



RANCHER

Seeks his Free Spirit

MARLEY MICHAELS

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STARCHILD

When I was younger, I made a promise to myself to always stay true to who I am. To not ever hide it or dim my light for anyone. To follow my dreams and not let anyone stand in my way.

Now that I'm fast approaching thirty years on this earth, I've started looking back on my life so far and doing it with pride and wonder. Because I'm living my dream. I help people, I guide those who seek it, those who sometimes don't even realize they're lost and in need of spiritual healing. And I do it with zen and calmness, knowing I'm centered and unbiased and can give them exactly what they need.

Yet right now, I'm so far from calm and zen and all of those things. I'm spitting tacks—and I'm not someone who loses their cool easily or quickly—because having recently visited a dear friend of hers at Bear Mountain, I was congratulated on being Landry Graham's fated soulmate.

Newsflash—I'm not. Or I didn't *know* I was, let alone that a before-now-unknown-to-me spirit at Bull Mountain had *chosen* me for him. I didn't even know there was a matchmaking mountain spirit out there choosing soulmates for people.

It's not that I don't *like* Landry. He seems like a nice man. A little mysterious given that he usually just hangs around outside the shop or walks past. He's like my friendly neighborhood stalker... or fan... or maybe an admirer. But I don't *know* him, which would make it hard to know if I could *love* him.

What I do know is that he has never made any romantic overtures my way, and neither have I. We're friends of friends or friendly townsfolk... if

we were ever to chat, that is.

It's not that I *wouldn't* talk to him, or that I haven't wanted to, it just hasn't happened for some unknown reason. But right now, I'm steaming mad.

If this 'Mountain's Call' I was accidentally told about is to be believed, I won't get a choice about who I'm destined to fall in love with. It's already set in stone and determined by fate. All because a matchmaking *mountain* has already predestined the owner of my heart.

I pause at the bottom of the stairs that lead up to Spring Haven's only bookstore and post office, aptly named Books, Nooks, and Post, and take a deep, hopefully calming breath. I'm waiting for my brain to talk some sense into me and stop me from what I'm about to do. However, all the break does is fill my usually calm lungs with more determination to set the record straight with the man in question. Nobody can tell me what to do and who to love. It's just plain ridiculous!

So instead of stopping, walking away, and maybe talking to Landry another day when I'm *not* so mad, I embrace it and let it fuel me as I stomp up the stairs and open the door, finding the Graham family and their friends, eating, drinking, and laughing. *Maybe they're laughing at me being an idiot and not knowing I'm the next 'chosen one.'*

I push that thought away because I'm long past being the butt of people's jokes and being bullied for being different. That was teenage me. I'm a grown woman now. I'm original, unique, and people can either love it or leave me alone.

With that self-belief coursing through me, I pin my glaring gaze on Landry Graham and storm into the room. It really is a pity I'm angry because I don't give myself a moment to dwell on the fact that he really is quite handsome. He's got dark hair and warm dark eyes, his olive skin and strong jaw features that would make even a steaming mad woman do a double take. He's not a small man either, his wide shoulders and big arms stretching the fabric of his burgundy long-sleeved shirt, dark blue wranglers covering his long bent legs.

"You!" I say, stalking toward him like a woman on a mission. "You didn't tell me. You've known this *whole* time and you *didn't. tell. Me.*" I punctuate each word with a poked finger into his chest.

"Whoa there." Landry frowns in confusion as he covers my hands with his, holding them captive in front of me. I suck in a breath at the instant tingle

and heat where his skin touches mine. My pulse spikes, my heart thumping a mile a minute like it wants to jump out of my chest and pound him over his head. “I don’t know what you think I didn’t tell you. But you must be mistaken.”

“I *know*, Landry,” I spit out angrily. It’s like my calm and peaceful demeanor is gone and there’s nothing I can do to get it back right now. I don’t get angry. I’m all about peace, love, and tranquility... usually, anyway.

“Know *what*, babe?”

“Don’t you *babe* me, Landry Graham,” I grind out. “I’m not one of those women that’s gonna melt when you talk sweet to them. I’m Starchild. I’m a strong, independent, free-spirited woman with a mind and heart of her own.”

“Hey, I know that. I’m not—”

But I’m on a roll. I know I’ve gotta get out of here. I’m making a spectacle and that’s so not me. “There ain’t no damn *mountain* that can tell me who I’m gonna love and that’s *that*.”

I shake myself free of his hold and spin around on my heels and storm out, knowing I’m being dramatic but also needing the satisfaction of holding my head up high.

It’s not until I’m safely ensconced back behind my locked shop door down the road that I take my first easy breath. Bracing my hands on my glass-topped front counter, I hang my head down and suck in more air, trying to focus on each inhale and exhale as guilt and shame wash over me. What the hell did I just do? *And more importantly... why?*

My eyes bolt open as my chest seizes and realization dawns. That was Cora’s special surprise Rhett had organized. She was meeting her favorite author and I just barged in there and ruined it. I’ll have to talk to her and apologize, maybe I’ll give her one of my new lavender-scented candles and take her out for lunch. On top of that though, I just don’t feel like myself. I feel out of sorts, my mind, body, and soul are not at peace, full of whirling emotions I’m not comfortable with.

This isn’t me. I’m not a violent person. I rarely shout. I definitely don’t poke someone’s chest in anger. I try to clear my mind but it’s scattered and I know I’m not thinking straight right now. *Or maybe I am...*

I was born and raised in Spring Haven, Alaska, but up until I was twenty-five, I was a nomad with my parents and brother, living on the road in our RV and caravan. We’d move from place to place around Alaska and Canada, enjoying life and the earth and everything we could out of both while always

giving back as much as we could. And because I never knew any different, I thought it was the best way to be.

Until I realized that I missed home and had a yearning for roots, for independence, and wanted a chance to make my own mark on the world. That's when I knew I had to choose my own path, one that was separate from my parents. One that I could own and know, when my time came, I'd be proud of.

That's when I returned to my hometown, moved in with my Gramma Ruth and set about starting and finishing a joint business and wellness degree online, culminating in the opening of my shop, Happy Auras, two years ago.

It's mine and as it's grown, so have I—as a person, as a strong independent woman, and as a contributing member of the town I love.

Except now I've just made a huge scene on what should've been a lovely evening for one of my closest friends. And why? Because I'm angry that my destiny has apparently already been decided for me?

I need to get out of here because even the crystals and Feng Shui of my sanctuary are not working on me right now. Maybe I need to go home to Gramma's house and meditate, purge all the bad energy out so that the good stuff can get in.

But as I stare blankly at the back wall and try to decide what and *where* I should go now, my gaze falls on a poster I hung up a few months ago when a lovely couple came in and asked if I could display it for them. It's for the Freedom Wellness Retreat in Kinleyville.

Maybe *that* is what I need, a few days of peace and tranquility with no Landry, no voodoo mountain spirit trying to pull at my heartstrings, and no mountain's call, as Gandalf called it. He's the one that let it slip that I'm meant to be Landry's soulmate.

Going to the retreat will give me a few day's escape from this weird new conundrum I've found myself in. Yes, that's exactly what I need. Then I can come back all anew and refreshed and I'll be the Starchild everyone knows. I can get on with my life and forget all about the Call and destiny and *fate*.

A quick phone call to the retreat and a quickly written sign pinned to the front door explaining I was closed for a few days, and I'm in my car heading home. After telling Gramma everything and my plans, I'm on the highway leading out of town and leaving Spring Haven in my rear-view mirror.

My only hope now is that when I get back, the mountain will have realized her mistake and found another soulmate for her mountain rancher.

Although none of that explains why my heart aches the further away from town I go.

LANDRY

“What was *that* about?” the town’s diner owner and family friend, Mags asks, breaking the stunned silence of the bookstore. I stare at the door, frozen in place as my brain runs a marathon replaying the whole showdown with Starchild.

“And there ain’t no damn mountain that can tell me who I’m gonna love and that’s that.”

She’s my *One*? How did I not know that? More importantly, how does *she* know that and I don’t?

“The mountain has chosen Landry next,” Aster Hollingsworth, bestselling romance author and Seer for Moose Mountain says. “She’s your *One* it seems. If you hadn’t worked that out already.”

I spin around and stare at the woman who watches me closely from her place on the couch.

“How? Surely it should go in birth order. Which would mean Austin should be next, not me. Definitely not me. And Starchild? I’m—I...”

Aster smiles, and miraculously the pressure in my chest eases at the sight. “Is it *that* much of a surprise?” Her gaze studies me while also pinning me in place. It’s like she’s searching my brain or something. It’s a little strange. Not many people try to get into my head like that.

Instead of answering, I drop my head into my hands with a frustrated groan, dragging my fingers up into my hair and wringing the strands tight. “Ugh.”

“Aren’t you happy?” my brother Toby says from beside me. I look up at him as he squeezes my shoulder. “You’ve always had a soft spot for Star.”

“More than a soft spot,” I mumble before groaning again. Then something strikes me and my head jerks back toward Aster. “You knew this was coming, didn’t you?”

