with the kids? I’ll be right back and don’t you dare say anything to her or Garrett.” Maisie chases after Leia and hops into the passenger seat.

“Never a dull moment.” I shake my head as I walk inside the house. Teresa is on the couch feeding Breanna the milk Maisie must have expressed while tapping her feet and keeping the boys bouncing in their chairs.

“Hey.” I smile at her as I head upstairs. She looks as if she’s got things handled here. When it comes to her grandbabies, Teresa is all in. I have no doubt in my mind that she’d be happy if Maisie and Garrett were having another.

“Where were Leia and Maisie headin’?” Garrett steps out of his office with a curious look on his face.

“I thought you were building windbreaks?” I smile awkwardly when I realize I’m gonna have to come up with a lie.

“I don’t get to do that kinda thing anymore. Too busy reading through speeches and proposals.” He holds up the documents in his hand as evidence.

“So where were they goin’? I saw ‘em leave through the window. They looked in a rush.”

“They ermmm... There was a sale.” I think fast.

“A sale?” Garrett frowns at me.

“Yeah. Me and Leia saw it as we were driving through town, that cute little boutique they talk about all the time has a sale on, and as soon as we told Maisie she insisted Leia take her there straight away. You know how that girl loves to shop.” I laugh nervously when I figure he isn’t buying what I’m telling him. “Anyway, I need to check on something outside.” Turning on my heels, I head out the door and rush out to the yard before I can fuck up anymore.

The yard is empty and I rest my back against the stable, taking in the peace and quiet for a little while. My mind wanders back to the line camp and the storage barn and how good it feels to have Cole’s fingers touch my skin. Last night, eating across the table from him and not being able to touch him felt like a punishment. I know how hard he’ll be working today, but I hope he might find a little energy for me when he’s finished.

I take the opportunity while it’s quiet and make my way over to the bunkhouse, it’s empty like I expected, and when I see a notepad on the table I flick through the pages of card

scores until I get to a blank one. Taking the sharpened low pencil beside it, I scribble Cole a note.

Meet me at the line camp 9 pm

I know which bunk belongs to him from when I followed him in here the other day, and I head on over to place the note on his pillow. I can't help wondering if he ever thinks about me when he lies here at night. I think about him all the time. I'm always daydreaming about the way his eyes look at me or the way he smells. My hand instinctively reaches for his pillow and lifts it up from the mattress so I can take in a sniff of that manly smell I just can't get enough of.

"You're pathetic." I laugh to myself and as I flip the pillow back up the right way and go to place it back down, something falls out from the bottom of it. I crouch onto the floor and when I pick it up and see what it is, a pain I shouldn't feel slices through my chest.

I never got to meet Aubrey but I know the photo I'm holding is of him with her. I've heard Maisie and the others talk about how much he loved her and how he lost a part of himself when she died, even though she was married to another man. I see the way he's smiling in the picture and can't remember a time when I've never seen him look that happy with me. It puts a lump in my throat, not just because it hurts, or because I will never make him feel the way she did, but because I pity him.

I quickly place the photograph back where it belongs and leave my note on the top of his pillow.

I'm aware of the rules and how catching feelings isn't allowed, but I figure if I'm the only person who's gonna get hurt in this, then I'm entitled to break the rule. Maybe his heart will always belong to someone else, but that doesn't mean mine can't belong to him.



I'm in my office when I hear Leia's car pull back up outside the house, and I listen out for the girls coming back in. The front door goes and I hear footsteps rush up the stairs. Maisie hates being away from the babies, if nothing was wrong, the first thing she would do when she first got home would be to make a fuss of them. I get up from behind my desk and march out to the living area, just catching Leia on the top of the stairs, but seeing no sign of Maisie.

"Maisie," I call up assuming she's up there too, then when I don't get an answer I head on up to see what the hell's going on.

Leia is standing outside the bathroom door with a real guilty look on her face, and when I step in front of her she lowers her head and quickly rushes back down the stairs like a scared child.

"Maisie." I twist the handle of the door but it's locked.

"Maisie, let me in." I bang my fist against it.

"Go away," she calls back, making me even more concerned.

"Maisie, what's wrong?"

"Garrett, please just leave me alone." She sounds upset, maybe even a little angry, and I go over all the things I might have done to have upset her.

"Maisie, if you don't open this door I'm gonna break it down," I warn. She should know better than to think a door would stop me getting to her when she's upset. "Mais—" I hear a click and when the door creaks open, I push it all the way and see her standing by the basin with her head down.

“Darlin’, what’s wrong?” I rush toward her, raising her chin with the crook of my finger and forcing her to look at me. Her big, blue eyes are shining bright from the tears in ‘em, and as beautiful as she looks, I can’t stand it.

“You gotta tell me what happened. Have I...” I stop talking when her eyes point down to all the litter in the basin, a brown paper bag, a ripped open box, and an instruction leaflet. It’s a pregnancy test. My wife is taking a fuckin’ pregnancy test.

“Jesus Christ.” I take a step back in shock. “I thought you couldn’t get pregnant while you were...” My finger waves between her tits because right now I’m struggling with fuckin’ words.

“A common mistake it seems.” She looks back at me like she’s petrified. “Please don’t be mad. I know I’ve been stupid but...”

“Mad? Why would I be mad?” I question her.

“Because we only just had three babies. Because your life is being turned upside down right now by all this Harvey shit, and because... *We only just had three babies, Garrett.* Why aren’t you mad?” Now she’s yelling again and also looking at me as if I’m crazy.

“Cause there ain’t ever gonna be a time in this life when the woman who I am head over stirrups in love with tells me she’s gonna give me another kid and I’d be mad at her for it.” I step back toward her and place my hand over her flat stomach. Maisie got her figure back after carrying the triplets remarkably fast and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like the idea of her swelling back up again.

“Garrett, I’m tired all the time. I have no energy. How the hell am I supposed to be pregnant and look after three babies? How the hell are we gonna take care of four kids?” She strokes her hand over her forehead and sighs in defeat.

“Because we got a whole family of people around us who wanna help, because you’re amazing and strong, and right now you’re tired because you’re in the first trimester. I’ll take care

of you just like I did before. This is gonna be alright. Did you take the test?" I look around for it but can't see it.

"Yeah, just before you came in. I'm waitin' on the result." She looks nervous.

"Well then we might not even have anything to worry about," I point out.

"Come on, Garrett, we are the most fertile couple in Fork River's history." She makes another valid point and the tiny smile she makes as she does it tells me she won't be mad about this for very long.

"Is it time yet?" I whisper.

"Yeah." Her eyes glance over to the windowsill by the toilet where the white stick is resting.

"You want me to see what it says?" I tuck her blonde hair behind her ear and wipe away one of her tears with my thumb as she nods back at me slowly.

"Okay." I drop my hand into hers and squeeze it tight as I use the other to reach over to the windowsill and take the stick.

"You ready?" I ask before I turn it over and look at the result window.

"I'm ready." She smiles back bravely.

I turn the stick over and when I see the words *not pregnant* looking back up at me I feel a little surge of disappointment.

"False alarm, darlin'." I manage a smile for her, knowing that this was the outcome she wanted. It would be selfish of me to expect her to think otherwise. Maisie is an excellent mother; she puts everything she has into our babies. I couldn't expect her to give anymore.

She lets out a huge sigh of relief and throws her arms around my neck, then surprises me a few seconds later when she starts sobbing her heart out.

"What is it, are you disappointed?" I shake my head, trying to figure her out.

"No, this is for the best, but..."

“Maisie, talk to me.” I feel my frustration growing, if I don’t know what’s wrong how can I fix it?

“If I’m not pregnant, then what the hell’s wrong with me?” she asks, burying her head into my shoulder and letting her tears soak through my shirt.



I t's been a long day, but not too long to stop myself from heading out to the line camp when I see Savannah's message on my bunk. After a quick shower and a change of shirt, I head straight out there and can't help smiling to myself when I see she's borrowed Garrett's truck and parked in front of the cabin.

"You know you should really get your own rid—" The words stop coming when I see her lying out on the bed, bare ass naked apart from those boots I like so much.

"Wanna have some more fun, cowboy?" she teases as her hand slowly slides down her body and rests between her legs.

"I thought you might like to see for yourself the kinda things I get up to when you're not around." Her fingers stroke lazily against her clit, and I wet my lips wondering how the hell I can feel jealous of her using her own hand.

"You ever think of me when you get yourself off?" she asks, the smile on her face telling me she probably already knows the answer, but I nod back at her regardless.

I've spent every night since I got here wondering what it would feel like to have you touch me, and now that I know, it makes holding back real hard.

"Take your hand away," I order, lifting my hat off and balancing it on the bedpost as I step closer.

My tongue is desperate to taste her again, and when she doesn't do as I requested I sink onto my knees, snatch at her thighs, and twist her body so her legs hang off the mattress and her pussy is pressed against my mouth.

The sound she makes when I softly blow against her sensitive flesh is so fucking desperate but I love it. I love that I

have the ability to make this girl weak. I love how when we're together like this she lets me dominate, and I love that her pussy is already glistening and ready for me to take.

“Col—” She cuts off her own words when I make a slow lick through her center and with my name trapped in her throat, she needily bucks against my tongue.

There's so much I want to punish this girl for. It's so frustrating that I can't get her out of my head. I hate the way I worry about her when I'm not with her and, worst of all, I hate that I miss her. I want to hold her hand and kiss her goodbye the way Wade and Garrett do with their women. For so long I've closed myself off to the idea of having somebody, and now I wanna break every damn one of the stupid rules we have in place. I want this girl to fall for me. I want her to fall so hard she'll never get back up. That way, I'd get to keep her.

It's selfish of me to think like that. I'm not the kinda man she should be around, not even on my good days. I have scars inside and out. I'm diseased with hate and the need for vengeance and this girl feels like the cure to all that. Allowing her to do that wouldn't be fair, I'd suck all the good outta her and bring her down, and that's an unfair consequence for her to have to pay.

I'm not just scared of hurting her. I'm scared of getting hurt myself. Which seems strange since I've hit rock bottom. I thought that made me indestructible, I relied on it, and then just when I thought nothin' could hurt me no more, along came fuckin' Red.

I climb up her body and kiss her, letting her fingers unbutton my shirt and drag it off my shoulders. Her lips taste like whiskey, maybe she had a few shots of it for courage before I got here, and now I'm starting to wish I'd done the same.

“What's wrong?” She looks up at me and asks when she notices that I'm hovering over her body and staring at her. I shake my head because nothing's wrong. Nothing's wrong at all. In fact, I've just figured out how right everything is.

“Cole?” She stares back at me, puzzled.

“Nothing’s wrong,” I promise her, cradling her face in my hand as I kiss her again, this time in a different way to the times before. I don’t kiss her like I wanna possess her, or like I need to prove something. I hold her like she’s the most precious thing in the world and I kiss her like she owns all the shattered pieces of my stone-cold heart.

A warmth spreads over my skin and I feel that coldness start to thaw, and I can’t deny that it’s happening. I’m falling. I can’t stop it and I don’t even think I want to anymore.

I reach down between us and strip off my jeans, letting my cock find its way to her and watching her pretty eyes stretch open as I slowly edge it inside her. She’s a sight that seems too perfect to look at. I love the way her cheeks flush almost as red as her hair when she’s high on pleasure. I love the tiny dusting of freckles on her nose that only show up when the sun’s bright. I’m starting to think I might love everything about this woman, even the parts that drive me crazy.

“You’re perfect.” The words slip out of my mouth as I steadily thrust inside her and Savannah looks surprised by ‘em. Her eyelashes flutter and her lips twitch into a smile that she bites back down. I don’t regret the words coming out, in fact, her reaction to ‘em gives me the hope that maybe she wants to break the rules too.

I take my time with her, I kiss her neck and her shoulders while I continue to slowly ease myself in and out of her perfect tight hole. I let her come whenever she wants. I let her hands wander all over my body and explore me, no longer feeling afraid of what she might uncover. I don’t know where or when the tide shifted for us, but I do know that she owns me now.

When I wake up, it’s her big doe-like eyes that stare back at me. The light is low and flickering from the candles she’s lit and it creates the perfect glow around her soft red hair. I flick a strand of it between my fingers just to check I’m not dreaming.

“Things have changed, haven’t they?” Savannah smiles at me sadly.

“Yeah, darlin’, things have changed,” I admit, no point denying it to her or myself. It’s what we’re gonna do about it that’s gonna be the problem.

“Do you still love her?” She shocks me with her question and when I narrow my eyes at her, she explains. “Aubrey, do you...”

“Aubrey’s dead.” Even saying those words feels as though someone’s carving my guts out.

“Just because someone’s dead, doesn’t mean you can’t still love them. You must miss her.”

“I don’t miss her. I lost her a long time before she died. What I miss is what we shoulda had,” I admit, not liking one bit where this is heading. I don’t wanna talk about Aubrey, not here and not like this.

“I’m the kinda man who needs closure and I don’t feel like I got that with her. I certainly didn’t get it with Mayor Walker,” I point out, trying to move us on from the subject.

“And you would have killed him?”

“I’ve killed men for much less,” I confess because I won’t hide who I am, not from her or anyone else.

“Is that supposed to be a warning?” She smiles at me.

“It’s exactly what it should be. Red, I should be telling you to run. To go back to whatever privileged little life in L.A. that you came from.”

“But...” She slides her finger over my bottom lip and after I quickly take it between my teeth, I grab hold of her wrist as I gently release it and place a kiss on her fingertip. “I don’t want to.”

I drag her hand down so it rests on my chest and when her head snuggles into the crook of my neck and she breathes me in, I appreciate the comfort she gets from it.

“Did you kill the man who put those scars on your back?” she asks, and I swallow real hard when I think about it.

“I thought about it,” I confess.

“So he’s still alive?” She almost sounds as if she doesn’t believe me.

“Oh yeah, he’s still living.” I laugh sarcastically.

“Cole.” She suddenly sits up and looks down at me in shock. “Did you do that to yourself?” I don’t like the horror on her face, I’ve never talked about this shit with anyone for fear of seeing that look. People would never understand, not even if I explained it to ‘em. But I got a feelin’ that maybe she just might.

“It started when Mom left. I was twelve years old and the troublesome one. She was constantly scolding me, and Dad always told me that I was gonna drive her to some kinda breakdown. The day before she left, I was tossing a ball around the house after she told me not to, and I knocked one of the ornaments her mom had given her off the mantelpiece. It smashed into thousands of pieces, it was never gonna be fixable, and when Mom found me looking at it she wasn’t angry like I thought she’d be. She was real fuckin’ sad. She sobbed and stared at those broken pieces for what felt like hours. I wanted her to shout at me, I wanted her to make me pay for what I did, but she didn’t say a word. Then the next day, we woke up and she was gone.”

“You thought your mom left because of that?” Savannah looks sorry for me.

“I figured Dad was right and I pushed her too far. I hated myself for it. I blamed myself for the fact she’d left and I couldn’t bear that pain being inside me. Mitch used to tell us stories about when he was younger and how wranglers got whipped like horses for not pulling their weight where he came from. I remembered thinking about how awful that was and, at the time, well, I felt like I needed something awful. I waited ‘til everyone was asleep and I went out to the stable. I found Grandpa’s old training whip and took off my shirt...”

“Oh god.” Savannah covers her mouth with her hands as tears build in her eyes.

“The first strike felt like I’d broken through the damn I’d built up inside me. I learned fast that pain on the outside is far easier to tolerate than pain on the inside. So I struck myself again, harder. It stung and the pain forced tears in my eyes. It felt good when they came too. Hell knows I’d held ‘em in for long enough.

“Cole.” Savannah squeezes my hand tighter.

“I hated her for leaving, she was making Garrett, Wade, and Breanna suffer for what I did. Then, over time, I figured it was the ultimate punishment for her to give me. She knew how much I loved ‘em all. I was always taking the blame for the shit my brothers did, and Breanna may have only been a baby, but I always wanted her close. I was scared something bad would happen to her and wanted to be there to protect her all the time.” I think back to those days and how scared I used to be of losing Breanna. She wasn’t born at home like me and my brothers were. Mom got rushed into hospital for an emergency cesarean and I remember Grandpa cried that night because he thought we were gonna lose ‘em both.

“That’s why when they both came home from the hospital I thanked God and promised myself that I’d never let anything happen to my little sister.