She bites her lip. “Not exactly,” she replies, as if hedging her bets. “But I *do* know that last week there was a reunion of sorts at Bear Mountain to celebrate Gandalf’s birthday.” Tim aka Gandalf, is a tall, wiry old man who looks exactly like his name’s sake from the Tolkien movies—robes and all.

My family is very new to the whole belief that there is a spirit within Bull Mountain who rewards the protectors of her land—us—with our fated soulmates. After watching a few people close to me complete the Call, I’ve learned that the mountain brings your One into your life and the connection you feel is so strong and real, it’s undeniable...but only when it’s your turn. Maybe *that* is why I felt drawn to Starchild but hadn’t acted on it?

Aster, the woman I shouldn’t be taking out any of my shock and confusion on, heard the Call with her now husband, Gray Cooper, years ago on their mountain. His bloodline was the first to be rewarded generations ago. Since then, it has moved along the mountain ranges from Moose, to Bear, and then to Eagle where my sister Tess and her family now live.

Our turn came last Summer when Colt went home to Eagle after staying away for two years and brought back the love of his life, Lee, somehow activating the prophecy at Bull Mountain at the same time.

Even after all of that, the whole thing is still a big mystery to me. Although I can’t think of anything better than looking at a woman and just *knowing* that she’s meant to be yours.

It’s not that I’m a man afraid of hard work. Be it on the ranch or in the rodeo ring entertaining the crowd between events, I always go the extra mile to get the job done. I know what to do and how to do it and have fun along the way. It’s as simple as that. Life is for living, but it’s also about family, friends, and being a good person. That’s what I focus on.

Starchild is my exception. She’s so beautiful and confident, strong, and giving, compassionate, friendly, and independent. All things that have meant I’ve held off on making that first move to get to know her better.

That’s why I’ve never gone inside of Happy Auras. Just standing outside gets me overthinking what to do, or what I would say to her. That leaves me hanging outside like a weirdo, stealing glimpses of her in her awesome tie-dyed outfits and inhaling the incense sticks she burns whenever I’m in town.

None of that helps me *now* though since it appears the spirit has chosen

me next and *Starchild* is my One. I still can't believe it.

"What do I do?" I ask the room at large. My oldest brother Rhett and his fiancée Cora are standing in each other's arms with concerned expressions on their faces. My next brother Austin sits in an armchair with a bottle of beer in one hand and what looks like one of Aster's romance novels in the other. He's not even looking my way. Toby, my Irish twin who's ten months older than me, shakes his head. Mags looks to Red, our other ranch co-owner and official head of Bull Mountain Ranch, who shares a silent conversation with her, one I can't understand. Looks like I'm on my own figuring this mystery out.

"Maybe some pie from the diner downstairs will help?" Cora suggests with a shrug, looking all starry-eyed at Rhett. "It always works for me."

Rhett tightens his hold on his One and chuckles, lowering his mouth and whispering something for Cora's ear only and making her smile.

"Don't you think someone should maybe—I dunno—go *after* her?" Toby suggests to the room at large.

"No!" all four women in the room answer in unison.

"What? Why not? She's upset and she ran off," Toby continues. I frown because here I am, sitting here on my butt while my supposed One couldn't get away from me fast enough. And how long has she known about the Call? Shouldn't the mountain spirit send out an announcement letter or something? "*Congratulations. You've been selected as the next recipient of the mountain's call. Watch this space for your soulmate.*"

I turn toward Red since he's the wise one out of all of us. If anyone knows what to do, it'd be him. "Red?"

He scrubs his bearded chin with his hand. "Not sure I'm the one you should be goin' to for advice, Lan. I ain't got much experience with women these days."

I push to my feet. "Well I think I should go check on her. Make sure she's OK. She did seem very upset."

My sister Tess moves in front of me as if to stop me from leaving. "Lan, I think, seein' how angry she was, that maybe she needs a little time to... cool off? I don't know the woman, but she didn't seem happy with you." *Ain't that the understatement of the century.*

My brows bunch together. "Star's never angry. She's always happy and smilin'. She *never* shouts or yells." Or pokes people's chests and make their hearts pound like a two thousand pound bull's hooves in a chute. I can *still*

feel the heat from where she touched me. It's like she branded me with her tiny, ineffectual fingers. *That's weird, right?* "She's just... Star. She makes you feel good just by lookin' at her."

I swear all the women in the bookstore let out a sigh. Tess tilts her head, arching a brow as she does it. "You sure you didn't know she was your One, Lan? Because right now you sound like a smitten kitten?"

My whole body jerks at that. "What? No. I mean—no. Just no. I'm just tellin' it how I see it. That's all. I'm not a smitten *anythin'*."

"Bull crap," Toby mutters with a cough. "You've been stalkin' her shop like a man obsessed, Lan. It's OK, we all know it. Your clothes smell like that incense of hers every time you come back from town."

Rhett grins like a cat that's got the cream. "As a man who willingly admits to being smitten, I think you're protestin' too much, little brother."

"Little my ass, I'll show you little," I say, mock glaring at him.

"Boys..." Austin says, low and deep but not all that bothered. He still hasn't moved from his perch, and he's still reading Aster's book like I'm *not* having a weird mountain's call crisis.

"OK. How about this? We all go downstairs to the diner for some of Mags's blueberry pie and ice cream and tomorrow, I'll come into town with you and we can go see Starchild together," Cora suggests. "Who knows, maybe she'd be willing to talk to you by then."

"Don't think there's any talking to be done," I say. "She sounded pretty certain that she doesn't wanna fall in love with me and have my mountain ranch babies." Saying it out loud makes me realize how sad that makes me. *What do you do if your One doesn't want you?* Has this ever happened before?

My head snaps up. "Aster, can the Call be canceled? Do you miss your chance if your One doesn't want you?"

Aster's gaze softens. "That's not how it works, Lan."

I nod, letting that knowledge sink in. "So I guess she's stuck with me as her fated soulmate then?"

All eyes are on me and suddenly I feel like a bug being examined under a microscope.

I think back to what I know about the spirit's reward. It's a journey. The mountain chooses two people whose paths cross for reasons that are more often than not discovered as they go down the road of completing the Call.

This means that there's something I need to do, or learn, or discover and

the same for Star. *That's* how this whole thing works.

Rhett learned about life after the rodeo and getting the reward he'd been waiting forever for, and Cora realized that sometimes fate steps in and gives you what you didn't even know you wanted or needed.

For Colt, it was accepting that he was already good enough for Lee. And for Lee, it was staying the path and trusting her heart that Colt was and always would be the one for her.

Suddenly, I'm not confused anymore because I can *see* exactly what my journey towards completing the Call with Starchild. I have to show her who I am, get to know her, and make her fall head over heels, hopelessly in love with me. That's my mission, and it's one I'm more than happy to dedicate my time toward.

But not tonight. I'll give her time and space and use it to come up with a plan to win Star's heart. One step at a time.

"Landry, are you OK?" Rhett asks.

"Yep. I'm good. Real good. I think I've just had one of those telepathic things happen."

Toby laughs, the girls all giggle, Rhett and Red chuckle and Austin looks at me like I've grown another head and he doesn't know who the hell I am anymore.

Aster snickers as she comes up to me and grins. "Do you mean you've had an epiphany? Because being *telepathic* means transmitting thoughts to other people and knowing their thoughts." She tilts her head with a wry smile. "Unless you're stealing some of my Seer powers?"

I shake my head. "Okay, so maybe not that. But I have to do this the right way if I want to make Star fall in love with me so that we can get married and make lots of mountain babies."

Toby's eyes jump wide. "You want that?"

"Oh yeah."

"So what's the right way then?" Toby asks.

"Starting tomorrow, I'm going to *prove* to her that I'm her One. And I'm going to do it by getting to know her and letting her get to know me. If we're truly meant to be together, then the universe will make sure it happens."

Except the next day when I go to Happy Aura's, I realize that I shouldn't have waited because on the window is a note that makes my heart ache and my brain hurt.

"Closed until further notice."

Maybe I've missed my chance. Or worse, maybe Aster was wrong this time, maybe the Call *can* be canceled.

STARCHILD

Athena and her partner Horizon each give me a huge hug as we say goodbye. It's been two weeks since I came to the Freedom Wellness Retreat in search of clarity, calm, and—as Athena explained it—a reset. She was right, but she was also wrong.

Because no matter what meditation, reflection, soul searching, and mindfulness I've tried, I've discovered there's a part of me that still feels... *off*. It's the reason why my original one-week stay was extended to two.

I tried explaining it to the Head Yogi at the retreat, and despite him directing me into positions reminiscent of a twisted pretzel and making unknown muscles ache, the only outcome was the realization that the problem isn't physical.

So we tried the spiritual angle next. I went and did two days of silence inside a Yurt on the side of Eagle Mountain. The problem was that while I was silent, the world outside the tent was not. Cattle, wind, critters, and what I swear was a duck kept me not only awake, but also made clearing my mind near impossible.

With that failure, yesterday's last-ditch attempt was a spiritual cleansing. The aim is to purify the mind, body, and spirit from negative energy and promote positive energy by removing blockages or stagnant energy that may be causing the soul distress or dysfunction. Or in my case, a feeling of being *off*.

Unfortunately, that also failed to deliver the clarity or zen I was seeking. Now all I can think about is returning to Spring Haven and what exactly I'm going to be walking back into.

“It’s going to be OK, Star. The universe works in mysterious ways. It’s not our job to understand it. We’re just here for the ride,” Athena says cheerfully.

Horizon nods, his eyes warm and all-knowing. "She's right. You may not have the answers you came here for yet, but you'll find them."

“And you’re always welcome here. Even if it’s just to visit and say hello,” Athena adds with a smile.

I nod, giving them one last hug before moving toward my car and starting the engine, waving goodbye again before heading toward the highway.

As I drive, my mind begins to wander, replaying the events of the past two weeks. Despite my lack of progress, I feel like I have moved forward in some ways and sideways in others. The atmosphere of the retreat, the kind people, and the beautiful scenery gave me what I needed - a break. It's just that ever since I found out about the mountain's call and being destined for Landry—whatever the hell that all means—there's still this big unknown I'd hoped to find an answer to. Maybe I was searching for answers that are not yet known, and all I needed was a re-set so that I could go back and restart my normal life. The life I loved, in the town I love, with my shop and friends and Gramma are all things I *can* control, so why focus on the things that I can't. *Maybe Athena was right, we're just here for the ride.*

With that in mind, I turn up the radio, Say You Love Me by Fleetwood Mac coming on. Suddenly, with the window down and the upbeat lyrics filling the car, I forget about being off and focus on the here and now. It's amazing and just what the doctor ordered.

But as I approach Spring Haven, a strange ball of tension starts to grow inside of me. I don't know what awaits me there. I left in a hurry. I ran away to avoid facing Landry, my friends, and possibly some fated reality of a future. I shut the shop with no explanation and disappeared. The only person who knew where I was going was Gramma.

I pull into the driveway of the small cottage I share with my grandmother and take a deep breath. Checking the time, I realize that the Sunday School Sallys will be at the Loaded Hog diner for their traditional post-church Sunday lunch. That means that I've got the house to myself for a while which is a welcome discovery because I know that Gramma will have told them about my out-of-character outburst with Landry, and then my quick escape to avoid seeing him again. And as is always the case with the Sallys, they'll all have their own opinions on the situation.

The Sallys are my Gramma's group of lifelong friends who were born and raised here in town. They've never left and they've never wanted to. They all met at Sunday school at the town's only church down the road from the house we live in now, and to this day, they all still live side by side in the homes they've always had. Not only are they lifelong neighbors, but they've also formed what the townsfolk jokingly call a geriatric gang of gossiping grannies. There's Aunt Dorothy (Dottie), Aunt Agnes (Aggie), Aunt Frances (Frankie), and then my beloved grandmother, Gramma Ruth (Ruthie.)

And since they're all busy eating and nattering away at the diner, I know I've still got some time to get myself settled and ready for the new week before they stage an intervention and try to help. That's what they do, they give advice, they share their own experiences and knowledge, and then they concoct a plan. That's probably what I'm most afraid of. What if they tell me to stop fighting fate and try to marry me off to Landry Graham?

I step inside the cottage and take a deep breath, smelling the familiar scent of lavender and bergamot in the air, my grandmother's signature scent. I smile to myself and take a walk around the house. It's been two weeks since I left, but in some ways it feels like I've been away for months. Everything looks the same but also feels different. I can't shake off the feeling that something has changed, that I'm coming back to a different world. *Or maybe it's me that's changed?*

Then there's Landry. Just thinking about the man gives me palpitations. I still remember his wide-eyed stunned expression as he just sat there while I shouted and ranted at him. What am I supposed to do the next time he hangs outside the shop? Do I go outside and speak to him? Offer to talk things out over coffee and corned beef hash at the diner? Do I apologize for assaulting him with my finger and shouting at him?

“There ain't no damn mountain that can tell me who I'm gonna love and that's that.”

I wince at his slack-jawed shocked expression at my words. He probably didn't think I'm the type of woman who'd yell at him like that. I feel terrible about it because I can't remember the last time I yelled at someone. That's not me, I'm not a confrontational person. But in that moment, it was like a whole other person took over my body. It's why I meditated and silently chanted all of the negative, angry, and confused energy out of me back in that mountain yurt. Although nothing can explain why my skin still feels all tight and uncomfortable when I think of him. It's weird. And itchy. It reminds me

of the time my brother Orion dared me to cook up Poison Ivy tea. Of course, we didn't get that far because as soon as I touched it I started turning red and blotchy and blowing up like a puffer fish.

If I was a different kind of person, I'd forget all about it and act like it never happened. Just put it down to Gandalf's crazy moonshine talk, and just go on with my life. I still plan on apologizing to Rhett and Cora for interrupting their gathering, and maybe I'll send Landry an apology gift for being rude and putting my hands—OK, finger—on him. But maybe I need to focus on my own life—Gramma, the Sallys, Happy Auras, and me. Yes, that's what I'll do.

Before I do anything else though, I need to do laundry, and start cooking my favorite pumpkin and lentil curry for dinner.

An hour later I hear the front door open and the sound of Gramma's voice. "Star, are you home?"

"Yeah, Gramma. In the sittin' room," I reply, smiling as multiple sets of footsteps shuffle across the wooden floorboards of the kitchen and into the hallway before four of my favorite people in the universe steam through the doorway, all with huge smiles on their faces.

"You're back!" exclaims Aunt Dottie, rushing towards me and enveloping me in a tight hug. Aunt Aggie and Aunt Frankie follow suit, embracing me and telling me how much they missed me.

Gramma simply looks at me with a small smile, her eyes full of concern and love. "How are you, dear?" she asks gently. "Any progress?"

When I decided to stay longer at the retreat, I used Athena's phone to call home. And since Gramma has gifts like mine, she could tell that I was still lost and searching, and if anyone was ever a believer in taking all the time you need to find yourself, it's her.

"I'm good, Gramma," I reply, smiling at her.

"Star..." Her eyes lock with mine, her gaze so pointed I almost start to squirm. "I asked if you had made progress?"

I shrug. "I tried everything."

"Well not *everything*," she quips back, making me roll my eyes.

"Gramma... I just needed time and space to clear my head and purge the chakras."

"Yes, child. Open and clear that body of yours. Call in *all* the good juju and kick out the bad," Aunt Aggie says with a fist pump that makes me giggle.

Aggie is what I call the wild child of the group. Her hair is currently a light pastel orange with black tiger stripes through it. It's not *my* style, but Aunt Aggie has always walked to the beat of her own drum. It doesn't mean I love her any less.

The Sallys all nod in understanding. Aunt Frankie pats my hand. "Well, we're glad you're back, honey. We missed you something fierce."

Aunt Dottie nods in agreement. "And we're sorry we missed you having a run at Landry. What I would've done to be a fly on the wall when *you* blew your stack at him."

Gramma clears her throat. "What Dottie *means* is, it must've been hard for you with all those emotions runnin' through you."

I feel my cheeks flush. "It's okay, Aunt Dottie. It was just a momentary lapse in judgment," I say, hoping to dismiss the topic. "I don't even *know* Landry, not that well anyway. So I don't think I was or *am* in a position to judge the man."

Aunt Aggie leans in, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Come on, Starchild. At least tell us what you said to him."

I groan, shaking my head. "It was nothin', Aunt Aggie. Just some silly stuff that I said in the heat of the moment. I let myself get all worked up over somethin' Gandalf said when we were at Bear Mountain Homestead. So when we got back home, I was all worked up and it's like my body wasn't my own anymore. I stormed into the bookstore, interrupted the Graham family gatherin' and told Landry that I wouldn't let any damn mountain tell me who to love."

Ruthie, Aggie, and Dottie all tilt their heads at the same time and in the same way, and I have to bite my lip to hold back a giggle at the sight. They look like those clown games with the wide mouths at carnivals, the ones that turn back and forth in perfect sync.

"Gandalf was drunk as a sailor on his first day in port. He could've been talking scripture straight from the lips of the man above and I wouldn't have believed him," Dottie replies.

I snicker because she's not wrong. There's been many celebrations up Bear Mountain where we've all enjoyed a bit too much of his honey whisky and moonshine. At this last visit, he was showing us his homemade hemp vodka. He assured us it was low alcohol, but by the way the Sallys all volunteered me to drive home the next day while they slept it off, I doubt that claim.

What if it was wrong? What if I misconstrued what Gandalf said and this has all just been a big communication breakdown? *Then why did Landry not argue it with you? Why did no one seem shocked about what I said?*

"This is hurting my head," I grumble, slumping back into the couch cushions.

"OK, Star. So what's the next step?" Gramma asks, steering the conversation back on track.

"I need to say sorry to Landry. Tell him I misunderstood and overreacted and then ask if we can start fresh."

Gramma arches a brow. "And you think that'll clear that swirlin' confusion that's foggin' your thoughts like a rain cloud?"

I gasp. "How can you—"

She winks. "Star, you know my gifts but I'm also a grandmother who can read the room. I can tell you're still troubled. You've got *some* clarity but you're confused as all hell and that aura has a smell about it that you can't shake without answers. Lucky for you, my dear, you've got the Sunday School Sallys at your back and we're ready to go all in."