“I stopped doing it when we got used to Mom not being there, I focused on the ranch, and things started going good. I met Aubrey and she made me happy. And then one night, Breanna never came home.”

“I’m so sorry.” Savannah gives up on holding in her tears and I hate the pity on her face.

“We all dealt with it in different ways, but we all blamed ourselves. She was our sister, we were all supposed to protect her. The thought of her throwing herself off that damn edge because she felt like she had no better option or that she couldn’t talk to one of us really made me want to do it too. I thought about it over and over, I even drove my truck up there and sat for a while, trying to imagine what was goin’ through

her head. Then I thought about my brothers back at home and what it would do to 'em. I'd only be multiplying their grief and blame. So I came back to the ranch and I took that whip out again. I cut that leather into my skin until it bled then I did it some more. I wanted to hurt worse than ever. I wanted to tear the pain outta my body and that was the only way I knew how. The scars are bad because for a real long time, I never let them heal. I thrashed myself almost every night because the pain inside me never fully went away."

"Do your brothers know?" she asks.

"Garrett caught me once, he made me promise to stop."

"And did you?"

"A promise between a Carson brother is a sacred vow. I had to." I manage a smile for her. "We never talked about it again and I kept that promise I made right up until the day Aubrey died. I won't apologize for breaking it. When life brings ya to ya knees we gotta do whatever it is that makes ya stand up again. I haven't done for a while."

"And do you still think about it?" She studies me curiously

"You wanna hear something crazy, Red?" I take her by the hips and place her on top of me. "Since you've been in town driving me crazy, I haven't needed to. Not even when I found out about Walker. You're a pain in my ass, but you keep me from the whip." I wrap my fingers around her throat and drag her lips closer to mine. "I think you might just be saving me from myself," I admit.

The growing sense of helplessness cements deeper into my chest when I remind myself why I can't let her be my savior.

"I gotta be somewhere." I quickly get out of bed and pull on my jeans.

"What? I thought we could..."

"Go back to the ranch, Red." I pull on my boots and pick up my shirt from the floor, reaching over the bed and placing a kiss on her cheek before I rush out the door.



“Morning. Is Caroline here?” I ask Fiona when I step into the guest house reception.

“She checked out this morning.” Her answer surprises me. “But she did leave you this.” She turns around and takes an envelope from one of the pigeonholes. “And I’m sure she mentioned something about heading over to the diner for some breakfast before she heads back to Utah. I’m really struggling to cook eggs right now.” She taps her hand proudly over her tummy.

“Sucks, don’t it? Thankfully, I’m past all that now. I just want to eat everything in sight.” I roll my eyes before saying goodbye and rushing over to the diner to try and catch Caroline before she leaves.

I find her sitting in a booth and lazily stirring a spoon around her coffee.

“Leia.” She smiles when she sees me and I don’t know if it’s out of shock or disappointment, but she sure looks nervous.

“Were you just going to leave without saying goodbye?” I hear the hurt in my voice.

“Of course not, that’s what the letter was about.” She glances down to the letter I’m still clutching in my hand.

“Caroline, you can’t leave. There’s still hope.”

“Leia, sit down,” she waves her hand to the space opposite her and when I do as she says, she takes both my hands in hers and holds them tight.

“My daughter is dead,” she tells me, trying her best to be strong. “Esme had a wonderful home life. She had friends and

family who adored her. If she was alive, she would have found a way home. I was talking to the authorities yesterday and they went through some of the things that could have happened to a girl out hiking on her own. There were so many risks. I've just got to accept that I've lost her forever."

"No, you don't have to accept that at all. Supposing someone has her, they could be..."

"There would have been a ransom, and even if that was the case. Four years is a long time. It's unlikely that a person would keep a victim for that long."

"That's not true. There's a girl back at the ranch who was kept prisoner in a basement for five years. Mitch and Josie are helping her re-adjust. These things do happen. Maybe that's what happened to Esme? Please don't give up hope. Please don't think she's dead." I can feel the panic building in my throat. I'm too scared to close my eyes in case I see his face again. I've been having the worst dreams about my father lately. I've watched him shove Breanna off that cliff, I've seen his hands clasped around Aubrey's throat, and the last few nights I've seen him hurt Esme too. I don't know how, so my imagination makes up a different way each time.

"Leia, I appreciate all you and Savannah have done. It's the kind of thing Esme would have done." Caroline smiles fondly. "But sometimes holding on to hope can be what destroys us." She slides her hands away from mine and goes to stand up, but I tug on her arm and clench it tight.

"My dad." I blurt the words out because I feel I owe this to her. Caroline frowns at me in confusion and my eyes dart around us to check for anyone listening before I drag her closer.

"My dad killed two girls right here in this town. He was a murderer," I whisper sharply, watching her eyes widen. She looks quite disturbed as she sinks back into her seat.

"Is he in jail?" she whispers.

"No, he's dead." I hate the fact that those words break my heart. I hate the man and everything he did, how can I possibly

be sad about the fact he's dead? "But I need to know that your girl is still alive. I need to be sure he didn't kill her too, because I can't stand the guilt I feel for never seeing what he was."

"Sweetheart." Caroline's eyes fill with sympathetic tears. "How would you ever have known?"

"Because we were close. Me and him understood each other, at least I thought we did. I loved him, and I felt the love he had for me too."

"My dear girl, you can't carry that guilt with you anymore. You're about to become a mother, and take it from someone who knows, that is the greatest gift in the world. Don't let what happened in your past overshadow all the beautiful times you have ahead of you. Your father did not kill my daughter. Even if he did, you wouldn't be to blame. Leia, if the man's dead he can't hurt anybody else." She manages another brave smile for me.

I close my eyes and nod my head because I know she's right.

"Now, you have my number and I'd very much like a picture of that beautiful baby when it's born. Treasure every second, Leia." She kisses my cheek before standing up and I rush to my feet, wrapping my arms around her. "Esme was so lucky to have you," I whisper, thinking of my own mother and how cold-hearted she is

"I was the lucky one." Caroline smiles fondly.

"Goodbye, Leia, I wish you all the happiness in the world." I nod my head and watch her get into her crammed-full station wagon and drive away, knowing that all her chances of happiness vanished with her daughter.

"Oh hey, sweetheart," Teresa greets me when I get home.

I made a decision on the way back here, I decided that I'm gonna listen to Caroline's advice and I will not allow what my father did to ruin all that me and Wade have to look forward

to. I felt a strange stir in my stomach while I was driving that I've never felt before, and I'm convinced it was my baby saying, "*Good choice, Mom.*"

I'm smiling at that thought when Breanna starts crying and just as I'm heading over to grab her, Teresa beats me to it. She lifts up her granddaughter, cooing over her lovingly and that makes me smile too. Teresa's really proven herself over the past few months. I know Wade is finding it much easier to be around her these days, and I can't imagine how hard it must have been for her to be separated from her children for so long. Especially since Breanna was just a baby when she left.

"Where were you?" The question comes right off my lips and when Teresa turns her head and looks at me, I immediately regret it

"I'm sorry, you don't have to answer that. Don't answer it. It was rude of me."

"No, it's fine." She steps closer to me and takes a seat on the couch, bouncing baby Breanna on her knee.

"When Bill told me I had to leave I realized I had nowhere to go. My entire married life had revolved around this ranch and this town. I had no friends of my own. So I went to the only man who I figured could help me."

"Who?" I take a seat beside her, suddenly intrigued.

"You met the boy's uncle when he came for Thanksgiving." She shrugs.

"Jimmer?" I stare at her in disbelief.

"I'm surprised you didn't pick up on the tension." She laughs.

"I did, which is why I'm shocked it was him who you went to," I admit.

"Like I said, I had little choice. I was very aware of how much Bill's brother hated me, but I also knew that he knew how much Hank loved me. Jimmer had known about us for years. He didn't agree with it, of course, but he loved his father very much."

“So you were in Colorado all that time?” I question her further.

“Oh no, dear. Jimmer couldn’t bear to look at me. He sent me to one of his other Charters, ordered his president there to take care of me until I found myself a job and found my own place. I ended up in Long Beach.”

“Long Beach, California?”

“The very one.” Teresa smiles sadly.

“And where did you go after that?”

“I went nowhere. I stuck it out and became a shell. I’d lost my kids and the man I loved. I’d just learned that the man I was married to and so opposed to violence was capable of killing his own father, and I feared he’d change his mind about letting me live and come for me too. I stayed at the club for its protection and because, like I said, I had nowhere else to go.

“And Jimmer didn’t mind?”

“Jimmer didn’t give two shits. I guess he figured he’d done his duty to his father and offered me somewhere safe. He never forced me to become a whore for the members of that Charter.”

“You were a...” I can’t believe what I’m hearing and I suddenly feel like this is not something we should be discussing in front of these little ones.

“I was a Dirty Soul slut.” She laughs as if what she’s telling me is no big deal.

“Teresa, I’m so sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?” She laughs. “I was the one who made the choices. I couldn’t be the woman I wanted to be anymore. So I just went wherever the journey I was on took me. It was easier to forget what I’d lost when I was drunk every night. Some of the members were good to me, some of ‘em weren’t, but the best part about it was...” She leans in closer. “I didn’t care. I felt like nothing could hurt me anymore. I was free.”

“So what made you come back?” I ask, still perplexed by her revelation.

“I heard that Bill died and figured my kids might need me.”

“And what about Breanna? You must have heard about her too. Didn’t you figure they’d need you then?”

“I couldn’t come back, Leia, not while Bill was alive. He would have killed me just like he promised.”

I remember Wade telling me what happened. I was just as shocked as everyone else around here when I learned that Bill Carson hung his own father and had made his wife choose to either leave town or join him on the rafters after he had learned about their affair.

Teresa really didn’t have a choice.

“I spent some time getting sober, it took a little while but I was determined not to come back here until I was sure I was stable enough. I knew it would be hard and that the boys would be unforgiving. I felt like they deserved the truth and now I’m here, I’m just trying to be the best version of myself.” She smiles sadly.

“Do they know about the club and what you did there?”

“Maybe.” She shrugs. “I think Finn was as surprised to see me when I showed up here as I was to see him. I watched that boy grow up at the club, I even cried at his funeral.”

“Finn?” I stare at her in shock.

“Finn was a Soul before he was a cowboy, sweetheart. He supposedly died in prison. And I’ll bet him being still alive and workin’ this ranch has a lot to do with the wise old uncle.” Teresa sniggers. “I don’t know if Finn’s shared the fact I was at the club with the boys. If he has, they haven’t mentioned it.

“Leia, I’m just grateful to be here and to get a second chance at this. I want to do better for my grandbabies than I did for my own children and in doing so, I really hope I can earn my boys’ forgiveness.”

“Well, you’re making a real good start.” I stroke Breanna’s cheek as she sits happily on her grandma’s lap.

“And what do you think we will be getting next?” Teresa taps her hand affectionately over my stomach when I rest back on the couch.

“I have no idea.” I smile as I look down at the tiny bump that’s really starting to grow now. I’ve not allowed myself the time to think about things like that all that much. The sad thing is, I haven’t really allowed myself to think about it at all. I’ve distracted myself from all that happened with Dad by reading all the books and getting all the practical information, but I’ve not allowed myself to be excited by how magical all this is.

“Well, I hope for this little one’s sake you have a girl. It won’t be easy growing up outnumbered by Carson boys.” Teresa laughs.

“Where’s Maisie?” I stop laughing with her when I realize there’s no sign of her.

“She’s upstairs taking another nap. Poor girl’s shattered. I’m really starting to worry about her.”

“You think she should see a doctor?” I’ve been worried about her for a while now, she seems to be getting worse rather than better.

“Maybe, it can’t be easy having so much to think about and we must remember how young she is. But we’ve got her back. Me, you and Savannah will take care of her.”

“We sure will.” I kiss my mother-in-law on the cheek and stand up.

“Thank you, Leia.” She quickly takes my hand before I can walk away. “You’ve just made me feel like I’m part of this family again.”

“Part of it.” I huff a laugh at her. “You’re half responsible for it.”

She smiles like she’s proud of that fact before I head off to find Savannah so I can tell her the news about Caroline.



1 week later

I stare across the table at Cole with venom in my eyes, cursing him in my head, and hating that between my legs is a constant throbbing reminder of how long it's been since we were together.

"Something wrong, Savannah?" Garrett asks.

"No, I'm great." I stab my fork into the meat on my plate and slice my knife through it, imagining it's Cole's flesh. He looks up from under those hooded eyes to give me a cold stare then focuses back on his own plate. And that right there is pretty much all I've gotten out of him since he made his confession to me at the line camp last week. I really thought we'd made progress. I figured we were heading somewhere better than this stupid arrangement we had going on. It really felt like Cole had opened up to me, and I don't know what I did to make him close the gates in my face again.

"I got stuff to be doing." Cole gets up from the table when he's finished, picking up his hat and placing it on his head before he marches out the dining room.

I refuse to turn my head and watch him leave, so I wipe the corners of my mouth with a napkin and when I look up and see everyone around the table staring at me, I shrug.

"What's everyone's problem?"

“Ermmm, you can cut the atmosphere with a knife,” Dalton points out awkwardly.

“His problem, not mine.” I excuse myself too, heading straight up to my room and slamming my door like a grumpy teenager.

I look out my bedroom window toward the bunkhouse where Cole has his back rested against the wall and is smoking a cigarette. He’s looking up at my window and when he notices me staring right back at him, he drops his cigarette, crushes it under his boot, and heads toward the stable.

“Grrrrr.” I grip my hair in my hands and flop back onto the mattress. I have no idea what this is about and I hate that I let myself get my hopes up about us.

My phone vibrates on the nightstand and I get this stupid little hope that it might be him. When I pick it up and see that it’s my dad, my heart sinks. This is the tenth time he’s called today and I can’t ignore him for much longer, so reluctantly, I answer.

“Savannah... darling, it’s Daddy.”

I roll my eyes and draw in some strength.

“What do you want?” I ask, hoping this will be quick and painless.

“I want you to come home, of course. We all miss you terribly.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen right now. I told you I needed space.”

“You did, and we’ve given you plenty of it. It’s time to come home. Stop playing games, Savannah.” His tone changes from friendly to agitated in an instant.

“The fact you think all this is a game only proves you don’t know me at all,” I snap back.

“I only made this call out of consideration. You’ve forced my hand and I’ve had to take measures.”

“What kind of measures?” I sit back up when I feel the panic rise in my chest.

“The kind of measures that will get you back on track and make you start seeing sense. I’ll see you soon, darling.” His words almost sound threatening as he hangs up the phone, and I launch it at the wall before bursting into tears.

I don’t know what he has planned but it’s unreasonable for him to expect me to go back after all that happened. Whatever he has coming for me. I will fight against it, and I will fight against whatever it is Cole’s playing at too. I stand back up, heading out of my room and storming out the house to confront Cole face to face.

I find him in the tack room sitting on a crate and smoking something that smells a lot like the stuff I did at the River Boys’ party.

“What do you want?” His hat is resting low on his head and covering his eyes and he doesn’t even give me the courtesy of lifting it.

“What do I want?” I laugh at him bitterly. “I want you to explain to me what the hell’s goin’ on here. The other night...”

“The other night shouldn’t have happened. I shouldn’t have put all that heavy shit on ya. I broke the rules and I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care about the rules, Cole. And I sure as hell don’t want your apologies. I don’t want there to be rules between us anymore. I thought that’s what you wanted too.”

“Well, it ain’t.” He finally lifts his head and looks for my reaction.

“You’re a liar,” I tell him, holding back my tears because there is no way on Earth I’m gonna let him see how much he’s hurting me.

“Savannah, why do you have to push shit? I’m tryin’ to do ya a favor here.” He scrubs his hand over his face in frustration.

“By treating me like I’m nothing to you? By confusing the hell out of me and making me fall...”

“Stop... Don’t say that.” He points his finger at me, standing up and storming toward me until I’m against the wall. Just being in his presence is making me crave his hands on me. Even though the fierce look on his face suggests he could do some serious damage to me.

“I’m tryin’ hard to do what’s right here, and you’re making it impossible. Stop.” He loses a little of his hard persona when his voice wobbles.

“Don’t pretend you don’t feel it too, Cole.” I shake my head at him. “It’s okay to be scared. But it’s not okay to treat me like I never existed.”