My mouth drops open, words escaping me. "All in?" I repeat, my voice a little shaky. *Who do they think they are? The matriarchal mafioso?*

"Oh yeah," Ruthie chimes. "We've always been a little curious about the Graham family and Bull Mountain Ranch. I mean, they're all good, well-meaning gentlemen. They work hard, they play hard, they're respectful, and trustworthy, and they're all born and bred, true-blue Spring Havians. But things changed when Rhett suddenly retired from the rodeo circuit. First, there was young Colt and his lovely fiancée, Lee. Then Cora Pope comes back into town just as Colt and Lee leave, and now she and Rhett are head over heels in love and planning their weddin'. I'm just sayin', there's somethin' not quite fishy in the water at that ranch, and I—for one—am intrigued as to what mystical voodoo magic is going on."

"Maybe Cupid has made himself a perch on that bull-horned peak?" Dottie suggests. "Stranger things have happened."

"Aren't there that series of bodice rippers about a mountain giving men their soulmates?" Ruthie replies. "I mean, I'm sure I read something recently."

Ruth's words ping something in my brain and my pulse spikes. "Wait... do you know the name of the author?"

"What author, Star?" she asks, brows furrowed.

I try to calm my racing heartbeat with a slow and steady deep breath. “The one about the mountain rewarding her men?”

“Oh, that one. I think her name is Astrid? Asthma?” Ruth says.

“That can’t be right. I ain’t ever met a lady called Asthma,” Dottie replies with an adorable frown. “Who would call their daughter that?”

“I’ve met an Astrid,” Aggie adds.

Ruth’s eyes jump wide. “I got it... Aster!”

My breath catches. “Aster Hollingsworth?”

“Yep. That’s the one.”

I cover my face in my hands, groaning as I realize that the author who writes about a mountain giving men their soulmates was right there at the bookstore when I stormed in and told Landry, in no uncertain terms, that I would *not* fall in love with him.

“The name Aster means star. Did you know that?” Gramma asks. When I look over her way, I find her gaze twinkling with *something*.

I spear her a look. “What do you know, Gramma?”

“Nothing,” she replies in a sing-song, totally-knows-something voice.

“Gramma...”

“I don’t know anything, child. But I *do* think there might be something to what Gandalf said.” Her words are carefully chosen but for the first time in my life, I cannot get a read on my grandmother.

“What do you mean?” I ask, trying to ignore the fact that every single hair on my body feels like it’s standing on end.

She studies me. “Have you considered the possibility that it could be true? What if there's fate and destiny at play here?” I open my mouth to answer but nothing comes out. My brain is blank of any argument because I don’t have one.

I’m stunned, stumped, and now silent. Because if there’s anyone’s intuition and instinct I trust more than my own, it’s hers.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Aggie says, sitting up a little straighter. “We need to investigate.”

All of the Sallys make affirmative noises which would normally worry me, because it means there are plans afoot. Devious plans. Gangster granny plans.

And instead of arguing with them and stopping their murmured mutterings and brainstorming, I stay quiet. Because for the first time in two weeks, I feel like there's a little sliver of light at the end of this long confusing

tunnel.

Maybe instead of ignoring it all, I need to find out more about it and work out what's going on. Step one - talk to Landry next time he comes by the shop.

The problem is, it seems I'm not the only one who disappeared. And over a week later, I'm still wondering where he is, and when he'll be back peeking in my front window when he thinks I'm not looking.

My worst fear of all is that he won't come back at all. And ain't that the kicker.

LANDRY

Landry: Any news?

Toby: The ranch is fine, brother.

Landry: Not at the ranch. In town?

Toby: There was a riot and staged takeover at the animal rescue.

Landry: WHAT?

Toby: Yeah. A chihuahua and a donkey escaped their quarters and tried to lead a mutiny.

Landry: You're screwing with me. A donkey?

Austin: He's not. It was front-page news in the Spring Haven Gazette.

If it made the town's one and only paper, it must be true.

Toby: Martha the moose also tried to get to Duck Norris on top of Cora and Rhett's barn. You should see the antler marks on the wall.

Landry: So nothing NEW has happened then?

Austin: Nothing other than Spring Haven animals gone wild.

Toby: And Duck Norris has gone into hiding. We haven't seen or heard from him since you left.

I think about that for a moment. We've all had suspicions about the cross-

eyed, one-legged duck we've called Duck Dilbert Dickward Norris. He came to Bull Mountain Ranch with Colt and Lee and we believe he has a connection to the mountain spirit. Call it a sixth sense, but it's almost as if that bird does the legwork in bringing the Call's recipients together.

Toby: How's Kodiak? Never thought I'd miss the rodeo but knowing you're there without us is just plain weird.

Landry: Aww are you missing me, Tobes?

Austin: He's missing his wingman at the Saloon.

I chuckle at that. The Secret Cow Saloon is our home away from home. There's nothing better than kicking back at the bar after a long hard week of work at the ranch. There's dancing, music, and old timers holding the bar up and sharing stories of their adventures in a time gone by. It's my happy place because when you're there, you can just be yourself.

Before I can ask my brothers the burning question plaguing me, another message comes through.

Toby: And no Starchild sightings. But we haven't gone into town for the last few days. We have been preparing to move the bulls in with the chosen ones.

We've been preparing for this next step in our new Bull Stud for months now, and it's almost time for the first round of breeding.

Landry: So it's go time? Time for the bulls to get their reward of some good quality loving?

Austin: Landry, please do not ever describe our bull stud breeding program as good quality loving.

Toby: That's the perfect description. Cow conjugal visits?

There's no wiping the smile off my face as I put my phone down and cradle my mug of cowboy brew coffee in my hands from my perch outside our trailer.

Two weeks ago, I returned to the ranch feeling dejected and lost after realizing that Starchild was so upset and angry with me that she closed her shop and ran away. Red and Rhett gave me a few days of leeway but my family have never been the type to stand back when one of us is suffering. What made it worse is that I didn't even know *why* I was suffering except

everything just hurt—my heart, my head, everything.

That's when Red knocked on my bunkhouse bedroom door one day and announced that he and I were going on the road to rejoin the rodeo. "You need a distraction, and what better way to stop thinkin' about the Call than doing what you love. I made a few calls and as luck has it, they need clowns."

"You callin' yourself a clown now, Red?"

"Must be to put up with your smart mouth," he muttered.

That's how we ended up back on the circuit for the next two events in Niniichik and Kodiak. A three-week round trip that would get us out of town and hopefully away from any influence of the mountain spirit while I try to stop thinking about the one woman who may have, potentially, gotten away.

"You can't work on the mountain's call when your One is nowhere to be found, Lan," Red explained.

"But what if she comes back?"

Then he smiled. "Destiny is destiny. What will be, will be. What you *won't* do is sulk around the ranch until Starchild comes back."

"What if she doesn't come back, Red?" I asked after we waved goodbye to our family.

"Destiny, Landry. If it's meant to happen, it will."

"You look like you're deep in thought there," Red announces as he plops down on the bench next to me. The sun sits high over the top of us, and as much as I can admit I needed this change of scenery, I'm looking forward to getting back to Spring Haven. And since today is the last day of this Kodiak rodeo, tonight we'll pack up and at dawn, we'll hitch up the trailer to Rhet's truck and start the journey home.

"Did you know Martha tried to destroy Cora's barn to get to Duck Norris?" I ask.

Red chuckles and shakes his head. "Naw, but it doesn't surprise me. That bird has a knack for rufflin' everyone else's feathers."

"I don't think he's that bad. He's kinda cute."

Red's brow jumps up. "Cute in a wandering, worrisome, waterfowl kind of way? Sure."

We sit in comfortable silence for a while, watching the cowboys and cowgirls prepare for the final events of the rodeo. The smell of dirt and hay fills my nose as the sound of country music drifts across the fairground. The crowd streams into the grounds, making their way to the grandstands. It's a familiar and comforting scene, one that makes me forget about everything

else for a while.

"You decided what you're gonna do when she comes back?"

I don't need to ask who he's talking about. "Hang out outside the shop like a weirdo again?"

Red snorts. "Not sure I should be backin' that idea anymore. Why didn't you ever just go and *talk* to her?"

I shrug, taking a sip of my coffee. "I don't know. I guess I was afraid of what she might say or that she wouldn't want to see me. I mean, we're so different."

Red nods in understanding. "Yeah, but did you ever think that if you never tried, you'd never know? Sometimes, you gotta take that risk if you want something—or someone—bad enough."

"I know," I say, staring out at the rodeo. "It doesn't matter now though. She made herself crystal clear. Call or no Call, she's not interested."

"Did she though? We were all there and the way *I* remember it, she doesn't want someone tellin' her *who* to love. And from what you know of the woman, and her Gramma and the Sunday School Sallys, do you think she's someone who'd ever just accept somethin' that takes her choice away? She's a free spirit, that one. That means you can't sit back and wait for her to fall at your feet. You've gotta work for it, for her."

"I know."

His smile widens. "Means you've got a choice to make. Only *you* can decide how you're goin' to play this when we get back home. Only *you* can choose to go after what you want—"

"I didn't know Star would be my One."

"Nope, you didn't. But it's more than obvious you're not disappointed with the mountain's choice for you. You've had a soft spot for her for a while now. Maybe the mountain decided you needed a push in the right direction?"

"By having her find out about the Call without giving any of us the chance to explain it to her? For all I know, she thinks we're out there commandeerin' soulmates against their will."

Red throws his head back this time, his laughter is loud and wild. "Landry, one look at Cora and you know that's not true. And don't forget, Starchild and her grandmother have gifts that no one in town has. She may not want to be told she's your One, but that doesn't mean she doesn't know that fate has a way of steppin' in anyway."

I throw back the rest of my coffee and push to my feet. "Time to get this

clown show on the road."

"At least tell me I've given you some food for thought. You know we all just want to see you happy. The mountain has chosen to reward you, remember. That's a good thing," Red replies.

"Yeah, and no reward is worth havin' without a bit of blood, sweat, and tears shed to get there. Right?"

He claps my shoulder and there's no missing the pride shining in his gaze. "Exactly."

"That mean you're gonna open your mind to hearing the Call in future, Red?"

He shuts down straight away. "Not happenin', Lan. I've already had my soulmate and I'll cherish every single moment I got to spend with her, and the gift she gave me with my son. Doesn't mean I won't happily stand by and watch you and your brothers get yours. On that note, let's go. I wanna watch you fall on your ass for laughs one last time."

STARCHILD

It's been over a week since I got back and I'm only now getting to meet with Cora and Mags at the diner for lunch. I've missed them both so much but between the shop and the Sallys colluding to find out everything they can about not only the Call, but Bull Mountain Ranch, and Landry in particular, it feels like I haven't had a chance to breathe.

That doesn't mean I've been able to stop thinking about Landry or the last time we spoke. I *yelled* at him. It still doesn't feel right.

"I know, Landry," I spit out, uncomfortable anger I've never felt before controlling me. It's like my calm, peaceful demeanor is gone and there's nothing I can do to get it back right now.

"Know what, babe?"

"Don't you babe me, Landry Graham," I grind. "I'm not one of those women that's gonna melt when you talk sweet to them. I'm nobody's babe. I'm Starchild. I'm a strong, independent, free-spirited woman with a mind and heart of her own."

"Hey, I know that. I'm not—"

"There ain't no damn mountain that can tell me who I'm gonna love and that's that."

I still stand by my belief that a mountain spirit—whether real or otherwise—can't tell me who I am destined to be with, but something weird has happened since I returned to Spring Haven. I *can't* see the future. I can do crystal readings for other people but when I try to do it for myself, nothing

works. It's just a big blank nothing.

Gramma even tried yesterday and had no luck. For anyone else, it's as clear as day. When it comes to me—nothing. I can't see what's coming or any indication of my future. It's like the light has been turned out on my future and nothing and no one can turn it back on. That's never happened to me before and it's a little disconcerting.

Gramma and the Sallys are a whole other story. They've become very secretive, holding private meetings at Aunt Aggie's house next to ours. I tried looking out my bedroom window into her house and spotted what looked like big pieces of paper stuck to the wall with writing on it. There were even pins with strings pointing in different directions. But when I asked my grandmother about it, she was very cagey. "It's nothing, dear. Just some...business we're taking care of."

"What kind of business?" I pressed.

"Sunday School Sally business. Nothin' for you to worry your pretty head about. You keep focusin' on that *off* feelin' of yours and leave us old biddies to do our thing."

The twinkle in her eye didn't leave me feeling relieved, it just made me even *more* suspicious.

"Sorry 'bout that, you never know when you'll be sittin' behind the counter twiddlin' your thumbs or get a sudden influx of townsfolk jonesin' for the daily special," Mags says with a grin as she places my travel mug of chai green tea onto the table before sliding into the booth opposite me.

It's then that Cora steps through the front door, her normally cool and calm look nowhere to be seen.

"Hey. Hi. Sorry, I'm late," she rushes out as she sits next to me. She wraps her arm over my shoulder and pulls me in for a hug. "I'm so glad you're back."

My brows bunch. "You are? I thought you'd be mad at me for makin' a scene at the bookstore?"

Cora shakes her head, her hair falling in front of her face. "No, of course not. I was just worried about you. You seemed so...upset." She pauses, her gaze flickering to Mags before returning to me.

I sigh. "I don't know what came over me. I was just so mad. I thought Landry knew this big thing and hadn't told me."

Cora covers my hand with hers. "Honey, it doesn't work like that."

Now I'm even more confused. "*What* doesn't work like that? I spent two

weeks tryin' to find out why I was feelin' off-kilter and not myself, and now that I'm back, I can't even find Landry to get the answers because he's disappeared now too."

"I can help you with that," Mags replies. "The man was all over the place when you closed the shop and when he didn't get any better at the ranch, Red called in some favors, and he and Landry went on the road with the rodeo for a few events."

He does rodeo? How did I not know that? I knew Rhett was a retired champion bull rider. But I can't remember hearing that any of the other Graham brothers were involved too.

"To compete?"

Cora snorts and Mags snickers. "Oh goodness, no. They all used to go on the road with Rhett when he was on the circuit, but they were all there for Rhett. Landry works as a rodeo clown."

I open my mouth and clamp it shut again as I try to mesh my view of the man who wouldn't even come inside my shop to say hello with a man who'd put himself in danger to make people laugh.

"A rodeo clown?" I repeat, trying to hide my shock. "Like he puts himself in the ring with the bulls to distract them and stuff?"

Mags nods. "Mainly entertainin' the crowd and muckin' about, but he works as a barrelman sometimes too. The guy's got some serious skills. He's done it for years until Rhett retired and they all decided to put their focus on the ranch and the bull stud."

Cora leans forward, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "I haven't seen him do it but I've seen a bunch of photos and Rhett says he was one of the best. People look forward to seeing him in the arena."

I can't help but smile, because it's a whole other side to Landry I didn't know existed. It's intriguing, like I have one piece of the thousand-piece puzzle that makes him who he is. It doesn't correlate with the man I know who hangs outside my shop peeking inside the window and walking past hoping I'll see him.

"So he ran away because *I* ran away. I must've really hurt his feelin's." Tears prick my eyes as a wave of emotion washes over me. I hate knowing I've upset anyone. I know I was angry and I own my emotions and how I chose to deal with them in that moment, but that's no excuse for making Landry feel bad.

"Yes and no," Cora says, but that's *all* she says, which confuses me even

more.

I frown again. "That makes no sense, Cora."

"What about you?" Mags says, changing the subject. "How have *you* been doin'? You seemed pretty adamant that the mountain's call was *not* for you."

"I don't even know anythin' about it."

"Oh well I can tell you about that lickety-split," Cora says, her British accent still strong, but when she says things like 'lickety-split' I can't help but smile at the adopted twang I hear creeping in. "Long ago there was a mountain spirit living dormant inside Moose Mountain. And there was a family called the Coopers who lived on and around the mountain, working the land and looking after the mountain."

"OK," I say with a nod. "But Moose Mountain is like hours away."

"It is," Cora continues. "Anyway, the mountain's call was activated and the spirit started rewarding the Cooper family with their soulmates, bringing them to the mountain where they'd go through a journey of love, life, and discovery together before falling head over heels and living happily ever after."

My brows tightly knit together. "That sounds like a fairytale."

"It does," Mags agrees. "But it's a true story. There are even books about it in the bookstore."

"By Aster Hollingsworth? Your favorite author that you were meetin' the night I barged in?"

Cora smiles. "That's the one. She's awesome and so lovely. We've started emailing each other and she keeps sending me little snippets of the book she wrote about Rhett and me."

I freeze. "She's writin' a *book* about you?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's so cool to read about what we went through knowing that we're already living our forever."

"Is she a fortune teller or somethin'? Because I have gifts, but even *I* can't tell the future enough to write a book about it."

"Imagine if you could? You'd be a millionaire," Mags muses.

I open my mouth to reply but clamp it shut again as I remember Gandalf's words.

"So what does Bear Mountain have to do with this?"

"The founding brothers of Bear Mountain Homestead were also rewarded with the mountain's call there too once the prophecy was activated."

"You mean Brady and Walker and all of them?"

"You know them?" Mags asks.

"Yeah. Gramma and the Sallys all grew up with Tim aka Gandalf. We went to visit them for his birthday and he was the one who let it slip that I was meant to be Landry's One. He said I was next and that he hoped Landry and I would be very happy together."

Mags hums thoughtfully. "I'd wondered what set you off."

"Now you know," I say, taking a sip of my tea. "That's why I barged into your gatherin' and yelled at Landry."

"You've gotta know, honey, Landry didn't know he was going to hear the Call next. He had no clue until you told him," Cora informs me.