“I’m being cruel to be kind.” He hisses through his teeth. “You don’t know me, you don’t know what kind of man I am, Red. Every female I ever cared about is dead.”

“I know you.” I reach my hand up and press my fingertips over his lips so he can’t interrupt me. “And I know that, right now, you’re being a coward. When you’re ready to be a man, Cole Carson, come find me.” I slide myself from him and head across the yard, wiping the tears off my cheeks before I get to the house.

I head straight for the drinks cabinet and pour myself something strong, knocking it back in one gulp.

“Tough night?” Maisie asks, coming down the stairs with the baby monitor and approaching me with caution.

“You have no idea.” I shake my head and pour myself another.

“Wade and Leia have gone to visit her mom and sister, Garrett’s got lots of work to do, and Teresa is reading in her room. You wanna chill out and watch a ridiculous over-the-top romance movie like we used to?” She smiles.

“That sounds perfect.” I place the drink back down and head over to the couch.

“I’ll go make us some popcorn while you pick the film.” Maisie hands me the remote control before heading into the kitchen, looking a little brighter than she has been lately. I’m flicking through the selection of chick flicks when I hear the door knock, and since Maisie is on popcorn duty, I call out and tell her I’ll get it.

“You just make sure you don’t burn those kernels,” I laugh, remembering how popcorn was never something Maisie would let me be in charge of when we lived together. Not after I nearly set fire to the kitchen in our old apartment.

The smile quickly drops off my face when I open the door and see who’s standing on the other side.

“Dan?” I can barely believe my eyes, and my heart immediately starts to up its tempo. I guess this is the *measures* my father took, and it’s a low fucking blow, even for him.

“Hey, babe.” Dan flashes me that cute all-American boy grin. “I thought it was time for me and you to talk.”



She's right, of course, she's fuckin' right. I am being a coward. I think back to last week and how good it felt lying beside her and opening up the way I did. I should never have let the voices back inside my head. But I did, I've let them scream at me and curse me in my sleep. I allowed guilt to dispel any hope Savannah had given me of having something good with her, and now I've hurt her instead. I have to stop doing this, not just to her but to myself. Savannah has proven to me that I can be happy with her. Avoiding her these past 7 days has been almost impossible. Do I really want to live in self-pity and loathing for the rest of my life? Am I really gonna let a girl like Savannah, who makes me feel as if my heart was never broken when I'm with her, slip through my fingers? No, I ain't. I'm gonna walk over to that ranch and I'm gonna tell her how I really feel, and she better be ready because I'm gonna break every damn rule we ever made.

I march across the yard and fling open the door and when I see the tall man standing in the living room with Maisie, I can't help wondering who the hell he is. Maisie suddenly looks very nervous when she notices me. Like she's worried I'm gonna do him some harm.

The preppy bastard is dressed like he's just stepped off the fuckin' golf course, wearing chinos and a polo shirt, and I'll bet he's one of Harvey's little moles, come here to check if we're all walking to heel.

"Who's this?" I look at Maisie and gesture my head at him.

"Cole. It's fine. I'm dealing with it." There's no sign of Savannah here or Garrett.

"I said, who is he?" I step closer to the stranger and stare him right in his eyes. He seems harmless enough, but I've

learned the hard way that looks can be deceiving.

“This here is ermmm... It’s...”

“My name’s Daniel, I’m Savannah’s fiancé.” He holds out his hand for me to shake and when I ignore it and look toward Maisie, she shakes her head and closes her eyes as if she is as clueless as I am.

“Her what now?” I question the fucker standing in front of me.

“I’m her fiancé, I came here to try and talk some sen—”

“Where’s Savannah?” I cut him off and ask Maisie.

“She left, she got in Leia’s car and drove off,” she informs me.

“Cole.” Garrett comes storming out of his office and I can tell by the fury on his face that something’s happened.

“What’s up?” I ask.

“We need to get to Grid 2 right now.” He tosses one of the rifles he’s carrying at me.

“What happened?”

“The herd’s been attacked.”

“Wolves?” I sling the gun onto my shoulder.

“No, dogs. A fuckin’ pack of ‘em.” Garrett shocks me.

“What the...”

“Come on, we gotta check it out.” He grabs his truck keys from by the door

“Garrett, Savannah’s gone,” I tell him.

“Yeah, and what?” He shakes his head like it ain’t a big deal.

“And we need to find her.” I swear I’m gonna lose my temper with him.

“Who’s this guy?” He stares at the disturbed looking stranger, who’s claiming to be Savannah’s fiancé.

“I’m Daniel, I’m—”

“He’s Savannah’s fiancé,” Maisie interrupts him and suddenly even my brother looks shocked.

“Well, he should be the one to find her then. Come on, we need to find out who these dogs belong to.” He places his hat on his head and heads out the door

“Go with him. We’ll find her,” Maisie promises me, and figuring the best place for me is somewhere away from this whole fucked up situation, I follow my brother out the door.

“Holy shit.” I shine the torch on the ground where the blood and guts are spread out from the massacre.

“Mitch heard the commotion from the cabin he’s staying at, he came out here just in time to see the trucks pulling away.

“How many?” I ask.

“Four trucks full of dogs.” His eyes are full of anger. He’s only wearing a white tee and his boxers and must be freezing his balls off. I got the number plate from one of ‘em. I’ve already sent it to Zayne.”

“I don’t think we need it.” Garrett shakes his head as he looks down at the massacre for himself.

“Only one person I know of around here who keeps that many dogs.”

“The Bambrooks fight their dogs, they don’t do this shit. Besides, they got no issue with us,” Mitch points out when he gets what Garrett’s suggesting.

“The Bambrooks will do anything for a fast buck,” I back up my brother. This has got them written all over it.

“Come on. Let’s go have a talk with them.” He starts heading for the truck

“Garrett, that’s not a good idea.” Mitch quickly pulls him back.

“Of course it is, there are over thirty dead cattle here, Mitch. I don’t know why they did this, but I’m sure as fuck gonna find out.”

“I ain’t saying that they don’t need to be spoken to. I’m just sayin’ that it can’t be by you who goes. You can’t risk nothing right now, boss, you gotta step back and let other people deal with this kinda thing.”

“But—”

“No buts, not until we’re clear of Harvey. Cole’s got this. Dalton’s already on his way back. They can go with Tate and Finn and do what needs to be done. You, you go home to your wife and your kids and you plan what you’re gonna say at the charity auction on Friday night.”

“I fucking hate this.” Garrett slams his boot into the dead carcass by his feet.

“I know.” I grip his shoulder. “But don’t you worry. I’ll make those assholes wish they never heard of our family, let alone fucked with it,” I promise.

We arrive at the Bambrook house an hour later, the place isolated from anywhere, tucked inside a valley, but you can hear it from miles away because of all the barking dogs. It ain’t their fault, the poor bastards have been trained to kill since they were pups, the real beasts are their owners, the ones who put ‘em in the fights and work ‘em ‘til they’re dead. The men who ensure these animals will have to be caged their whole lives because they’ve had aggression bred and trained into them.

Every one of those men are gonna die tonight.

“How many?” Dalton asks as Tate looks through the binoculars.

“I count six.” He looks up. There’s only four of us but that doesn’t matter, after hearing about Savannah’s secret fiancé, I got the power of a dozen men inside of me.

“Come on, ain’t no use sitting around here waiting.” I wanna unleash my anger and spill blood. I lead the silent march down through the valley and up to the Bambrook brothers’ front door with Dalton, while Tate and Finn head around the back. The dogs are barking at the metal cage they’re trapped in, covered in our herd’s blood, frothing at the mouth, and looking ready to fuckin’ kill all over again. Which is why we have to make sure the cunts inside don’t get the chance to let them loose on us.

“They wouldn’t kill a human, would they?” Dalton whispers as we wait for the text to come through from Tate to say they’re in position.

“I don’t think they have a preference.” I shrug, taking a breath when my phone lights up, then moving fast to kick the door through. Three startled faces look up at me, proving that these fuckers are cowards when they haven’t got the power of their dogs to back ‘em up. Two run for the back door while the one bolts for the kitchen, and that’s the fucker I chase down and grab by the ankles before he can climb out of the window. I waste no time, there are six of ‘em to kill. That’s why this one gets the privilege of a quick death when I wrap my hands around his jaw and use it to snap his neck.

One of his buddies comes down from upstairs to see what the commotion is and Dalton gets to him before he can run back up, grabbing him by the ankle and dragging him back to the bottom so he can kick the shit into him. Tate and Finn are busy causing pain for the two men that ran for the back door, while I rush upstairs to find the other two men Tate counted. I find one in the shower, his music playing so loud that he’s oblivious to the carnage happening downstairs. Sneaking up behind him, I grab him by the back of his head and slam him face-first into the facet. He moans like a fuckin’ pussy as blood spurts from his nose and when I continue to ram his face into the tiles over and over again, he cries so loud you can hear him over his drum and bass.

“Who hired you?” I shout at the naked son of a bitch and when he shakes his head at me, I grab the shower head, turn the water as hot as it will go, and hold it on him. His screams

nearly take off the roof and when I give him some relief and hold the spray away from his body while he catches his breath, I ask him again

“Who hired you?” I’m running out of patience so he better talk fuckin’ fast.

“M-M...Mason,” he tells me, slumped back in the corner of the bath and looking pathetic.

“You made a mistake.” I take the knife out of my back pocket and slice it across the fucker’s throat, leaving him to bleed out while I go downstairs and check in with the others.

“We kept one alive in case you didn’t get what you needed,” Finn tells me when I join them.

“I got all I needed.” I look at the body count and see four dead men, there’s just the terrified little prick that’s on his knees in front of Tate to take care of now.

“You all made a mistake when you took that job on for Mason,” I tell him, crouching down to his level, grabbing the front of his shirt, and raising him to his feet. “Now you’re gonna pay for it.” I slam my fist into his face, over and over again. Giving him every ounce of my anger until he’s a faceless man and a soulless one too.



“Maisie said I might find you here.” Dan’s voice comes from behind me and it makes me sigh heavily.

“I didn’t want you to find me at all,” I tell him as he pulls out the chair opposite me and takes a seat. He looks real strange here in Cahoots. This bar is a foot sticking to the floor and the aroma of money nuts kinda joint, hardly what he’s used to back home.

“Please don’t be like that, I didn’t come here to fight.”

“Then why did you come here? After I specifically asked for time and space?” I ask, suddenly feeling exhausted.

“I came here because I love you,” he tells me, searching around the room like he’s afraid anyone in here might hear him. “And I know you love me, what you found out about your parents just freaked you out and made you start doubting everything. Savannah, they’re worried about you. They want to put things right.”

“You can’t put years of lying and deception right,” I inform him.

“Okay, maybe not, but what did I do, Savannah? We were happy before all this. We were gonna get married for Christ’s sake.”

“I never gave you an answer,” I remind him.

“I didn’t need an answer, we’ve been together since 9th grade. Our parents are best friends. We’re best friends.”

“No, we weren’t. I lost my best friend when she moved here. Maisie was the only person I had outside of that world.”

“What world? You’re not making any sense.” He seems so confused.

“The world all of you live in, the one I lived in too. The big houses and fancy cars. The upscale parties and constant need to do better than each other. I don’t belong in that world.” I knock back my drink.

“You think you belong in this one?” Dan looks around us in horror.

“Maybe.” I shrug. “I feel more myself here. I’ve made friends here. I…”

“Savannah, you told me when you left that you wanted more out of this life. You told me you wanted adventure, that you wanted to travel. I came here to offer you all that.”

“You want to offer me adventure?” I laugh at him. Dan’s a nice guy. He’s handsome and real smart, but he’s not an adventurer.

“I asked your father if I could take a year out from my internship so we could go traveling. I thought we could start with Asia and then move on to Europe.”

“You? Take a year off?” I question him again. All Dan ever wanted was to be a lawyer, when he finished law school and Dad offered him a role at the firm it was his dream come true.

“Yes, because you’re more important, Savannah. It’s been torture not waking up beside you, I hate not being able to talk to you, and I know I promised you your space and I said I wouldn’t push you for a decision, but we can forget getting married for now. Let’s do this instead.”

“Dad told me he’d taken measures, is that what you’re really doing here?”

“The measures he’s taken are letting me go from the firm and trusting me to take his daughter around the world so she can live all her dreams,” he informs me, making me feel bad for being so cruel to them all.

“I have to think about it.” I drag my eyes away from his and wonder what the point of me staying here will be if Cole

intends to keep avoiding me. I love Maisie, but I couldn't put myself through that.

“Okay, that's enough for me for now. Let me drive you back to the ranch. I'm staying at the guest house across the street and I'll be there until you come to me with your decision.” Dan stands up and holds out his hand. I smile as I take it and let him lead me out to his car. I've drunk far too much to drive anyway.

“Remember what I said.” Dan strokes my cheek when he drops me off outside the house. “I love you, Savannah, I don't want to leave here without you.”

“I'll think about it, I promise.” Reaching over the console I press a kiss against his cheek. “Speak tomorrow sometime.” I smile before I get out the car and head into the house.

The atmosphere is tense when I step inside. Leia is chewing anxiously on her thumb while Maisie is trying to calm Garrett down.

“What happened?” I ask, suddenly worrying that Cole isn't here, surely he'd be here for a family emergency, which is exactly what this looks like.

“Someone brought a pack of dogs onto the ranch and unleashed them on the herd,” Teresa explains as she passes Garrett a drink.

“Oh my god. Were there...”

“We lost over thirty. Cole and Dalton have gone after the men that did it,” Garrett explains, breathing through his nose like he wants to tear down the walls around him. “I should be with 'em. I should be showing those cunts what happens when you fuck with...”

“No, Garrett, Mitch was right, you know how Harvey reacts to a scandal.”

“Yeah, well I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't set this whole thing up to test me.” Garrett downs his drink while Maisie wraps her arms around his waist.

“I’m gonna go call Zayne, see what else he’s got on these fuckers.” Garrett kisses the top of his wife’s head before heading into the office and Maisie watches him leave before her attention turns to me and she drags me into the kitchen.

“What the hell was Dan doing here? When you came here I figured you’d broken up?” she scolds me.

“We had. I just hadn’t got round to telling him that.” I bite my lip, feeling all kinds of guilt for being so selfish. None of what happened with my parents was his fault and maybe he’s right, maybe that’s what started me off with questioning everything about us.

“Cole was here, it was a pretty big shock for him too.” She raises her eyebrows at me.

“Wait a minute. Are you saying that Cole saw Dan?” I feel my stomach do a somersault.

“Yeah, Dan introduced himself as your *fiancé*. How could you not tell me that you were engaged, Savannah? And Cole? You must know he likes you. Hell, we’ve all seen it.”

“Maisie, I’m not engaged. Dan asked me before I left but I didn’t give him an answer.”

“Well Cole heard the same as what I did, and he looked pretty cut up about it when he left here. I really thought you liked Cole too.” She shakes her head.

“I do like him,” I confess. “He’s just so....”

“He’s been hurt, and in a way that I hope neither of us will ever be able to understand.”

“We’ve been fucking,” I admit, watching my best friend’s mouth drop open.

“You and Cole? For how long?”

“Not long. But long enough for me to fall in love with him, and believe me, I tried hard not to.”

“Savannah, this is gonna crush him.” She looks really worried as she sinks into one of the kitchen chairs.

“He shared something special with me the other week, and ever since he’s been cold with me, he’s pushing me away. I don’t know what he wants.”

“Savannah, this is Cole. He’s... He’s damaged. He wouldn’t have gotten into something with you if you didn’t mean something to him.”

“Then why did he tell me not to fall for him?”

“Because he’s protecting you. He doesn’t trust himself. He doesn’t think he’s good enough for you. Cole has a lot of hate for himself.”

“I need to talk to him.” I head back for the door.

“You can’t, he’s out dealing with the latest situation. I don’t know how long he’s gonna be. But before you do, you need to be sure that it’s him you want and not Dan. Dan told me why he came here. He told me what he’s offering. It’s your dream, Savannah. Have you fallen for Cole enough to give that up? He may be grumpy, but he’s Garrett’s brother and I love him. I won’t let you hurt him.” Maisie smiles at me sadly before she leaves me to my thoughts.



I'm covered in blood and in need of a real good shower. It's late after Wade and the River Boys showed up to help us clean up the Bambrook place. When we finally get back to the ranch, I'm just about to follow Finn, Tate, and Dalton into the bunkhouse when I hear her voice call my name.