My head jerks back. "What? How? If it's a call, isn't it like some loud blaring horn in your head announcin' you're going to meet your soulmate? That's how I know it *can't* be me. Maybe Gandalf was wrong and got the wrong girl. Nothin' has changed in my life except me being told I'm going to apparently fall head over heels for Landry Graham, a man who can't even *speak* to me. There's been no lightnin' bolt or sign from above or sign anywhere to tell me I'm goin' to meet my destined soulmate."

Cora purses her lips as a snicker escapes her, Mags doesn't even try to hide her amusement. "Starchild, I don't know much about the Call myself, seeing as I've only recently learned about it through Rhett and Cora, but I don't think a mystical mountain spirit livin' deep within Bull Mountain would have a bullhorn at the ready."

I lean back in my seat, my mind spinning. I don't know what to believe. On the one hand, it sounds like a romantic adventure. On the other, it sounds like I don't get a choice in who I'm destined to be with. What if Landry and I don't like each other? We hardly know anything about one another as it is. He could have smelly feet, or snore, or be a disbeliever and naysayer when it comes to my gifts and the shop.

"I...I don't know what to do about any of this," I say, my voice wavering. "Gramma and the Sallys are up to somethin' too and won't tell me what. I can't seem to get a readin' on anything to do with me and my future which is freakin' me out as well, and now you're sayin' that the mountain's call is real and that I can't stop it?"

"Well, there's a lot to unpack there. How 'bout we start with the easy thing? You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. The mountain spirit isn't *making* people fall in love with strangers just because she wants it to happen. There's always a reason she brings people together to be each

other's Ones," Cora says.

"And there are far worse single men in this town than Landry Graham, let me tell you. That boy has a heart of gold and would do anythin' for anyone. He was totally shocked and lost when you left the bookstore. Even more so when he couldn't find you to see if you were OK," Mags continues.

But out of all of that, I'm stuck on one thing she just said. "He came after me?" I whisper. "But he's never talked to me before that night."

"That doesn't mean he didn't want to. I think you just make him nervous or somethin', which is funny because I can't think of a day I've ever seen him nervous about anythin'," Mags says. "And like I said, when we all saw how upset you were, he talked it out with all of us and then took off. He didn't even come downstairs here to get some pie and if there's somethin' to know about those Bull Mountain Ranch men, nothin' gets between them and my pie."

Cora hums, drawing my attention. "I also happen to know that he's coming back home tomorrow. He and Red are on their way back as we speak. So if talking to him is what you're wanting to do, you'll get your chance very soon."

I breathe a huge sigh of relief and the tight feeling I've had around my chest for the past few weeks eases slightly. "OK."

"OK, you're going to talk to him, or...?" Cora asks, leaning in and giving away just how invested she is in all of this.

I nod. "First I think I need to find out about the mountain spirit and the Call and these books Aster writes."

"I can do that for you," she says, clapping her hands. "This is so exciting. I can't wait to see it play out. And then we'll be sister- in-laws. I've always wanted a sister."

"Cora..." Mags says, in a low but amused warning. Both of our heads swivel her way. "How about you *don't* get your hopes up and pile on the pressure to Starchild now that we've *just* got her to the stage where she's open to learnin' about all of this mystical matchmakin' mumbo jumbo?"

"It's not mumbo jumbo. It's real. Look at me and Rhett," Cora grins at us and there's no mistaking just how happy she is.

Mags's gaze swings my way and I can tell that while she's holding back a smile, she's also being kind and watching out for me. "Thank you for meetin' with me. And thank you, Cora, for not being mad about me makin' a scene at your surprise."

She scoffs and waves her hand in the air. "You're not the first to be caught off guard by this prophecy and you definitely won't be the last. I'm still holding out hope that Mags here will hear it one day."

"Cora..." she warns again and this time she's *not* amused. "Anyway, can we get back to the Sallys? What do you mean they're up to somethin'? Those old biddies are always gettin' into mischief."

Over chai tea, coffee, and corned beef hash, Mags, Cora and I mull over what the Sallys could be up to, all the while I think about what might happen when Landry comes back tomorrow.

It's then I realize that there's a spark of something that's been lit inside of me that hasn't been there since I came back to town.

Hope.

LANDRY

I feel like I'm being watched.

This is my first trip into town since getting back from Kodiak and ever since I parked my truck outside the diner to run errands for the ranch, the hairs at the back of my neck have been standing on end.

I don't let the feeling stop me though because today I'm on a mission—do what needs to be done in town and do it *without* walking past Happy Auras. Because if I'm going anywhere near Starchild, I'm gonna do it when I can say Hi and other things I haven't quite decided on yet. But that's a good start, right?

On the long journey back from the rodeo I made a decision. If I don't want the mountain spirit to rethink her choice to reward me with Starchild, then I need to prove to her and everyone else that I'm deserving of the honor. And that means working for it.

Red told me I was being ridiculous and that I'd already earned it with the work we've done to replant Bull Mountain after the years of neglect and overuse by the previous owners, as well as giving retired rodeo bulls a new life on the ranch too. It doesn't feel like it's enough though.

Red and Rhett are the ones who spearheaded the purchase of our ranch, and Austin works harder and longer than Toby and I put together. He's always doing the grunt work and building things. Red organizes things. Rhett *does* the things. Toby just does whatever he's asked to do and then there's me, the baby Graham brother who's literally known for being a clown. I work hard and carry the load, but maybe that's not enough.

As I walk down Main Street, I can't shake this feeling of unease. It's like

someone is following me. I turn to look over my shoulder, but there's no one there.

I decide that maybe I've just been away from people for too long, and continue towards Books, Nooks, and Post to send off some checks and post a signed contract for another bull Red's got his eye on from Kodiak.

"Hey there," the owner Greg says as I walk inside. Greg is Mags's first ex-husband. Thankfully for them, they're still friends and there's no animosity for their blink-and-you-miss-it marriage three decades ago. They share a daughter who's long since flown the nest and even co-own the bookstore and diner building together.

"Hi. How's it goin'?" I ask as I nod his way and head toward the post office boxes at the back of the store.

"Good, good. Can't complain." He studies me, something working behind his eyes. "And how are things with Starchild?"

My step falters, my mission to the rear of the shop forgotten for the moment as I turn to face him. "I'm real sorry about that. I know this is your place of business and all and I apologize if that made you feel uncomfortable."

Greg's head jerks. "You're apologizin' to *me*? Way I see it, you had no idea what was happenin'."

"I didn't at the time. It's a long story," I say with a sigh.

"Yeah, the mountain's call. Hard to keep that a secret after a scene like that. Had me some spare time so I picked up some of Aster's books. They're good," he says. "Have you read them? If you're lookin' for some ideas on how to win your soulmate over, there are plenty of them in there. Those cowboys and mountain men sure do know how to make their women swoon."

My eyes bug out at this big, tall, gruff, and rough bearded oaf of a man telling me about men making women swoon. Then I remember that he owns a bookstore so maybe it's par for the course. I guess you really can't tell what a person likes to read just from looking at them.

"I've heard the women talk about them but haven't picked a book up myself."

"You should. Though I'm not sure I understand the whole 'mountain rewarding her protectors' idea yet, but it's a nice thought. Knowin' that the one person put on this earth for you and vice versa is called to the mountain."

"Not so much when your One is blindsided and doesn't want anythin' to do with you."

The man's lips quirk up to the side as he tilts his head. "You sure 'bout that?"

"No. But she *did* run away after that night."

"Way I hear it, so did you," he shoots back.

A snort escapes my lips. "Touche."

"For what it's worth, you're a good man, Landry. Watched you grow up and know that what you see is what you get. That's respectable. Just show her the real you and I'm sure she'll realize she's just as lucky as you are. I'm sure she didn't mean it." *The one thing I forgot about that whole scene was Starchild announcing to everyone in the room that she won't have a mountain tell her who to fall in love with.*

I nod, grateful for Greg's words of encouragement. "Thanks, Greg. I appreciate it."

As I turn to leave, a flash of movement outside the door's front window catches my eye. I freeze, my heart pounding as I try to make out who or what it was.

"Everything okay, Landry?" Greg asks curiously.

I shake my head, kicking myself for being so paranoid. "I must be real tired because I swear someone was peekin' in the window just now."

Greg's eyes dart to the door. "You want me to go check it out?"

I shake my head. "Nah. I'm just feelin' a bit off today, I think. I'll get my wits about me again. Maybe I need a coffee before I continue with my day."

"You know you're always welcome to join me downstairs for dinner one night. You must be missin' Mags's food after three weeks away."

"Thanks, Greg. I'll keep that in mind. And you're right, I am hankerin' for some of her pie."

"Then you're in luck, she's making gooseberry pie this week. Never had a bite where it didn't have me beggin' for another."

He nods. "The offer's open. She may be my ex-wife but that doesn't mean I don't like eatin' her cookin' every night."

"Thanks, Greg. I better go do this post and check the post box before I forget what I'm here for."

"All good. I'm gonna head out back to unpack the new Aster book that's just come in. I'll leave you a copy on the counter. Grab it on your way out. You won't regret it, Landry. I promise." Then with a wave and a chin lift, Greg disappears.

I guess if I'm trying to prove to everyone as well as Star that I'm the man

for her, I need all the help I can get. And if that includes lessons in how to make a woman swoon from a romance novel, so be it.