"Cole." Savannah races from the porch across the yard wearing nothing but an oversized shirt and a blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

"Cole, I need to talk to you," she calls out again when I try to ignore her.

The boys exchange looks between them and start getting excited, until I eyeball them and they quickly head inside.

"Glad to see your fiancé got ya home safe," I tell her, turning around to face her. It's dark but she'll be able to see all the blood I've got all over my face, clothes, and hands.

"Dan isn't my fiancé," She growls impatiently.

"Well, he seemed pretty confident that he was when I spoke to him. Congratulations. Don't bother sending an invite to the weddin'." I turn my back on her and get ready to stomp back into the bunkhouse, but she moves quick, grabbing my arm and pulling me back.

"How fuckin' dare you? I deserve a chance to explain myself to you. Which is at least more than you've ever done for me."

This girl has no idea what I'd do for her, and I'm prepared to give her up just so she'll never have to find that out. Hearing that she belongs to someone else and how angry it made me has only proven that I was right before. I have to let

her go. She made me feel again and now I know that having feelings is a weakness a man like me can't risk.

“Cole.”

“Shut up.” I storm toward her, taking her by her throat and pushing her back until her shoulders hit the barn wall. I don't care that I'm touching her skin with another man's blood on my hands. She needs to know who she's fucking with, here. I'm no Dan, who wears cream-colored trousers and drives around in fancy cars. I'm a monster, who feeds off people's pain as well as craving my own.

I give into temptation and kiss her lips, hard and possessive. I'll bet Danny Boy never had the balls to kiss her like this, and when I catch her tongue with my teeth, I bite it just enough to make it hurt.

She moans as her hips rotate against mine, proving I haven't scared her enough to heed my word and leave me the fuck alone. I take my bloody hands and curl them into the collar of the oversized shirt she's wearing, pulling it apart and tearing it off her body so she's exposed in the middle of the yard wearing just her panties. I expect her to slap me again, but instead, she stares up at me daringly. She knows what I'm doing and the stubborn stupid bitch is gonna make me see it through.

I take a few paces back and look at how her body glistens in the moonlight, her pert, round tits, just the right shape for my hands, and her tightly puckered nipples taking the brunt of the cold night air. I want her to wonder what's going through my head. I want her to fear it so she'll stop playing with my emotions. Yet she shows me no fear at all, she slides her hands into the waistline of her panties and drags them off her hips. They fall to the ground and she uses the tip of her toe to kick them up into my face. Instinctively I catch them in my hand and screw them up in my fist, then shoving them inside my pocket I push back up against her.

“You're brave to tease me when I'm in this kinda mood,” I warn.

“I'm not scared of you.” She shakes her head defiantly.

“I killed three men tonight. I left one of ‘em without a face,” I warn her, staring right into her soul.

“You tellin’ stories or you gonna fuck me?” She reaches between us and slides her palm over my cock through my jeans.

“I’m trying to make you understand why I keep pushing you away.” I clutch her jaw in my hand and let my fingers dig into her skin.

“You lied to me, and I’m real fuckin’ mad about that.” I hiss at her.

“I didn’t lie.” She shakes her head back at me.

“Did you love him?” I ask, even though I know her answer is gonna probably make me even madder.

“Yes, there was a time when I loved him.” She narrows her eyes at me. “But there was a time when you loved someone else too,” she reminds me, and I don’t know if she’s trying to make this worse for herself or if she’s trying to make some kind of point.

“You should go back with him,” I tell her, still not stopping her when she starts undoing my belt.

“I might,” she admits, sinking her claws a little deeper into my skin and attempting to scratch my heart out my chest.

I have to fight against the urge to beg her not to. It’d be best for us both if she did. I still decide that I should show her what she’d be missing.

I grip under her thighs and lift her up, wrapping her legs around my hips and let my cock stroke between her exposed pussy.

“You’re so wet. Always so fuckin’ wet for me, Red. Did you get this wet for him?”

She shakes her head at me, almost looking hurt.

“Did he fuck you the way I fuck you?” I squeeze one of her ass cheeks tight in my hand and use it to spread her open a little wider for me.

“No.”

“I’ll give you something to think about next time he’s on top of ya, darlin’.” I slip into her hot, wet pussy and hear her sigh with relief.

“Every time, he’s inside you, you can think of us, and how good we had it. You can remember how you used to lose yourself.” I make my thrusts punishing but slow, watching her come apart for me for the last time. I know now that I have to let her go, even though I don’t want to.

“Cole.” She clings to me tightly as I fuck her, sinking my teeth into her shoulder and bruising her ass with my grip. She throws back her head and moans so loud the bunkhouse boys will hear her, but I don’t care anymore. I want them to know that she was mine, even if she does leave her with her preppy fiancé.

“God, Cole,” she growls desperately as she comes for me, soaking my cock and clutching me so tight I almost forget to breathe. She’s riding her high and I chase it with her, feeling her bones crush under my fingers as I thrust one last time and spill my load so deep inside her she’ll have me drippin’ out of her for days.

“I hope you and him are happy together, Red,” I whisper in her ear before kissin’ her mouth and dragging my cock from inside her. Then I drop her to her feet and turn my ass around before I change my mind.

“Cole,” she calls after me, but I keep on walkin’, wiping the single tear that falls from my eye and leaving her naked and drippin’ with my cum in the middle of the yard as I step into the bunkhouse.



“You sure you’re up to this?” Leia asks Maisie as she zips up the dress she’s wearing. It’s long, lacy, and very elegant.

“Yes, I think Teresa’s right, getting out and socializing will do me some good, and having you guys on hand to help her makes me feel a whole lot better about it.” She smiles between us both. I fake her one back before spreading myself out on the bed and playing with little Jack’s feet. He always likes it when I blow raspberries on his soles.

“Have you spoken to Dan today?” Maisie turns her attention to me.

“No.” I shake my head and continue to focus on making Jack laugh, hoping she’ll give up.

“Well, don’t you think you should? He came all this way.” She tries her best to make me feel bad.

“Well, I never asked him to,” I remind her.

“Listen.” Maisie lifts up her little boy and passes him to Leia so she can sit down beside me. “I don’t want you to go. I love having you here and through these whole crazy past couple of months, you’ve kept me grounded. Both of you have.” She smiles up at Leia too. “But Dan is a good guy. If you don’t want what he’s offering, he needs to be let down gently.”

“Maisie.” Garrett steps into the room, looking sharp as hell in a tuxedo, and he rubs his lips together hungrily when his wife stands up and straightens out her dress.

“Damn, Mrs. Carson.” He takes her hand and tugs her toward him. “To hell with my reputation, you are getting

fucked in a very luxurious bathroom tonight.” His whisper isn’t low enough for us not to hear him, and Maisie swats his chest before she lets him lead her out the room.

“You guys know where everything is, there’s plenty of expressed milk, and don’t forget to put Jack in the middle when you put them down, he settles better that way.” She reels everything off as we follow her down the stairs.

“Maisie, we got this, just go and have a good time,” Leia tells her.

“You’re right, Mommy’s being a little crazy.” Maisie strokes the top of Jack’s head before kissing it and heading over to the couch where Teresa is with Jacob and Breanna. “You all be on your best behavior.” Maisie kisses them too, before picking up her purse and heading back toward Garrett.

“Come on, Mr. Mayor, let’s go give ‘em a show.” She heads for the door and gasps when Garrett squeezes her ass on the way out.

“She seems better today, doesn’t she?” Leia points out once they have left.

“She went to the Doctors and had some blood tests done earlier, maybe she’s anemic, I really suffered after having Breanna,” Teresa tells us as she stands up and lifts up Jacob with her.

“I’m going to make a start on getting these little ones down. I’ll call for the next one when I’m ready.” She leaves us to take Jacob upstairs while I take a seat on the couch where baby Breanna is lying.

“I hope she’s right and that Maisie has fun tonight, I hate seeing her the way she’s been lately,” Leia says thoughtfully.

“Maisie’s gonna have a good time, don’t worry,” I assure her.

“And what about you? You can talk to me, you know.”

“Talk about what?”

“The whole ex-boyfriend coming to town thing, and the fact that you and Cole are crazy for each other.” She rocks

Jack in her arms while she waits for me to confirm or deny. I've spent the past twenty-four hours trying not to think about Cole and the fact he fucked me out in the yard last night so coldly. I think I understand what he's trying to do and I hate it.

"We're not crazy about each other. Sure, there was a time when I thought maybe it could work out, but..." I shake my head, deciding there is no way I can go into detail. Leia would lose all respect for me.

"Do you wanna go back to L.A.?" She makes it sound so simple.

"Dan doesn't want to go back to L.A. He wants us to travel, he knows I've always wanted to." I rattle the toy next to Breanna at her to try and distract myself from what comes next.

"So why do you look so sad?" Leia laughs.

"Because it doesn't matter where Dan takes me, it's not Dan who I want."

"Sounds to me like you've made up your mind." Leia has a clever grin on her face.

"I wish it were that easy, this isn't a choice between Dan and Cole. Cole's made it very clear that me and him aren't an option. He's so hell-bent on self-destruction he wouldn't let himself have me even if he wanted to."

"Savannah, Cole is difficult. He's got a real harsh way about him, but he cares. He's loved before and got real hurt and he's scared to do that again. If he's the one you want, you have to show him that he has no need to be afraid."

"Evening, ladies, I will be your entertainment for this evening," Dalton bursts through the front door and hangs up his hat. "Now I ain't ruling out a chick flick so long as it has at least some action in it."

"When you say entertainment, what you really mean is protection, right?" Leia calls him out. I swear, these Carson men insult our intelligence by thinking we don't know that they have us on twenty-four-hour watch.

“Come on, Dalton, we’re not idiots. Do you honestly think I believe Wade is playing poker with the River Boys tonight?”

“Please, girls, don’t make it hard.” Dalton sighs.

“So, you drew the short straw and got us on a Friday night?”

“Hey, I could have sat out on the porch like Finn and Tate do, but I happen to like ya company.” He gives us that charming grin of his.

“So I’m assuming Wade is on security with Cole at the charity Gala, waiting for something to go wrong.” Leia hands over Jacob to his uncle and takes a seat next to me and Breanna.

“Wade is there, Cole’s em...”

“Cole’s what?” I sit up a little straighter, suddenly curious when I see Dalton looking a little worried.

“Cole’s kinda AWOL, has been since last night. Well, we can’t really call it that. We know where he is. He’s just doin’ that thing he does when he needs to be alone. Ain’t any of us gonna argue with him.” He screws up his nose and holds out the baby in his arms. “I think this one dropped summit.”

“So is Cole okay?” I ignore him and try to get more outta him.

“No, he’s bothered about somethin’.” His eyebrow raises at me. “But ain’t any of us that can do jack about it.”

Leia gives me a look, the kind of look that tells me maybe I could.

“You know what you want, Savannah.” She holds up her hands.

“I do but...”

“No buts, time for action. Me, Teresa, and Dalton have things covered here. You take Dalton’s truck, drive to line camp and tell that stubborn asshole how ya feel. If he still wants to play hardball after that, at least you can say you tried everything.”

“You’re right. I’m gonna go have this out with him once and for all. No one strips me down and fucks me in the middle of a farm yard without me having my say.” I realize I’ve said far too much when Dalton and Leia both look at each other in shock and quickly head over to Dalton, tapping over his pockets until I locate his keys.

“Wish me luck, and Dalton was right, you definitely have a code brown situation over here.” I wave my hand under my nose before leaving them still stunned and heading out the door.

There’s a warm glow coming from inside the cabin when I get to the line camp and before I lose all my confidence, I barge through the door without knocking. Cole is sitting in front of the wood burner staring into the flames. He looks shocked at the intrusion, which is odd because he must have heard the truck pull up, but then I realize it’s not shock at all, it’s disappointment.

“What ya doin’ out here, Red?” he growls at me impatiently as he looks back into the fire.

“I came out here to put stuff straight.”

“Things couldn’t be straighter.” He keeps his eyes focused on the bright flames flickering in front of him.

“No, there are things you don’t know and...”

“Yeah, Red, you’re just full of surprises.” He gets up from the chair and stalks toward me. “I don’t like surprises, especially ones that mean I’ve been sticking it into another man’s girl.”

The cold bite of his words has my palm slapping hard against his face, it stings me like a bitch, yet it doesn’t even make him flinch.

“That’s not what we are.” I shake my head at him.

“What we *were*,” he corrects.

“You know, you can fuck me like a slut, you can avoid me, and you can play your twisted little games, but you can’t

downplay this. Cole...” I take a deep breath before I throw all my pride out the fucking door. “I have never felt the way I do about you before. And yes, I had a boyfriend when I came here, yes, he asked me to marry him, but I never gave him an answer. I never gave him an answer because I knew that he wasn’t what I wanted.” I wait for Cole to say something back, but he just frowns at me like he expects more.

“I had the perfect life back at home, me and Dan had been together since High school, I’ve never had to worry or want for anything. But it never seemed like enough. It always felt like there was something missing. I thought I needed to see the world and have all these grand adventures before I could settle down and commit my life to him.”

“Well, ain’t that what Danny Boy’s offering ya?” He cocks his head to one side, proving that word spreads fast around here.

“Yeah, that’s what he’s offering, and that’s how I know that he’s not the guy for me.” Cole shakes his head in confusion.

“The man I want wouldn’t have to offer me anything. He could be broke and on his knees. He could have a million fucked up thoughts in his head and another man’s blood on his hands but all that would matter was us being together.” I step into the small space that’s between us. “I don’t need to travel the world, Cole. I found the adventure I want and it’s here with you.” I hold his dark brown eyes with mine, ensuring that he hears what I’m saying.

“You don’t know what you’re sayin’. You don’t know me. Savannah, I’ll only suck all the good outta ya.”

“No, you won’t. I’m not scared of you, Cole. I know the things you’ve done and that there will be more for you to do. I have faith in you, now all you gotta do is have faith in yourself.”

My heart is thudding in my chest while I wait for his response. My ass is vibrating, and when I realize it’s my phone I ignore it. Cole’s cell starts ringing and he frowns at me

curiously when he lifts it out his pocket and sees Leia's name flashing.

"Leia," he answers, and although I can't hear the words she's saying, I pick up on the high-pitched desperation of her voice. Fear suddenly weighs down the tension in Cole's face and his skin turns white.

"We have to go," he tells me once he's hung up. Then, without any explanation, he grabs my arm and starts dragging me toward the door.

"Go where? Cole, what's happened?" I pull back to resist and he spins around with fury.

"Breanna's not breathing, Mom and Dalton are on their way to the emergency room with her now." His words make my legs feel like they're gonna give in but we haven't got time for that. I race toward his truck and hop in the passenger seat, praying to God that she's gonna be okay.



“Sleep now, little ones.” I touch my hand over the chest of each of my grandsons before turning on the mobile that hangs over their crib, then lifting Breanna out from beside them, I take a seat in the rocking chair and snuggle her in my arms.

Garrett couldn't have named her more perfectly. This beautiful little girl looks just like her aunt did at her age, and holding her in my arms feels like a brand new start for me. Back when my children were young, I never had the chance to be a proper mother to them. I was too busy being Bill Carson's wife.

What Garrett is doing right now, may be his worst nightmare but his father would have been in his element. Bill tried so hard to get some respect from this town. He would have done anything for the opportunity to be its mayor. For years I had to aid him in all his endeavors and behave in the right way. Attend the parties he convinced himself were gonna get him places.

That's why I needed Hank so much. He brought me back to reality. He reminded me of how simple love could be when you take away all the complications around it. That affair cost Hank his life, and although Bill didn't kill me, he took away mine too. The boys were past needing me by then, they didn't need a mama to wipe their tears and clean the blood from the scrapes on their knees anymore. They were already learning to be cowboys, even little Wade. But Breanna, she needed me. She was far too young to lose her mama.

I'd wanted a little girl for so long, and although he couldn't shout it out from the rooftops, I knew Hank wanted

her too. Something softened in him every time he looked into her eyes and I felt so proud that I'd given that to him.

I stare at the baby girl in my arms and feel her little chest rise and fall against mine, the medicine I gave her twenty minutes ago will have kicked in by now. It won't harm her, just make her drowsy enough not to stir while I go ahead with my plan.

"Are you ready for a new beginning, my love?" I kiss her forehead before taking a calming breath and going over the plan again in my head.

I have the bag with everything we'll need, packed in the trunk. A baby seat that I got from a thrift store in Billing, already strapped in the back. And most importantly, I have the document we need to start our new life. Everything has been thought through to the last detail, nothing can go wrong. At least that's what I tell myself as I pick up a blanket and drape it around the precious little thing in my arms.

"You help Grandma out and stay quiet now, sweetheart," I whisper, before opening in the door and clutching her tight to my chest.

"Help!" I scream at the top of my lungs as I race down the stairs.

Leia immediately stands on her feet looking panicked, while the half-wit, half-brother stares at me in shock.

"She's not breathing. I need to get her to a hospital." I rush toward the door and start searching for the keys to my car. I know they're in my coat pocket, but people in a real panic forget these kinds of things. Small details count.

I feel Breanna wriggle a little against my chest and hold her tighter, hoping I gave her enough Chloral Hydrate to stop her from crying and keep her still.

"I'll call an ambulance." Leia leaps into action, grabbing her phone and I shake my head. "No time, I'll drive her to the emergency room myself." I snatch the keys out of my coat pocket and throw open the door. "You two stay here with the boys and call Garrett."

“Teresa, you can’t drive. Someone’s got to hold her,” Leia calls after me.

“It’s fine, I have a seat in my car.” I wasn’t expecting any argument on the fucking matter, I was expecting pure inconsolable panic.

“Dalton, you drive. I’ll call Maisie and get her to meet you there.” Leia, who is surprisingly good in a fucking panic, tries to take control.

“No.” I shake my head and clutch Breanna tighter. I’ve been working on this plan for so long I won’t have it fuck up at the final hurdle.

“Come on, Savannah’s got my truck, I’ll drive your car.” Dalton snatches my keys from my hand and rushes past me out onto the yard, and while Leia’s hand shakes as she makes the call to Maisie, I know time is of the essence here.

Once Garrett is alerted he is gonna head straight for the hospital, a hospital it looks like I’ll also be heading toward when instead we should be going in the opposite direction. Right now, I don’t have much choice. I guess it doesn’t matter how well thought out a plan is, there always has to be room for improvising. I rush to follow him out and watch him get into the driver’s seat. He starts the engine and I muffle out the tiny noise Breanna makes by screaming at him to hurry as I take the passenger seat with her in my arms.

“Shouldn’t we strap her in?” he questions me, looking over his shoulder to the empty car seat. He doesn’t seem to wonder why it’s in here or why I only have one of them.

“No, I need to hold her.” I shake my head firmly. Now that the plan needs adjusting I have to keep her close and wait for an opportunity.

“She got a pulse?” Dalton asks as he drives out of the ranch gates.

“Yes, a faint one, we need to hurry.” It’s pitch-black outside, and Dalton is clearly panicked as he focuses on the road ahead of him. I can feel my heart beating in my chest as I attempt to open the glove compartment where I have the 9mm

hidden. Hank always said you should be prepared and carry one there. I thank him for that now, because it's gonna be my way out of this.

I don't want to hurt him, but I will point the thing at his face and ask him politely to get the fuck out of my car. My palms are clammy and Breanna is starting to stir. I was scared to give her too much sedative so I kept the dosage low. I also didn't factor in the fact I'd need her to be quiet for so long. It's only a matter of time before she makes a sound Dalton will hear. The further we travel from the direction I'm supposed to be heading in, the more desperate I start to feel, and then somewhere out of the blue, fate takes the situation in hand and throws me a lifeline.

"Shit." Dalton slams his hand on the wheel when the lights on the railroad crossing start to flash red in the distance. "These lights always take forever. I'll call Garrett." He shakes his head when he finally pulls to a stop. This is a quiet road, there are no other cars around us. This is my chance.

While he takes out his phone, I quickly clip open the glove compartment and pull out the gun. Dalton doesn't seem to notice yet, tapping the wheel with his hands and willing the train to hurry up and come.

I click off the safety clip, just as Breanna makes a cooing noise and when he turns his head and looks at me, confused, I raise the gun up and hold it up to his face.

"Mrs. Carson, what's goin' on?" Dalton lifts his hands up and I keep the barrel pointed right at him while rocking Breanna in my arms.

"Put down the phone," I order, gesturing my eyes toward the dash so he knows to place it where I can see it. He looks confused but does as he's told, carefully placing it screen up so I can see he hasn't placed the call yet.

"I need you to get out of the car, Dalton." I remain calm, there is no need for a panic here, by him or by me.

"I can't do that, ma'am." He shakes his head at me, his face lit up red from the flashing bright lights in front of us

allowing me to see the fear in his eyes.

“You have to. I don’t want to shoot you but I will.”

“I’m sorry, but you got my niece there, and I won’t leave her with you, not now that I think I know what this is.” My granddaughter makes another cute little sound.

“Why don’t you hand her over to me, let us get out, then you can take the car and get a head start before Garrett gets word of this,” he suggests.

“Dalton, you’re so cute. I guess you must have gotten that from your whore of a mother.” I smile at him.

“Please, Mrs. Carson, don’t do this.”

“I have to do this, she’s mine,” I explain, feeling Breanna wriggle against me.

“No, she ain’t. She’s Maisie and Garrett’s little girl and they love her.”

“I love her, she was *my* little girl,” I feel my lips start to shake as well as the hand I’m holding the gun in. “She grew up thinking I abandoned her, she died thinking that too.” I feel the tears start to come.

“This isn’t your little girl,” Dalton tells me softly, he’s crying now too. I’ve never been more sure than I am now that my three boys belong to Hank, this right here in front of me is the real son of Bill Carson, weak and pathetic.

“She’s my chance to do better,” I explain, looking down at her and smiling.

“Put the gun down, Teresa. I ain’t gettin’ out of this car and leavin’ her with ya,” he warns me.

“Then you were the one that made the choice.” I pull the trigger and despite my trembling hands, I manage a clean shot into the boy’s head. The blast makes my ears ring unbearably, it dulls out the sound of Breanna’s screaming and the train that rumbles past us. I feel his blood dripping down my face, I see it stuck to the windows with chunks of his brain, but I haven’t got the time to ask the good Lord for his mercy.

I force myself back together and steadily place the gun on the dashboard. I get out of the car and ensure Breanna's safety by placing her in the seat I have strapped in the back.

"It's okay, sweetheart." I rest my hand on her chest to try and soothe her once I've buckled her in. It leaves a thick, red handprint on her clean, pink sleepsuit and when I notice all the other flecks of blood she's covered with, it makes me so mad. Dalton could have avoided her this kind of trauma. Her little ears will be hurting like mine, and she must be petrified. Standing back up I close the door and take a deep breath, tucking my hair behind my ears while I formulate a new plan. I don't have time to come up with anything genius. I can't go back the way we came for fear of meeting Garrett on the road. I'll have to keep moving forward. Instead of going right toward the hospital at the junction up ahead, I can take a left and double back on myself that way. It's a longer route, but a safer one.

"You've got this, Teresa," I tell myself as I walk around the car and open the driver's seat door. Dalton has fallen forward over the wheel, and when I get a little sound back, I realize that he's been pressing on the horn this whole time.

"You are just determined to be a pain in my ass," I huff as I gather all my strength and start dragging him out the car. "For a skinny little runt, you sure weigh a lot." I struggle and pull until he slumps out onto the tarmac, and then I quickly clamber over him and get into the seat myself.

There's blood splattered all over the inside of the windshield, and I use my sleeve to try and wipe it clear. It makes it worse so I have to use Breanna's blanket from the footwell to do a better job. My vision's far from perfect, but it'll have to do. The barrier has lifted now and I didn't think to look to see if it was a passenger or a cargo train that passed us. If it was a passenger there could have been witnesses. They could have called the police.

"It's okay, sweetie, Mommy's gonna fix this." I look in the rear-view mirror and smile at my baby girl, then slamming the door shut I take off the handbrake and press my foot on the gas pedal.



“How close to the hospital are they?” I ask Savannah as I drive frantically toward the house.

“How the hell am I supposed to know that?” she shakes her head and stares at me like I’ve lost my mind. I can feel myself being close to losing it, but I can’t do that until I know my niece is okay. I need to know what caused all this. I don’t know if it was an accident or if someone fuckin’ got to her. But I swear if they did, I’ll send that fucker to hell with a plastic bag around his fuckin’ head.

“Take my phone and open up the GPS app, look for the one with Dalton’s face on, he’s bound to have his phone with him,” I explain with our heads bumping against the truck cab roof as I drive over the pasture’s uneven ground at top speed.

“You track your brothers?” She makes it sound as if that’s weird.

“We track each other, it’s something Zayne set up for us when all this Harvey shit started. If one of us ever went missing we have a way of knowing where he is,” I explain, willing her to hurry up.

Savannah quickly gets to work bringing up the app.

“They’re heading for the hospital on that road you always take toward town,” she informs me, holding out the phone for me to see for myself.

“How long can babies go without breathin’ for?” I ask, feeling my chest tighten like I’m the one suffocating.

“I don’t know, but maybe she’s breathing again by now. Your mom will be doing all she can.” Her hand strokes over mine to comfort me, but I can feel her shaking. I make it to the

ranch in record time. Skidding to a halt outside and seeing Leia pacing on the porch.

“I’ve spoken to Maisie and Garrett, they’re heading straight to the hospital,” she assures me as I get out the truck.

“We’ll head there too. Are ya good staying here with the boys?” I grab her shoulders and make her focus. “Leia, can I leave you here with the boys?” I repeat.

“Yeah, of course.” She nods back at me, her skin pale and her eyes wild with worry and I can’t even tell her that it’s gonna be okay because I have no idea what happened here.

“Just try not to panic, think of that baby you’re carrying and those boys,” I remind her as I get back behind the wheel and speed out the yard toward the hospital.

“How long should it take them to get there?” Savannah asks, still holding the phone that’s tracking Dalton in her hand as I speed along the road that leads to the hospital.

“I don’t know, like twenty minutes. Fifteen if Dalton puts his foot down.” “They’ve stopped.” Savannah looks up at me. “They’re at the railroad crossing, a fucking train must have stopped them.”

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” I hit my hand repeatedly at the wheel and flick my eyes between where I’m going and the tiny flashing dot on the screen. One that remains stationary as I race along the dark open roads with my foot flat to the floor.

“It’s okay, they’re moving again.” Savannah sighs in relief when the dot starts moving. Knowing that due to the hold-up and my reckless driving, we aren’t far behind them, I focus all my attention on closing the gap.

“Is there another hospital other than the one Maisie had the babies at?” Savannah asks curiously.

“Not within a few hours.” I shake my head, wondering why that even matters.

“I could have sworn you have to take a right when you get to that junction up ahead.”

“Yeah, it’s a right for sure.”

“Well, Dalton just took a left,” she tells me, holding the screen closer to my face to prove it.

“That’s the opposite direction, why would he do that?” I try and make some sense of it. “Jesus, don’t tell me the road’s been closed.” I can feel my panic getting out of control, I can’t even imagine what my brother must be going through right now.

“Use your phone to call Maisie. Put it on speaker.” I keep driving while she fumbles through her pocket and pulls it out.

“Savannah, are you with her?” Maisie sounds in pieces when she answers.

“No, we’re tailing ‘em now, can you put me on speaker so Garrett can hear me,” I speak before Savannah can answer.

“Cole...” I hear my brother’s voice, and the weakness in it sends chills down my spine.

“Listen, I’m tailing Dalton, they were stuck at the railroad crossing for a while so we’re not far behind.”

“Good we’re coming in from the East Road, Wade’s behind us. We’ll see you there.”

“Wait, don’t hang up. Garrett, I don’t know what’s goin’ on but Dalton ain’t heading for the hospital,” I inform him.

“What do you mean he ain’t headin’ for the hospital? My little girl ain’t breathin’.”

“Garrett, what’s happening?” I can hear Maisie crying in the background.

“I don’t know what the fuck’s goin’ on, but he took a left at the junction and now it looks like they’re heading toward you.” I look at the GPS and see Wade and Garrett’s dots beeping a few miles down the road

“Cole, that makes no fuckin’ sense, there are no hospitals this way, none that are close anyway.”

“There must be a diversion or somethin’. Have you spoken to him?”

“We’ve tried but there’s no answer from him or Mom.”

“Hang on,” I tell him when I see the car that’s stopped near the railroad crossing up ahead, they’ve got their hazards on and a woman in a long brown coat has her phone pressed to her ear.

“There’s something happening by the tracks, looks like a woman’s hit a deer or somethin’.” I pull the truck to a halt and get out and as I get closer, I can see that somethin’ ain’t a deer.

“He’s dead. Looks like he’s been shot in the head,” I hear the woman tell the operator she’s on the phone with. She has blood on the hand she’s holding up in front of her in shock and as I rush past her and the full beam of her headlights shine on the man sprawled out on the road, my heart drops into my stomach like a lead fuckin’ weight.

“Cole, what the fuck’s happening?” Garrett yells down at the phone as I stare at the lifeless body that belongs to my brother.

“Dalton’s not driving.” Somehow I manage to form words as I fall onto my knees.

“What do you mean, he ain’t driving? Cole, what’s happening?”

“He’s dead.” I drop the phone out of my hand and crawl toward him, my own hands trembling with shock as I lift his head up from the tarmac and see the hole in it.

“No. No... NO!” I scream up at the black starlit sky, dragging my brother’s limp body to rest on my lap. “No.” My hands keep shaking as I touch his face, his eyes are still open and staring up at me. “Dalt... No.”

“Cole.” I look up when I hear Savannah’s voice and watch the horror spread over her when she realizes who it is.

“He can’t be dead?” I look up at her and shake my head.

“Cole.” Her tears stream out over her cheeks. “I’m so sorr
—”

“He’s not dead, he can’t be. He’s our brother.” I shake my head firmly and tap his cold cheek.

“Dalt, wake up. Come on,” I tell him, and when I get no response I grip his shirt and shake him real hard.

“Dalton. Wake the fuck up,” I yell at him angrily, and Savannah sinks to her knees beside me to try and comfort me.

“Cole we need—”

“Get off me.” I push her away and focus on the brother, the brother we only just realized we had. Not that it mattered, we’d watched him grow up and teased him the way big brothers should have anyway. He was one of us.

“Dalton, wake up. Please wake up.” My own tears blur my eyes as I realize there’s no hope, not with a bullet to the brain. “Dalt...” I drop his head back onto the tarmac and stand up, biting on my fist as I look down at him. I don’t know who the fuck did this, but I’m gonna kill ‘em. I don’t care about reputation no more. People keep comin’ at my family and it needs to fuckin’ stop.

“Cole, come on, we need to find your mom and Breanna.” Savannah tries to drag me away.

“I ain’t leaving him here.” I reach down and lift Dalton into my arms, his head flopping back and his arms splayed out as I start carrying him toward the truck.

“Cole, I don’t think you should.”

“I ain’t leavin’ him here,” I repeat, standing by the back door and waiting for her to open it.

“Excuse me, sir, you can’t do that.” The woman in the long brown jacket chases after me.

“This is clearly a murder scene, you can’t move the body. The police are on their way.” I ignore her as I lay my brother across the small narrow seat in the back.

“Sir... Please, the police will need...”

“He’s my brother,” I yell back at her. “And you can tell the police when they get here that I’m taking him home.”



“Did he just say...” Maisie stares at me blankly.

“Dalton’s dead,” I repeat the words, barely registering them myself.

“No, he can’t be.” She shakes her head and starts to cry.

I reach across the console and hold my wife’s hand as she falls apart, but I have to keep driving, even while my own heart breaks. I’m in shock, and right now I can’t afford to be anything other than focused. I have to find my baby girl.

“If he’s dead, who’s driving your mom and Breanna?” Maisie asks desperately. “Garrett, what the fuck’s going on?” she screams, distraught and equally as worried as I am.

“I don’t know,” I yell at her. All this time I’ve been trying to hold it together but I can’t anymore. I got a dead brother, a baby who ain’t breathing, and no idea why the car she’s in ain’t headin’ toward a fuckin’ hospital. I keep my eyes flicking between the road and the tracker on my phone as we continue to move closer to the car I’m assuming they are still in.

“It’s Leia,” Maisie tells me when her phone starts ringing again, and she quickly puts it on speaker as she answers it.

“Maisie, something weird’s going on,” she tells us, sounding concerned.