After leaving Greg's shop, I call by the diner downstairs for a coffee-to-go, spotting two of the Sallys–Agnes and Dorothy–sitting in a corner booth eyeing me up. I shoot them a wave and they wave back, but then they narrow their eyes as if studying me and I get that strange feeling of being watched again.

I shake it off and continue on my way to the grocery store, then the supply shop on the outskirts of town but instead of heading back to the ranch, I feel myself being drawn back into town. I park my truck on the main street again, a little way down from Starchild's store. I even crack the window a bit to try and get a whiff of her signature incense. That stuff is like crack. It smells so damn good. Cora bought me some of the sticks a while ago and I like to burn them in my bunkhouse bedroom at night while I'm kicking back and relaxing and writing.

That's a secret nobody knows about me. I haven't written anything of substance or published anything. Haven't even thought about showing the pages and pages of words to anyone before.

I don't know what makes me do it, but I look up just in time to catch Star standing in her store window. She looks down the street before her gaze slowly drifts back to my truck, then to me. Our eyes lock on to each other through the glass, my breath seizing as all the air in my lungs seems to disappear. My whole body from head to toe feels electrified at just the sight of her, my heart punching against my sternum like it wants to beat its way out of my chest to get to her.

Her lips part and completely enamored I watch her lift her hand to her chest and rub over where her heart would be, a cute frown pinching her features.

I can't help but wonder if she feels the same draw toward me as I feel toward her. The thought makes me want to burst out of my skin and run to her, throw open the door to her store, and sweep her into my arms. But I know better than that. Star needs time and space to come around to the idea of us being together. She needs to get to know me, and I need to get to know more about her. And that's not about to happen when I can't even get out of my car to go say hi to her.

Instead, I watch her and wait a few more moments before she breaks eye contact and turns away. A disappointed sigh escapes me and there's a dull

ache in my chest but something tells me now is not the time. Thank god I did because Star stops and turns back toward me, a small barely there smile curling her lips as she lifts her hand and waves, mouthing "Hi" as she does it.

Waving back, I do the same, and the way her smile widens has me feeling like a superhero who could move mountains.

I sit there for a beat longer after she disappears, before making the wise decision to start the truck and pull away from the curb, heading back home.

Glancing over to the passenger seat, I see the romance novel Greg gave me and know my plans for the night are now set. I need to decide on my next move, and Aster Hollingsworth's words are going to help me do that.

STARCHILD

When I saw Landry sitting outside my shop and he waved back at me, some of the tension that had been wound up tight deep inside of me since we last saw each other started to ease.

I'm still blocked and can't see anything about me and my future no matter how hard I try, but that's the first time that the part of me that still feels *off*, felt normal, or some semblance of it at least. Don't get me wrong, I'm still out of sorts, but maybe Landry doesn't hate me after all.

We still haven't talked to each other since the bookstore incident and until we do that, how the hell am I supposed to get to know him or find out more about what he's feeling and thinking and how to navigate whatever this thing called the Call is?

But I have started seeing goats. And I don't mean in fields or at a petting zoo. I mean in all of my readings for other people and even my dreams. I even tested it out on the Sallys and every single one had a goat in their future. Aggie's had her researching goat curry. Dottie was knitting a cashmere scarf with wool she got at the Spring Haven farmer's market. And in a dream I had last night, Frankie was wearing horns she bought from a half-man/half-goat creature that looked like they'd stepped off the pages of *The Lion*, *The Witch*, and *the Wardrobe*.

So low and behold, I'm surprised and perplexed when I'm helping clean Aggie's kitchen for her after she did, indeed, try to make goat curry, when I find not only a goat keychain in her top drawer, but a newly written to-do list titled "Things to find out about Landry Graham" with the first point on the list saying "find out why Starchild keeps seeing goats."

I'm starting to think I've stepped into another dimension. *Maybe a goat one!*

After finishing up at Aunt Aggie's house, I return home to find all four of the Sallys quickly hiding things in the living room. Gramma comes out to greet me, giving me a big hug and turning me away from whatever the women are doing. "Starchild, how are you?"

I pull back and eye her skeptically. "I'm OK. How are *you*?"

"Oh good, good. Busy doin' Gramma things. You know how it is," she rambles suspiciously.

I step back and study her. "What are you four up to? You're all actin' super sketchy and I just found a list in Aggie's kitchen about Landry."

All four Sallys turn my way, a mixture of surprise, amusement, and Aunt Dottie trying to look innocent. "Nothin'," they all say at once.

"Nothin' but a pack of lies! I know you're all up to somethin' and it's about Landry. I've seen you in Aunt Aggie's living room with what looks like evidence boards to solve a crime." I gasp as an idea comes to me, my mind whirling with ideas since I can't tell anything about my future right now so my creativity is working in overdrive. "Are you guys plannin' on breakin' the law? Are you goin' to frame Landry?"

They gasp, all looking genuinely offended. "Darlin' granddaughter, we would never," Gramma whispers.

"OK. I'm sorry. I don't really think you're tryin' to be criminal masterminds. But you *are* bein' secretive. And don't think I haven't noticed you all wanderin' around town a *lot* more than usual."

Gramma sighs and looks to Dottie, who looks to Aggie, who looks to Frankie. "I guess the jig is up, ladies."

I make my way over to an empty armchair and sit down. "The jig? What jig?"

"We've been doin' some... surveillance," Aunt Frankie explains.

"On Landry?"

They all nod, but it's Dottie that continues. "We are tryin' to find out what we can about him so that we can know that he's good enough for our girl."

My heart swells just as my head explodes. "You *what*?"

"Well, the thing is, we know all about the Grahams but we don't *know* everything. So, after findin' out about this matchmakin' mountain spirit, and then you tellin' your Gramma that you're strugglin' with your readings and

telepathy and all of that, we wanted to know *why*,” Aggie says. “Because if it truly is a love match, then nothin’ should be blockin’ your chakras and abilities. If the spirit is a *good* one, she’d allow you to embrace your gifts to see that Landry is your true soulmate. The other half of your soul. The yin to your yang. The—”

I wave my hand in the air. “Yeah, yeah. I get it,” I sigh. “But even *I* don’t know why I’m strugglin’ with seein’ things. It’s only when it’s about me, not anyone else. You four have been givin’ me visions of *goats* of all things.”

Gramma falls quiet and I see a wry smile adorning her lips. “You know what dreaming of goats means, right child?”

“No...” I say, shaking my head slowly.

“Wait there,” she says, getting up out of her chair and walking across to the bookcase. She pulls out a dream dictionary before returning to her seat. A few moments later, she breathes a quiet “A ha!” before pinning her gaze back at me. “A dream with a goat may indicate that a good change is comin’ in your life.”

“Like realizin’ the man who’s been foggin’ up your shop front is your soulmate,” Dottie says, bouncing in her seat. “Just so you know, I’m totally on Team Landry.”

I stare at her like she’s grown two heads. “There are *teams*?”

“Ah huh. Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’m Team Starchild too.”

“Of course you are, my Star is a darling,” Gramma pipes up, her chest puffing up with pride.

I huff out a resigned sigh. “I love you all, but you need to stop lookin’ into Landry. I don’t know what’s goin’ to happen, but I don’t want him to feel uncomfortable or hounded.”

Frankie reaches over and rests her frail warm hand on my arm. “Don’t you worry your pretty little head about *that*. We’ve been very discreet so far.” *So far?*

I look to the ceiling, offering up a plea for whichever higher being is listening to give me strength.

“So are you gonna talk to him? I saw he was in town yesterday,” Aunt Dottie says. “He didn’t look sad. Maybe a little jumpy though. I don’t know why.”

“Maybe because he knew he was bein’ watched,” I mutter under my breath.

Dottie shrugs. “Oh well. He better get used to it.”

“Aunt Dottie...” I warn, trying to look serious and stern but the cheeky grin on her face soon has my frown cracking.

“I think we need to step up our efforts though. Landry’s been back for a few days and he hasn’t even spoken to our Starchild. We can’t know if he’s a good, honest, worthy man for my granddaughter if they don’t even *speak*,” Gramma announces.

Aggie gets up and pulls out one of the pieces of paper I saw stuck to her living room wall the other day. My eyes widen and my mouth drops open as I see just how far the Sallys have gone with this. “At least we don’t have to hide it from you anymore.”

I don’t answer. I’m too busy staring at what looks like an evidence board from a police station. There’s a photo of Landry in the center with pins holding up red pieces of wool stretched out in different directions. There’s a photo of him and the others from Bull Mountain Ranch from a newspaper article published a few months ago about their new stud farm. Then there are Polaroid photos taken of Landry going into the bookstore, coming out of the bookstore, standing in line at the diner, the supply store, and even one with Landry parked in his truck outside my shop and me standing in the window waving at him.

“Oh, my goodness. You’re *stalkin’* him.”

All four ladies gasp. “We are not. We’re just doin’ our investigations. That’s all.” Frankie replies.

“Also known as stalking.”

“No, ma’am. If we were stalkin’ him, we’d be goin’ on out to that ranch of his.” Her eyes light up. “Oooh, maybe we could interrogate him.”