“Are the boys okay?” I shout, gripping the wheel and keeping my foot flat to the floor.

“They’re fine, sound asleep, and Tate’s here with me now,” she assures us.

“What you got, Leia?” I rush her to her point.

“I came up here to check on them and I’ve noticed some medicine next to the crib.”

“What kind of medicine?” Maisie asks.

“I don’t know, it’s not labeled which is why it’s odd. None of the babies have been ill. And...” Leia’s voice turns hesitant.

“Leia, what is it?” I ask, we haven’t got time for dithering.

“That muslin Breanna likes to sleep with isn’t here, and when I checked the fridge there was no expressed milk left.”

“I left enough for them each to have two feeds,” Maisie tells her.

“I didn’t register it at the time, because I was in such a panic but Teresa really didn’t want Dalton to go with her to the hospital. She kinda got mad when I suggested it. And I didn’t check Breanna myself, she was holding her kinda weird.”

“Are you saying that you think Mom took Breanna?” I ask her, shaking my head in frustration.

“I know it sounds crazy, but think about it, it’s always Breanna she’s taking care of. She doesn’t give the boys half the amount of attention she does her. Its...”

“She’s right.” Maisie looks at me, the big, blue orbs in her eyes full of worry. “Oh my god, Garrett, your mom. What if she lied about Breanna being sick to get her out the house? She knows I won’t let anyone take them anywhere without me.” My whole body goes rigid and as I notice the dot that is heading toward us veer off and take a right onto the road that leads back toward town, I take in everything the girls are saying.

“What is she doing?” I shake my head, coming to the conclusion that if they are right, my mom is the one now driving that car.

“She never intended on going to the hospital, Garrett. She’s getting herself back on to the route she was supposed to be taking.” Maisie fists at her hair and I feel so fuckin’ helpless it’s killing me.

“Yeah well, she picked the wrong road to go down.” I quickly come off the GPS app and scroll to Noah’s name.

“What’s up?” He sounds a little buzzed.

“You and the boys at the lake house?” I ask, knowing that on a Friday night, they won’t be anywhere else.

“Of course.”

“Good, get your asses out the house, get in your trucks and drive out to the Stower Bridge Road. Make sure you pass the Lochfield turning and create a roadblock.

“A roadblock?” Noah sounds surprised.

“Yeah, my mom’s coming through and she’s got my little girl in the car. She’s taken her.” I look at Maisie and hate the words that I’m having to say. This is all my fault, I should never have got us into this position by trusting her again.

“Noah, hurry the fuck up, I’m right on her tail but if she makes it to that turning, there are all kinds of different ways she could go.” I hang up and get back on to the GPS, all while driving like a NASCAR racer.

“Garrett, it’s gonna be okay, isn’t it? Please tell me it’s gonna be okay.” I look in my rear-view mirror and see Wade is still close behind. I don’t know if anyone has called him and told him about Dalton and I haven’t got the time or the strength to do it myself right now.

We drive for another ten minutes before I finally see Mom’s car in front of us. She’s driving far too fast to have my baby girl with her and unless she stole one out of Maisie’s car, I know she won’t have a car seat. I breathe a tiny sigh of relief when I see the River Boys up ahead. They’ve made the block in the perfect location, where the road goes through the valley and there’s no way she can maneuver the car around them.

Mom must know I’m behind her. I don’t want to imagine what thoughts have been going through her head leading up to this, or how dangerous she may have become. I don’t understand why she’d wanna hurt us like this, not after we took her in and gave her a chance.

“Garrett. I don’t like this.” Maisie looks petrified and I squeeze her leg through her pretty lace dress as Mom realizes she’s got nowhere to go and pulls the car to a stop.

“Maisie, Listen to me.” I cut my own engine and stretch over her so I can open the glove compartment where every Carson keeps a loaded gun.

“Garrett, what are you gonna do with that?” Her eyes glance to the gun warily as I hold it in the hand I use to frame her face.

“I’m gonna do whatever it takes. And I promise, our little girl is gonna be okay.” Kissing her forehead, I get out the truck before she can argue with me. Then hold my hand up at Wade when he storms out of his car would up full of aggression.

“Hang back,” I tell him before calmly approaching the driver’s side of the car and being wary of the fact she has a gun.

Mom is staring in front of her, revving the engine like she’s about to attempt to plow through the barricade. Her headlights shine onto Noah and Sawyer, who both sit casually on the hood of Sawyer’s truck with a smoke, and Zayne stands in the door frame of his Ford GT, with his arms resting over its roof.

“Get out the car, Mom,” I tell her in a cool, calm voice that I really struggle to maintain when I see the gun she must have used to kill Dalton, resting on the seat beside her. Breanna is screaming in the back of the car and the relief of knowing she’s breathing takes away some of the anger I feel at hearing her sound so distressed. I lean my head a fraction lower and see that she’s strapped into a car seat, which also makes me a little more comfortable.

“I can’t,” Mom tells me, continuing to rev the engine of the car.

“Mom, do you really think I’m gonna let you take her? Whatever this is, it’s over.”

“I’m sorry.” She looks up at me and smiles sadly before pressing her foot to the floor and making the car spin on its

wheels. The River Boys dart in different directions when they realize she intends to go through them and before she picks up enough speed to do some serious damage. I raise the gun in my hand and I shoot.

“Garrett, No.” Maisie comes racing up behind me as I take out a second tire, grabbing my arm and sobbing onto her knees, as the car with our precious little girl inside swerves across the road, it’s undoubtable that it will crash either into the barricade or the mountain wall, but the impact will be minimal now she can’t pick up speed. It still doesn’t make watching the hood smash into the side of Zayne’s GT any more bearable. Maisie kicks off her heels and races toward the car.

“Get Mom out. Take her back to the line camp before the police get her,” I call back to Wade, as I race behind Maisie and manage to get ahead of her. “Stay back,” I warn her, even though Mom’s head is planted into the airbag that’s burst out of the wheel and she’s still. I’m very aware of that gun that’s still in her front seat as I open the back passenger door.

Breanna is still screaming her lungs out, and although all my instincts scream at me to lift her out and comfort her, first I reach into the footwell where the gun has fallen so I can secure it. As soon as I have it in my hand and tucked in my jeans, I breathe a long sigh of relief as I unstrap my daughter from her seat and pull her onto my chest. She’s shaking with fear and I cling to her so tight I have to be careful not to hurt her.

“Garrett,” Maisie calls out as she races up behind me.

“She’s fine,” I call out, pulling us both out of the car. I can feel her little heart beating wildly against my chest, as I hold her and watch Wade drag mom out onto the road. He keeps her held to the ground, looking clueless as to what’s happening, while one of the River Boys grab him something to tie her with. Maisie’s eyes swell with fear when she notices all the blood on Breanna.

“Garrett, she’s covered in blood.” She screeches as she frantically checks her over for injury.

“It’s not hers,” Mom speaks up from the ground. “I would never have hurt her.”

I’m about to tell her to shut the fuck up, but my wife shocks the hell outta me when her face turns cold and she turns to face my mother. She says nothing to her, just strides toward her then kicks her in the face with her bare foot. Mom’s head falls back against the tarmac and Maisie proves that ain’t enough when she lifts it back up by her hair and drags her up on her feet. She roars with anger and frustration as she smashes Mom’s face flat into the wing mirror of the car, before letting her fall back to the floor, then rushing back toward me and Breanna. I let her snatch her from my hold, then I wrap them both in my arms, holdin’ ‘em tight and count my blessings.

“Garrett, what do we do?” Wade asks, looking down at Mom who’s sitting on the ground with her head resting back against the car door and blood pouring from her nose.

“You tie her up and take her to the line camp like I said. Wait for me to get back from the hospital, we need to get her checked over.” I look at my little girl and hope for Mom’s sake that she’s right and that none of this blood belongs to her.”

“What the fuck happened here, where the fuck’s Dalton?” Wade shakes his head, confirming that he has no idea what’s happened, and I hate that it falls on me to tell him.

“Dalton’s dead, Wade. This bitch killed him.” I look at the woman who bought me into the world with pure hatred in my eyes.

Wade takes in what I just told him, sliding his hand through his hair and pacing the road, and I’m sure he’s asking himself all the questions I’ve asked myself.

“No, she wouldn’t have done that.” He looks down at her. “Dalton? You killed Dalton?” he screams.

“Why? Why would you do that?” He makes her jump when he slams his fist into the panel beside her head.

“That’s why I want her taken to the line camp, she ain’t getting away with this by getting handed into the police. I

want answers.” I stare at her coldly. “And you guys.” I turn my head to the River Boys. “You call this in, say you found the car abandoned with the baby inside and that you called me. It’ll match up to the story I tell the hospital.” I put my arm around my wife’s shoulders and lead her back toward the truck. Kissing the top of her head, I stroke my little girl’s back while I wonder what the hell I’m gonna do to make the woman who gave birth to me pay for this.



I listen to Savannah sob as she follows me into the bunkhouse. I'm carrying Dalton and then see the look of shock on everyone's face when they see him lying limp in my arms.

"Clear the fucking table," I yell at them all, watching them all scatter so they can move all the empty beer bottles and crap so I can lay him down. I place him down carefully and feel the pain all over again when I step back and look at him.

"Get out," I yell at them all as they continue to stare. "I said, get out" I roar again when no one budes. Taking his hand in mine, I drop to my knees and sob into his chest.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." I repeat the words over and over again. Because this is all my fuckin' fault, if I wasn't sulking at the line camp tonight over Savannah, I would have been the one watching the house. It would have been me in that car with our crazy assed mother. Not him, the happy-go-lucky kid who had his whole life ahead of him.

"It's not your fault." Savannah rests her hand on my shoulder to try and comfort me and I tear it away.

"Get out," I tell her the same thing that I told the others.

"Cole, you shouldn't..."

"Just leave." I turn around and let her see the aggression on my face. I don't care if I sound cruel or hurt her feelings, right now she needs to get the fuck away from me. I'm angry beyond fuckin' reason and I don't know what I'm capable of right now.

I hear the front door slam shut, signaling that she's left, and I keep staring at my brother. The police will be here soon,

they're gonna wanna take him away, and that ain't right. He belongs right here alongside us. We still had so much to teach him. I think back to how I've acted since we found out he was our brother and wonder if I showed him enough that he was part of our family.

"Dalton." The door swings open again and when I see Mitch's startled face, I have no idea what to say to him. I stand back on my feet and shake my head, watching the old man fall apart right in front of me.

"I'm sorry." I swallow the lump in my throat as he loses control, swiping his arm over the kitchen counter and knocking everything on it to the floor. He punches the wall and kicks the units, then moves over to the lockers, sending 'em crashing as he drags them to the floor. He hammers his fist into one of the big wooden pillars that hold up the roof over and over again until his knuckles tear apart and blood streams down the splintered wood.

"Mitch, stop." I head over to grab him and when he turns around and swings for me, I manage to dodge his fist and force him back against it. "It ain't gonna bring him back."

"He was your fuckin' brother, Cole. You should have protected him. Same way you would have Garrett or Wade." He points his finger in my face and his words set me on fire. I grab the man I've looked up to since I was a boy by his throat and pin him to the good damn pillar.

"I would've. If I had seen this coming, I would have protected him with my fuckin' life. Ain't that what this means?" I rip open his shirt and remind him of the brand we share. Mitch's scar may have faded over the years he's had it, but he knows better than any of us of its value.

"He was drivin' Breanna and Mom to the hospital, the kid was sick. Someone must have ambushed 'em on the way. Whoever they are took him out and now they got Breanna and Mom," I explain, going through all the people in my head who might have done this. I can't think about my baby niece or the fact she could be dead too.

“Jesus, you don’t know, do you?” Mitch shakes his head, his anger suddenly turning into pity.

“Know what?”

“Cole, the car wasn’t ambushed. Your mom did this,” he tells me.

“What?” I drop my grip on the old man and shake my head as I step back.

“Your mom was tryin’ to take Breanna, and Dalton tried to stop her, that’s the reason he’s fuckin dead,” Mitch yells at me.

“No, she wouldn’t do that.”

“I just got off the phone with Noah, Wade’s on his way back here with her now. It was her, Cole, she had a plan. Wade found a trunk full of shit for her and the baby and documents for some offshore account your dad set up fuckin’ years ago. She did this. We’ve been so preoccupied with all this Harvey and political crap that we didn’t notice the biggest threat right under our fuckin’ noses.” He uses the back of his bloody hand to wipe under his nose, and he doesn’t look mad at me anymore. He looks mad with himself.

“Noah said he’s speakin’ to Sheriff Nelson, you shouldn’t have taken him away from the scene of the crime.” He slowly walks over to his nephew and closes his eyes when it hurts him to look.

“I had to I—”

“I said you shouldn’t have, I didn’t say I wasn’t grateful that you did.” Mitch opens his eyes and I see the tears brimming in ‘em. He sees the damage that’s been done to him, and he forces himself to keep looking despite how much it hurts him.

I know for sure that the heart I keep denying I got exists when I watch him let go of his pride and sob his heart out. He holds Dalton’s cold, pale hand the same way I did while I stand back and watch, taking in what he said about Mom and letting it sink in.

“Go be with your brothers. I’ll speak to Nelson when he gets here.”

“Garrett and Wade are gonna wanna say goodbye,” I tell him.

“I won’t let ‘em take him before they get here,” Mitch promises.

I pull up at the line camp and see Wade sitting on the porch step drinking a bottle of Jack to himself, he looks every bit as broken as I feel. I approach him as he knocks the bottle back and sighs heavily.

“She’s in there. Tied to a chair. I had to come out here because I couldn’t look at her,” he confesses.

“So it’s true? What Mitch said... She killed Dal—”

“Don’t. I don’t wanna hear it again.” He tenses his jaw to try and contain his tears. “Garrett and Maisie are at the hospital getting the little one checked out.”

“She’s okay?” I check, knowing it would break Garrett’s heart if anything happened to his little girl. It’d break mine too, just ‘cause I ain’t the most hands-on uncle that don’t mean I don’t love ‘em.

“Yeah, seems that way, the car crashed after Garrett blew out the tires but it was only minor. She was strapped in.”

“She wasn’t breathing. Leia said she...”

“It was all part of the plan, Cole,” Wade interrupts me. “She knew Maisie wouldn’t have let her take the babies anywhere alone. Tonight was her perfect opportunity. Leia reckons she gave the baby something to make her drowsy. Finn’s taken the bottle she found to the hospital so the docs can check out what it was.”

“What a fuckin’ mess.” I take off my hat and slide my hands through my hair.

“How do we fix this one, Cole?” My little brother turns his head to me looking worried.

“I ain’t ever wanted to hurt a woman before, but...”

“I feel ya.” I rest my hand on his shoulder and squeeze, the anger inside me raging hot and sizzling through my veins and I haven’t even laid my eyes on the bitch yet.

We drink what’s left in the bottle between us, and stay silent while we wait for my brother. I toss a few more logs on the fire that Wade must have started before I got here and stand staring into the flames wondering what comes next. My phone rings and when I see Savannah’s name flash up. I feel bad for how I yelled at her back at the Bunkhouse. None of this is her fault. All she wanted to do was comfort me.

I pick up, purely because I wanna hear the sound of her voice again.

“Cole.” I hear the relief in her voice when I answer and wonder what the hell I ever did to deserve it. “I’ve been worried.”

“No need, you got Tate at the house with ya, right?”

“Yeah he’s here, but I meant I’ve been worried about you.” Her words cause another tiny crack in my heart.

“No need for that either,” I tell her, kicking the stones under my feet and reminding myself to keep her at arm’s length.

“Cole, me, and Leia have been feeling kinda helpless and we’ve been trying to make sense outta everything.”

“Well, that’s your first mistake. There is no sense in this.” I shake my head and think about Dalton again.

“But there are things that have led up to this. Things we’ve all missed.”

“What kind of things?” I screw my face up in confusion, I’m usually pretty good at picking up on shit, but I did not see this one coming. Maybe that’s why I feel as scared as I am angry.

“Well, Maisie’s been feelin’ really rotten lately, because of that she’s kind of had to step back and let Teresa help with a lot more. She’s been exhausted and confused...”

“Garrett said she went to the doctor yesterday, right?”

“She also told Leia that she spent a few years getting sober before she came back to Fork River,” Savannah mentions, which is news to me. Mom never told us she had a problem.

“Well, most people who have spent so long getting sober don’t tend to drink after.” She makes a valid point, I’ve seen Mom drink plenty of times since she’s been here.

“Things just weren’t making sense so we thought we could try and be useful and checked out her room.” I can tell by her voice that she’s nervous about how I’ll react.

“And what did you find?” I ask, already knowing it must be something for them to be callin’.

“We found something that explains the way Maisie’s been feeling. We found liquid benzodiazepine,” she tells me.

“Wait, you think Mom has been drugging Maisie?” I check I’m hearing her right.

“She had some weird medicine in the baby’s room. And after all that’s happened today, does it sound so crazy?”

“No. Sadly it fucking doesn’t.”

“We just thought you might wanna know and I... I wanted to know that you were okay,” she adds softly

“Savannah.” I catch her before she hangs up.

“Yes?” she whispers.

“I’m not okay,” I admit, feeling the weight of everything that’s happened dragging me into the ground.

“I’ll be here when you need me,” she promises, and I quickly hang up and rejoin my brother on the porch before I show her any more weakness.

“That was the girls, they’ve been going through Mom’s room. They think she’s been drugging Maisie,” I inform him of what I just heard and wonder how much more shit we can learn today.

“Fuckin’ hell.” Wade scrubs his hand over his face. “You know Garrett’s gonna want her dead for this, right?”

“Wade, I want her dead for this,” I admit.

“Maybe she needs help, she lost a daughter. This could be some kind of mental break.” He looks up at me hopefully.

“She shot our brother in his fuckin’ head,” I remind him, thinking about the fact he’s laid out on the table at the bunkhouse.

“Cole, I hate her for it, I can’t get it out of my head, but...”

“There ain’t no buts, Wade. She’s a cold-blooded fuckin’ killer. Dalton would have been protecting his niece and she shot him for it.” I kick the porch rafter and make the roof shake, turning him silent again.

It’s another hour before Garrett’s truck pulls up, and when he gets out and slams the door, he marches toward the cabin door with hate in his eyes and tension in his fists.

“Whoa, Garrett.” Wade stands in front of him. “We need to think about how we’re gonna approach this.” He tries to get him to make eye contact, but something has snapped in Garrett’s head. For so long he’s had to hold back on shit. He’s taken blow after blow and dealt with it as subtly as he can, but this. This has pushed him too far.

“She took my daughter, she killed our brother, and now I find out she’s been drugging my wife. I know how to approach this.” He barges his shoulder into Wade and steps past him, opening the door into the cabin and stopping dead when he sees our mom tied to the chair.

All this time we’ve been outside, I’ve assumed Wade had her gagged because she’s been silent but she ain’t. She sits in silence, with blood crusted under her nose and a fearless look on her face.

“Boys.” She nods her head at us, and surprisingly, it’s me that reaches out and grabs Garrett when he launches for her.

“How can you be so calm, you sick bitch?” He struggles against my hold and I’m grateful when Wade steps up to help

me.

“No one ever did anything good while panicking.” She shrugs, showing no remorse or empathy for what she’s done.

“Garrett, you want answers,” Wade reminds him, and we both loosen our hold when we feel the strain he’s pushing against us slacken.

“Why?” he asks her, his voice coming out weak and all the anger in his eyes leaking into tears.

“Because I deserve another chance,” she tells him. “Your father took everything away from me. My family, my home. Hank.” She shakes her head. “I had to whore myself to survive. I had to suck drunk men’s dicks, all while that asshole was here, having this town give him all that attention he craved. The poor abandoned rancher whose wife left him with four kids to raise.”

“So you’re making us pay for what he did?” I look at her in disgust. “Let’s not forget you were fuckin’ his father. The same man who he took from us too,” I remind her, but she doesn’t react.

“You were gonna take my little girl.” Garrett steps closer to her. “You were gonna take her from her mother and her brothers. You were gonna make her suffer too.”

“No. I would have taken care of her. I love her.” Mom shakes her head looking as if Garrett’s offended her. “Taking her wasn’t part of the plan at first. But I got attached and I was taking her with me to save her,” she whispers.

“Save her from what?” Garrett yells in her face, his rage starting to climb back up again.

“From you.” She stares back at him cruelly. “From all of this. This ranch is cursed and she deserves better.”

“Don’t you *dare* tell me what my kids need! Not when you weren’t there for your own,” he swipes back at her.

“I didn’t have a choice in that.” She loses her cool and screams hysterically, causing me and Wade to glance at each other in concern.

“Of course, you had a fuckin’ choice. You could have gone to the cops, you could have gotten yourself a lawyer. But you didn’t, you left us with a man who killed our grandpa and you never looked back.”

“Wait... what *was* the fuckin’ plan?” I interrupt when I pick up on something she said earlier.

“You said taking her wasn’t part of the plan. What did you come here to do?” I narrow my eyes on her.

“This was the plan,” Garrett answers for her, taking a document out from his back pocket and tossing it onto her lap. “Over \$500,000 our dad had in an offshore account that she knew about.” Garrett looks at her in disgust. “You didn’t come here to build bridges or to get your family back. You came here to get rich.”

Mom closes her eyes as Garrett spits his allegation at her.

“And you know what I’m finding a little suspicious... Those men who broke in and killed Dad a couple of years ago told me they were looking for this too. Said someone had paid ‘em to break in and find it. I can’t imagine many other people knew about it.” He folds his arms over his chest while he waits for her answer.

“No.” Wade shakes his head in disbelief. “Mom, you didn’t...”

“I wasn’t workin’ alone.” She clears her throat as if that makes any difference.

“Mason... This shit’s got him written all over it.” I shake my head and laugh bitterly. That old bastard really has it coming to him.

“No, not Mason. Cora,” Mom announces proudly and when I lift my head back up to face her, I realize me and my brothers are all wearing the same shocked look.

“Cor... Maisie’s Mom?” Garrett checks he heard right.

“I met her back in L.A., she was in a bar drowning her sorrows after her latest failed relationship. We got drinking

together, and she opened up about how she selected her men. Turns out I had the perfect guy for her.”

“Mom.” Wade looks broken.

“I helped her find him, I knew he’d been on dating sites for years, I used to make fake profiles and talk to him myself sometimes. Build up his hopes, then dash ‘em again. You know how selective your father was. The fact I knew the man inside out helped Cora make him putty in her hands.”

“You sick bitches.” Wade helps himself to another bottle when it all becomes too much.

“The plan was for them to get married, for her to live the high life for however long she could drain him of it, and for me to get this.” Her eyes drop to the document on her lap.

“That wasn’t just Dad’s, Mom, it was ours. In case anything goes wrong. In case we lost everything. You were gonna...”

“Garrett, I think we’ve already established I’m not the best mother in the world.” She smiles at him sarcastically. When he turns his back and steps away from her, I know it’s so he can retain his rage.

“So what happened, you obviously didn’t get it?” Wade questions her and I don’t like the look I see on her face.

“Bill wasn’t supposed to die that night, it was just supposed to be a home invasion. Somehow, Cora fucked up. I knew she’d end up doing something stupid. But anyway, the contact we’d used to set up the home invasion went black on me. Cora went black on me too, and I figured that maybe she’d screwed me over.

“But she didn’t.” Wade looks at the documents on Mom’s lap.

“By the time I figured that out it was too late. I’d already made her pay for it.” She sighs

“Hang on, are you sayin’...” Garrett snaps his head back around and looks ready to blow. “Did you kill Maisie’s Mom?”

“I’d thought that would be the one thing you’d thank me for.” Mom chuckles to herself. “She was gonna drain your father of everything. When I left here, I promised myself that your father would be the last person who ever screwed me over. I thought Cora had screwed me over.” She shrugs.

I watch all the color drain from Garrett’s face.

“People thought I did that. I could have gone to jail. For life.”

“I came to talk to her not kill her, but as we’ve learned tonight, accidents happen.”

This time it’s Wade who grabs me when I go to step forward.

“She had enough breath in her to promise me she hadn’t touched the money herself while she was bleeding out. Maybe she thought I’d be grateful and call an ambulance. I put a bullet in her brain instead, it felt much more humane.”

“And is that what it felt like when you put one in Dalton?” Garrett launches at her, lifting her and the chair she’s tied to by her blouse and slamming her back against the wall.

“No,” She shakes her head and despite Garrett’s anger, she remains calm. “I begged Dalton not to make me do that. I was starting to like him,” she admits with no sign of regret on her face at all.

“You bitch.” Garrett drops her to the ground and wipes the tears from his eyes. “All this time. We took you back, we tried our best to forgive you... all you wanted was that money. You weren’t sorry for leaving us. You weren’t sorry for what happened to Breanna.”

“That’s not true.” Mom finally shows some emotion when she shakes her head. “I was trying to fix that. I took that little girl tonight to give her the chance Breanna never had. I was saving her from this family. I was saving her from you.” She looks Garrett square in the eyes.

“My little girl doesn’t need saving from me,” Garrett yells.

“Oh yeah, well you couldn’t protect your sister. None of you could. You let Mayor Walker fuck her, you let him knock her up and then you let him kill her. Carson men are selfish, this damn ranch is all they care about. Yes, I came here for the money, and to get it I had to play a role to gain your trust, but all the love I feel for that little girl you’ve taken from me was real.”

Garrett pulls his gun from his holster and points it at her, and Wade looks at me as if I should do something.

“What are ya gonna do, son, shoot me?” She laughs at him.

“Garrett. Think about this,” Wade calls out.

“Oh I’m thinkin’ about it, Wade. I’m visualizing her fucked up brains splattered all over these walls.” He stares at her while the gun shakes in his hand.

I don’t react, I just watch. Garrett has to make his own decision here.

“Garrett, you honestly think you could live with doin’ that? She’s our mom. She gave birth to you.” Wade heads over to him and tries to talk him down. “Garrett, I want her dead too, but that’s a hell of a thing for you to live the rest of your life with. We’ll find another way. She’s our mom, Garrett,” he reminds him.

“She ain’t my mom anymore.” Garrett drops the gun to the floor and closes his eyes. Then moving closer to her he pulls out his knife and cuts through the ropes that are tied around her chest while Wade scoops up the gun.

“This is it, the last second chance you’re ever gonna get from me,” he tells her, and Mom looks bewildered when he opens the cabin door and lets the cold air blow inside.

“Leave. Get the fuck out of Fork River and never come back.”

“Garrett?” Mom shakes her head as she slowly rises to her feet.

“I should kill you. God knows I want to, but it’s him who I’m gonna let be your judge. Leave.” He nods his head out the door toward the black cold night.

“But Garrett, it’s the middle of the night. It’s miles from anywhere out here. There could be wol—”

“Like I said, God can judge you. But let me warn you of this.” He leans in close to her, testing all his restraint. “If you ever come near me or my family again, I will kill you.” I watch the Adam’s Apple bob in his throat as he narrows his eyes.

“Please don’t do this,” she begs, and I come up from behind her and slam her in the back, forcing her out the door.

“You fuckin’ heard him,” Wade tells her, stepping out after me and Garrett as we watch her stumble off the porch.

“Boys, you don’t want me dead. I’m your mother. I know what I did was wrong but, I told you what happened. What your father did to me... Maybe I took things too far with Breanna... and I didn’t mean to hurt Dalton. I’m sorry for that. I really am.” She’s on her knees now, in the dirt where she belongs. None of us have a thing to say about her little speech, this woman has no remorse.

“You’re really gonna let me wander out there alone?” she asks, relying on his mercy. Garrett stares right through her and nods his head.

“Then you’re no better than your father was. None of ya are.” She drags herself back up onto her feet and backs away from us with unsteady steps. We all stand shoulder to shoulder and watch her disappear into the darkness and out of sight.

“I couldn’t do it,” Garrett says, frowning into the empty space in front of us.

“I get it.” Wade taps his shoulder. “None of us would have been able to.”

“You know she could come back,” I point out, trying to ignore how angry I am that Garrett let her go.

“She ain’t coming back.” Garrett shakes his head. “She ain’t got nothin’ to come back for.” He heads back into the cabin and picks up the document from the floor.

“You gonna tell Maisie about her mom?” Wade asks, sitting in the chair we had Mom tied to.

“I feel like I should, she deserves to know what happened.”

“What a fuckin’ mess.” Wade shakes his head. While I do nothin’.

“Let’s go home.” Garrett slaps me on the back, I’m done with this day.”

“I need to stay here. I can’t go back to the bunkhouse.” I think about Dalton lying out on that table and I can’t stand it.

“You ain’t goin’ in the bunkhouse, you’re coming home,” Garrett tells me firmly.

“I can’t. Not tonight. I’m too mad. I need my own space right now.” I stare at the floor and focus on breathin’.

“Come on, Cole, we ain’t leavin’ ya out here, not tonight. We should all be together,” Wade tells me.

“But we won’t be. We’ll never be together again. He was one of us.” I stare at them both. “I know it wasn’t for long, but he was our brother. He died protecting our family.” I see the pain in both Garrett’s and Wade’s face when I remind them. “I ain’t comin’ home tonight,” I repeat. “Respect that.”

I breathe through my nose and squeeze my fists. I can’t be around anyone right now, least of all Savannah. Not after all she told me earlier. Right now I’m weak. I feel like I need her and I won’t let that happen to me again. Tonight is a reminder of how easily something can be taken from you.

“Come on,” Wade goes to argue.

“Leave him, Wade.” Garrett picks up on my vibe and tugs him toward the door.

“Lock the door,” Wade points his finger at me, “and if that bitch comes knockin’...”

“She won’t come knockin’,” I assure him.

“Sheriff Nelson is gonna wanna speak to you ‘bout what happened with Dalton. I want you home for breakfast tomorrow mornin’,” Garrett warns me, “Don’t make me come out here and get ya.” He points his finger at me before pulling me in and gripping the back of my head so our foreheads touch. “I need ya, Cole,” he growls under his breath.

“I hear ya.” I nod my head at him as he walks out the door. Then sitting down in the chair, I wait for them to leave and the truck lights to disappear before I reach into the nightstand and pull out the handgun. I check it’s loaded and slide the clip back in place, pulling on my jacket and stepping out into the night.



Maisie sits on the couch between me and Leia, cradling her little girl in her arms and staring at the blank screen on the TV.

“It all makes sense now. She was trying to make me crazy.” More tears stream from her eyes.

“She was a mad woman.” Leia strokes Breanna’s back. “I’m just so relieved you’re all okay.” She smiles.

“Dalton’s not okay,” Maisie reminds us, looking heartbroken.

“Sheriff Nelson is over in the bunkhouse talkin’ to Mitch now,” I tell her what Tate told me. “The witness at the scene said she saw the car speed off and just managed to get the number plate. The police will know it was Teresa. She’s going to go down for this,” I assure her.

“If she lives.” Maisie sounds expressionless.

“Maisie, I know the boys wanted to talk to her, but surely they wouldn’t... Not their own mother.” I pull back in shock. I’m no fool, I know what the Carson men are about. But surely they aren’t capable of that?

“I hope they do.” Maisie strokes her fingers through her daughter’s wispy hair. “I hope they tear her limbs from her body and slit her throat.” I’ve never seen my friend like this before, but after what she’s been through today I’m hardly surprised by it.

The door opens and Wade and Garrett step inside. My heart sinks when I realize Cole isn’t with them.

“You good?” Garrett crouches down in front of Maisie, cradling the back of Breanna’s head in his hand as he gifts his

wife a sad smile.

“I will be. Did you kill her?” she asks with that same blank expression as before.

“No.” He shakes his head. “But she ain’t coming back,” he assures her, and before she can argue he interrupts.

“Listen, darlin’, can you hand Breanna over to Leia for a second, I got something I need to tell ya.”

“Is it serious?” She does as he asks, handing Breanna over and allowing him to raise her onto her feet.

“Come on, not here.” He leads her into his office and I can tell by the guilty look on Wade’s face when I look up at him that it’s not good news. The office doors close and Leia gives him the same questioning look as I am.

“We got some answers outta Mom tonight.” He takes up the space Maisie has vacated on the couch and lifts off his hat.

“She admitted that she only came back to get access to some account our dad set up years ago. Apparently, her and Maisie’s mom planned the whole thing. Cora only knew about Dad because of Mom, they even planned the home invasion that killed him together.”

“What?” Leia stares at him with wild shocked eyes. “That ain’t even it, Mom admitted to killing Cora too. She thought she’d double-crossed her.”

“This is insane.” I can’t believe what I’m hearing, and when the door to Garrett’s office flies open and Maisie comes out, me and Leia rush to console her. I know her relationship with her mom was rocky at the best of times, but all this is so twisted and conspiring I can’t imagine how it must be for her.

“You gonna be okay here with them just for a while?” Garrett checks with Maisie. “Me and Wade need to go say goodbye to our brother.” He looks across to Wade sadly and when Maisie nods back at him, they both place their hats back on and walk out the door with their heads down.



I walk with just the moon and the stars as my light. I know this ranch like the back of my hand, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out what route she would have taken. She only had to find the river, and then she can follow its path all the way to town. Sure, it's one hell of a hike, and I doubt she'd have gotten very far, but it ain't like she was left with much choice. I avoid the woods as I march through the wet grass. If something's gonna come at ya out here, it's far more likely to do it from somewhere it's got cover.

When I eventually get to the river, I pull out my phone and turn on the torch, scanning the ground for any sign of her coming through. The water is oddly calm, and the noises that come from the woods on the other side of the pasture remind me that, out here, we're all just tryin' to survive.

"Cole." I hear a weak voice come from up ahead and when I shine the torch toward it and squint my eyes, I can just make her out in the distance. She's tried to find shelter against one of the giant boulders that line the river bank and she looks completely helpless.

"Cole, I knew you'd come for me." She scurries onto her feet. I figure she must have lost her shoes somewhere along the way because she hobbles across the rough ground to get closer to me.

"Follow me," I tell her, turning my back on her and starting to walk out into the open pasture.

"Cole? Where are we going?"

I get far enough out for her to be in the open and have a good view of Copper Ridge when she turns herself around.

"Turn around." I stop and face her.

“What is this?” She laughs nervously.

“I said, turn around,” I repeat, somehow keeping it all together and when she does as I tell her and I’m staring at the back of her head I take a few paces closer.

“It’s pretty, ain’t it?” I tell her, admiring for myself how the moonlight from the other side of the sky shines against it and the stars form their constellations above it. “Pretty soon the sun will be rising up from behind it.”

“Cole, what’s this about?”

“Garrett and Wade, they’re different to me, you’ve always known that. You were always telling me I was the bad one.” I step closer and when she goes to turn her head I lose my cool.

“Don’t turn around, keep looking at that ridge,” I yell, taking the gun out of my holster. “I used to think you were being cruel, that you favored them over me, but as the years have gone on, I’ve realized you were right.”

“Listen, sweetheart, I know you didn’t come out here to hurt me.” Her voice trembles as I get closer.

“You should have stayed away. Coming back here, making us believe you were a victim, making us think you’d changed... It was cruel.” I feel the tears prick at my eyes and get even angrier because she doesn’t deserve ‘em. “Hell, even I started to believe you’d changed.” I shake my head at my own stupidity.

“I’m sorry. Is that what you wanna hear, Cole? Because I am. I’m truly fucking sorry.”

“You’re not sorry. You’re desperate.” I press the barrel of the gun against the back of her head and hear her gasp.

“Cole, this is silly. Your brothers don’t want this, they let me go. Are you really going to act against them?”

“You’re wrong, my brothers do want this. They just don’t want it on their conscience,” I correct her, feeling the blood pump fast around my body.

“And what about your conscience, sweetheart?” she asks, her voice trembling with fear.

“I lost my conscience a long time ago. I can put this bullet in your head and live with it because I know it’s the right thing to do.”

“When did that happen, Cole? When you let someone murder your little sister?” she snaps back at me, her words diggin’ in like a red-hot poker and stirring at my insides.

“Maybe. It was the point where I stopped caring.”

“Cole.” She tries to turn her head again but I push the gun deeper against her skull.

“Keep lookin’ forward,” I hiss from my teeth. “Now, you don’t deserve kindness, but I’m gonna give you this one. I’m gonna let that beautiful view with the stars above it be the last thing you see instead of the monster you made.” I swipe my free hand under my nose.

“Please don’t, Cole. I’ll leave. I’ll never come back.” She’s sobbing now, but I don’t believe a word she says.

“You went too far. You killed my brother and took that baby girl.”

“Dalton wasn’t your brother, he was your father’s Bastard,” she spits out like she’s forgotten I’m the one holding the gun.

“You’re wrong. Dalton was family, more family than you ever were.”

I feel the gun start to shake in my hand, the same way it did in Garrett’s.

“You won’t do it, Cole.” She must feel it clattering against her skull.

“Wrong again.” My hand turns steady when I remind myself why I’m doin’ this. “I may not be the uncle those babies will ever aspire to be, and I may not ever be the one they come to for affection, but I *will* be the uncle that keeps them safe...” I lean over her shoulder, “whatever it takes,” I whisper inside her ear, hearing her last fearful breath before I step back and pull the trigger.

The sharp blow echoes through the night sky and unsettles a few birds from the woods behind me. When Mom's body drops to the floor, I clutch the gun in my hand and let the tears roll over my cheeks. I take a few more steps back before my legs weaken and I drop to my ass, sitting in the wet morning dew as the sun starts coming up from behind the ridge... just like the start of every other day before it.

I sit in a trance, the cold breeze swirling around me as I stare at her body, and the blood that seeps from the neat, little bullet hole I put in the back of her head. Blood that stains the grass, my hands, and sticks to my face.

I don't know where to go from here. Or how I tell my brothers. How do I look that beautiful girl who told me she's in love with me in the eyes when I know that my soul is empty?

"It's okay, son." I jump when I feel a hand squeeze my shoulder, and when I look up over it and see Mitch, I wonder how the fuck he managed to sneak up on me. Especially with his horse.

"It's okay," he repeats when I grip his hand and squeeze it tight. I've never felt as weak as I do now.

"I couldn't have her out there, I couldn't risk her ever coming back," I try to explain as fresh tears fill my eyes.

"I know that, son, I'da put a bullet in the bitch's head myself if given the chance." He stares at her body with me.

"They can't find out, Wade or Garrett. They won't look—"

"You get yaself on home for breakfast. Let me take care of this." Mitch raises me onto my feet.

"I can't. I can't face 'em." I shake my head at him. "They won't understand, Mitch."

"Go home, Cole," he tells me, gripping my shoulders and searching my eyes for some focus.

"Bury her somewhere where she can see the Ridge," I tell him, not even attempting to hide my tears anymore. "I got one good memory of her. Just one." I look down at her lifeless

body. "I'd woken up in the middle of the night when I was about five or six. I was scared and must have been screamin'. She came to me and opened my curtains. Then she laid out beside me on my bed and told me to count the stars above the ridge. She stayed there stroking my hair until I fell back to sleep." I laugh to myself sadly. "I doubt she'd have remembered that, but I never forgot it. There was a time when she was good, Mitch, it was a long time ago but there *was* a time." I pick my hat up off the floor, placing it back on my head.

"There was a time when we were all good."

I look at her one last time before I turn my back and walk away.



I see him coming toward the line camp where I've been waiting for him for over an hour. He's got his head hung low and walks sadly. I stand up as he gets closer and wonder where he's been when I see all the blood on his jacket.

"What happened? That's not Dalton's blood," I point out when I see it on his face as well. He ignores me, heading around the side of the house where there's a rain store. Then splashing water over his face, he attempts to clean off his hands.

"Yearling was trapped in some barbwire, I had to get it untangled." He stares at the water as he scrubs his hands and pats down his face again.

"What are you doin' out here? The sun's barely up," he asks, sounding detached and cold.

"I came to check on you. I wanted to come last night but Wade said I shouldn't. I..." He snatches my hand away when I reach out to touch his face.

"Don't touch me," he rasps, his voice coming out weak and pained.

"Cole, what happened?" I ask because something inside him has changed.

"What happened? My baby niece got kidnapped, my brother got murdered, and I found out my mom is a psychopath all in one night." He storms past me toward his truck.

"Where are you going? We need to talk." I chase after him.

"There's nothing to talk about. Go home, Savannah."

“No. I’m not gonna do that anymore, I’m not gonna stare across the breakfast table and pretend that me and you...”

“I didn’t mean back to the ranch, I meant back to L.A. Go to Paris or wherever Danny wants to take ya, just get away from here and get away from me.”

“No.” I block him from getting to his truck door.

“Cole, I’m not going anywhere. I told you last night. I belong here with you.”

“No you don’t,” he hisses through his teeth at me.

“Bad shit happens to good people if you hang around here too long. Now if what you told me is true, and you really love me, you’ll get back in Wade’s truck, drive to the ranch, pack your shit, and leave.”

“Why are you so intent on making yourself suffer?” I strain to hold in my tears. “Don’t you realize that in doing this, you’re hurting me too?”

“I warned you not to catch feelings,” he tells me coldly.

“You think I’m gonna make this easy on you by leaving?” I laugh at him bitterly.

“No, Cole, you don’t get to stamp on a woman’s heart and pack her off on a plane. I’ve found a home here with people I like and people I care a whole lot about. The same people I know you care about too.” I poke my finger hard into his shoulder. “I’m going nowhere. Guess we’re just gonna have to suffer that breakfast table.” I turn on my heels and storm back toward Wade’s truck and when I feel his hand grip my arm and spin me around, I go to shove him away but he drags me close and slams his mouth hard over mine. His cold, soaked hands cradle my head between them as he consumes every part of me.

“A cowboy kiss isn’t gonna fix this,” I warn him when he eventually pulls away.

“That wasn’t a cowboy kiss, darlin’. That was a goodbye kiss.” He starts stepping backward toward his truck. “You’re

right, you shouldn't have to leave if you're happy here. I'll go."

"You're breaking my heart," I tell him, hoping that knowing what he's doing to me will make him see some sense.

"I'd rather you hate me than love me. It's safer that way. Red."

His forehead furrows and I see the pain he tries to hide from me before he gets inside his truck and slams the door. I feel my hope shatter when he starts up the engine and pulls away, leaving me standing here, mad at myself for breaking all the rules.



“He was just a boy,” I hiss at her once I’ve tossed her in the ground. I’m a man of my word so I did what Cole requested and dug her hole in a place where she can see the Ridge. No one ever comes out this far anymore, and here on the edge of the woods is the perfect location for this bitch to rot.

“He had a whole life ahead of him.” I wish I’d killed the bitch myself.

A bullet in the head was far too good for her after the years of hurt she’s caused this family and the damage she was prepared to do. Teresa has been the root of all the trouble around here. She was a temptress who lured Hank into her little web and then got him fuckin’ killed. My tears burn my eyes as I strike a match and light my cigarette. I don’t know all the details yet, but I know my nephew died trying to protect his niece. I know I’ll never be greeted with that dumbass smile of his when I step in the bunkhouse again, and that right now feels too hard to fuckin’ bear.

I stand and stare at her awhile and wonder where we go from here. I don’t like the idea of lying to Garrett and Wade. And Cole keeping this to himself ain’t gonna be good for him either. What he did took a lot of courage, and now he’s gonna need time to do some soul searching. I’ve watched that kid grow up to be a man. I’ve seen him do things that even made my stomach turn and I often wondered what his limit would be. I guess this right here was it and I refuse to let it destroy him.

I close my eyes and see Dalton, pale, and lifeless, laid out on the Bunkhouse table. He’ll be gone when I go back. We may have Sheriff Nelson on our side but there’s only so much

he can do. I hate the idea of strangers taking him away. The thought of him being alone in some mortuary makes my own blood go cold. He deserves better than that. He deserves the rest of his fuckin' life.

I shake my head one last time at Teresa before I shovel the dirt over her. It takes me some time, and my muscles still ache from having to dig alone, but I find the endurance to get the job done.

Once the ground is full, I drag some debris over the fresh grave in case anyone happens to wander out here, then I dust off my hands and walk away.

JD is waiting patiently for me where I tied him to one of the trees. He carried her all the way out here on his back, which is another thing the bitch didn't deserve. I should have tied her by the ankles and dragged her out here.

"Good boy." I pat his neck before I climb on his back, leavin' Teresa to feed the worms as I kick him on and head off to check on Everleigh.

The woods hide the cabin that Hank's father built as a safehouse all those years ago. I didn't have much time to make it liveable, but I did what I could, and since I'm stuck out here for the foreseeable, continuing to work on fixing it up is a much-needed distraction. It takes me over an hour to get back and after I've settled JD in the lean-to on the side of the cabin, I make sure he has some fresh straw and water.

I take a deep breath before I step on the porch and knock.

"Everleigh," I call out her name. "It's me, you can unbolt the door now." I feel bad for leaving her out here alone for so long, but when I got the call from Noah I had no other choice.

I hear the rusty bolt on the other side scrape before she opens it a fraction and as soon as I see those soft brown eyes, I feel that heavy weight in my chest lift a little higher. She lifts her lips into a hint of a smile that suggests she's happy to see me, then opens the door fully so I can step inside. She looks so timid as she backs away from me and stands with her shoulders against the back wall. It scares me that she still acts

like a cornered animal sometimes, but every day I notice the fear in her eyes that she arrived with becomes a little less.

“I’m sorry I was gone so long.” I take off my hat and hang it up behind the door. The girl is only used to being left alone for short periods of time. Josie covers me for a few hours of the day so I can do some work around the yard, but usually, it’s just her and me out here.

Her forehead creases when she notices the blood on my hands and shirt, and I quickly shake my head and let her know it isn’t mine while cursing myself for not cleaning up before I came in here. The way her chest sags with relief when she realizes it’s not my blood makes me wonder if she’s starting to care for me. There’s been plenty of things she’s done lately that would suggest it, and it makes me curious. How can a girl who’s been through so much still be kind and thoughtful?

I watch her step over to the kitchen side of the room and pour me a glass of water from the filter system I fixed up a few weeks ago.

“Thank you.” I take it from her and knock it back, before moving to rest in the chair by the fire. She follows me, then sinks onto her knees in front of me, and I scrub my hand over my face. I don’t know how many times I’m gonna have to tell her not to do that. This poor girl hasn’t just been mistreated, she’s been trained like a dog.

I sit forward and rest my elbows on my knees, studying her face a little deeper. It’s hard not to find her beautiful, and yeah, I feel bad about that. Put aside the fact that I’m old enough to be her father. The girl isn’t here for me to admire, she’s here to recover from something unthinkable that happened to her. But for all my sins, it’s impossible not to appreciate her perfect pink lips or wonder if her milky-colored skin feels as soft as it looks.

“Get up, darlin’.” I take a real big risk as I reach out my hand. She doesn’t flinch like I expect her to, so I allow my rough thumb to stroke over her delicate cheek. She looks like a rabbit in the headlight as she swallows deeply and stares into my eyes like she can sense all the pain inside me.

“You don’t belong on your knees,” I tell her, hating that these kinds of behaviors have been ingrained into her.

The doc tells me that all she would have had down in that basement was routine and discipline. I want her to have so much more than that now she’s free, but it’s a slow process. Right now, I can’t even get her to come out into the yard. I can’t get her to speak. The only time I hear her voice is at night when her nightmares come, and knowing that I can’t hold her while she screams feels like a punishment.

I let my thumb linger on her skin for far too long, this is progress. A dangerous kinda progress because now I’m thinking of all the other places I’d like to touch her. Her eyelashes flutter as she looks up at me and it feels like she’s begging me to open up to her.

“My nephew died,” I whisper the words and feel like my heart is being dragged outta my chest all over again. “I raised him since he was a boy, and tonight someone shot him in the back of his head.” I break down and sob, up until now all I’ve felt is anger. But I’m drained of it now and all that’s left is a helpless, hollow pit in my stomach.

Everleigh stands up on her feet and then shocks the hell outta me when her hand guides my head to rest against her stomach. She comforts me, stroking her fingers through my hair, and I wrap my arms around her hips and cling to her so tight I fear I might hurt her.

We stay like that until my tears dry out, and when my arms slacken and she pulls away, she smiles as she heads back to the kitchen and places the kettle on the gas stove.

I leave her to make the tea and step out onto the porch for some fresh morning air. Sometimes just being around her can feel overwhelming, and having a moment like that is making me crave far much more than she’ll ever be able to give.

I take out my cell and text Cole as a distraction.

Everything’s taken care of.

His response comes back quickly.

Thanks

Another message comes through almost straight away and when I read it, it gives me a little hope that we haven't lost him completely.

Mason's next.

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