Aunt Dottie looks up at the evidence board. “That’s scheduled for another week if we haven’t made any progress.”

“What?” I gasp. “You can’t. I love you all but this is crazy!”

Gramma leans forward in her chair and pins me with a stare. “No, child. What *should* be crazy is the idea of a mountain spirit choosin’ my grandchild as the fated soulmate for one of her ranchers. But here we are. We’re just tryin’ to make sure that you’re destined for a good man.”

“He *is* a good man,” I protest. *Well, I think he’s a good man. Cora would tell me if he wasn’t.*

“And our investigations will show that,” she says with a nod, crossing her arms as if to signal an end to the conversation.

I stand up and stop short of throwing my hands in the air while stamping

my foot. "I'm goin' to meditate and hopefully find out why I'm surrounded by my amateur granny sleuths!"

"I prefer granny private eyes personally," Aggie replies.

"Gumshoe grannies?" Dottie adds.

"What about meddlin' matriarchs?" I shoot back as I walk down the hallway toward my room.

"Now *that* one I like," Gramma replies. "Love you, child!"

"Love you too, Gramma." And I'd never admit it to them but I'm grinning by the time I shut my bedroom door.

They may all be nutty nanas, but I love them dearly.

That night I dream I'm driving along a long endless road. There are thick woods on either side of the highway, the canopies so overgrown they almost join to form a tunnel. The windows are down, my hair is flowing in the wind since my car has suddenly become a tie-dyed convertible combi van. Janis is on the radio singing about Bobby McGee when a small furry figure suddenly appears out of nowhere. I slow the car down and there's a white baby goat all wet and sad, bleating loudly as if it's lost. But try as I might, I can't pull the car to a stop. I just keep driving past. The goat runs alongside me, still bleating. Then I'm stopped by a duck standing in the middle of the road. Instead of the goat stopping though, it passes me, running to a crossroads that appears up ahead with the funky-looking duck flying after it. Yet I just stay there, frozen, stopped in front of the two different paths.

When I wake up, try as I might, I can't close my eyes and get back to the dream to find out what happened to the goat.

As I lay in bed and stare at the ceiling, I wonder whether there's a hidden meaning to it all.

I know the goat means a good change is coming, I'm just unsure about not being able to stop the car. And why, out of everything I do not understand about how I'm feeling right now, is *that* the thing I want to know most of all?

LANDRY

“You were up late last night,” Toby says as we lift some bags of feed onto the trailer outside the barn.

“I was readin’,” I grunt as I offload one of the heavy bags and wipe my brow with the back of my hand. It may be cold as balls but hard work isn’t worth doing unless you’re sweating.

My brother's brows hit his hairline. “Really? What book?”

“Just somethin’ I picked up from Greg when I was in town the other day.”

“Oh yeah. What one? Might’ve read it myself,” he replies as he follows me back inside to grab two more bags.

“Nothin’.”

“No, no. That sounds like you’re hidin’ somethin’, and we don’t hide anythin’ from each other.”

Toby and I are ten months apart, Irish twins. Rhett is the oldest, followed by Austin, with our sister Tess coming along two years after me.

“It’s one of Aster’s books. Her new one. Greg suggested I read it,” I mutter as I make quick work of grabbing another sack and walking away.

"Hold on. Are you embarrassed? Aster's books are about the Call, right? How else are we supposed to find out all about it and what we have to go through without readin' them, right?"

I drop the bag onto the trailer and look at Toby “Really? I thought for sure you’d tease me about it.”

“Nah, brother. I think that’s real smart,” he replies with a genuine smile. “Is it good?”

“Yeah. Except I swear it’s about Rhett and Cora, which is a little weird.”

He shrugs as he picks up his canteen of water and takes a long drink. "Only the rude bits would be weird. Just put other people's names in there instead of Rhett and Cora and you're golden."

I arch a brow. "You read romance novels often?"

Toby shrugs. "I'll read anythin' and everythin'. It's a good escape after a long hard day. Also gives a bit of insight into the way a woman's mind works and god knows all us men can do with a bit of help in that department."

I chuckle at that. "I suppose."

"So did you see Starchild when you were in town?"

"I did."

"Did you actually speak to her this time?" he asks.

I shake my head. "Nah. Tried to stay away but couldn't. Then she spotted me parked outside her shop and waved at me."

"That's good, right? It's not much but it's progress. Means she's not shoutin' at you. Maybe next time you can get out of your car and go inside." Toby's expression is serious and hopeful. He's not teasing me about my apparent obsession with Star. "Because you know you can't exactly complete the Call through a glass window."

I snort and gently shove at his shoulder. "I know that, doofus."

"If I'm a doofus, then you're a dork."

"Takes one to know one," I quip with a laugh.

"And *that's* why we're best friends as well as brothers. Dorks and doofuses unite." He holds his arm up before punching the air.

"Somethin' like that." I think back to yesterday and the feeling of being watched wherever I went. "Anythin' weird happenin' in town while Red and I were away?"

Toby scrunches his nose up. "Not that I know of. Why?"

"Dunno. Just felt like I was being followed yesterday. It was real weird. Like I was being watched but when I looked, I couldn't see anyone. Two of the Sallys were in the diner when I called in too and they were glarin' at me for no reason."

"You know those old ladies, they love a good gossip and no doubt they know about the soulmate showdown."

"The what?" I splutter.

"You know, the bookstore showdown. That's what we're callin' it, anyway."

"Nice," I sigh. "So I'm back to bein' the butt of the family's jokes now?"

Toby frowns. “No. Why would you be?”

“Where should I start? Because my soulmate doesn’t want anythin’ to do with me?”

“But she waved at you. Probably smiled too. That doesn’t sound like she doesn’t wanna see or talk to you. Maybe she’s waitin’ for *you* to make the first move. I’ve read enough romance books to know some women like that.”

“You think?”

His head jerks back. “*Yeeeah...* So are you goin’ to then?”

“Goin’ to what?”

He rolls his eyes with a loud resigned sigh. “Are you gonna talk to her?”

“Should I?”

“Um, yeah again. If you want backup, I’ll even drive in with ya,” he offers.

I think about it for a moment. “What would I say though? Sorry the mountain chose you?”

“How about startin’ with ‘Hi, how are you?’ then maybe a ‘Can we get onto the business of fallin’ in love now?’” I snort. When he says it like that, it sounds ridiculous. “You’re thinkin’ about doin’ it now, ain’t ya?”

“Maybe,” I mutter, spinning on my boot heel and walking back into the barn.

He follows behind me. “Where are you goin’?”

“Still got two more bags of feed to load up, then we’ve gotta check on the chosen ones. They’ve only had the bulls in with them for two weeks and they’ve got four weeks of lovin’ to go. Gotta keep their energy up so they all get the job done.”

“OK. *Then* can we go into town?” he asks, sounding like a kid in a candy shop.

“Maybe.”

“Aww. C’mon, Landry. You’ll never know if you don’t try,” he says, shoulder-bumping me as he moves past.

“All right then. But you’re not comin’ to the shop with me. You can hang out at the diner or somethin’. Deal?”

He shoots me a mock salute. “Yes, sir. This is gonna be awesome. I just know it. And not the diner, the Secret Cow. I’ll beat some old timer butt at pool while I wait for you.”

I love my brother, but he might just be the most positive, enthusiastic person I’ve ever met. I guess I can only hope that his optimism rubs off on

me and I can work out what the hell I'm gonna do when I walk through Happy Aura's door.

STARCHILD

The bell over the shop's front door tinkles and as I've been doing for the past two days since seeing Landry parked outside, my pulse spikes as I look up. It's not the first time I've secretly hoped it'll be his smiling face walking in.

But instead of the hulking cowboy, it's two teenage girls who've been customers of mine for a while.

"Hey, ladies," I say with a smile and a wave, getting the same back as they move toward their favorite part of the shop, a repurposed dresser that I recycled and painted, turning it into a glass-topped cabinet full of handmade jewelry.

Growing up on the road, my parents would make a number of things to sell at farmer's markets and country fairs as a way to fund our nomadic lifestyle. It was fun and a great creative outlet. So when I opened the shop, one of the key things in my business plan was to have at least half of the goods in the shop be handmade. The rest are sourced from other contacts I've made throughout my time living on the road and through creators I've found online.

"See anythin' you like today, girls?" I say, resting my hand on the book I'm reading, the polaroid the Sallys had taken of me waving at Landry through the window now my new bookmark. Don't ask me why, but that photo captivated me from the moment I saw it. And since I'm in it, I figured I should be able to keep it.

"We like them *all*, Star. They're amazin'," one of them replies.

"That's good. You know I'm always lookin' for models to display them on my website. Maybe we can come up with a barter deal."

“Really? What would we have to do?” the other girl asks, her interest piqued.

“Oh, that's the fun part. You'd put them on, I'd take a few photos, and then they'd be yours to keep. Especially if there's a crystal in them. You know that crystals harness unique energy and feed off your own.”

“So it'd be like a second-hand crystal otherwise?” the first girl questions.

“Exactly! So whaddaya say? Wanna model one piece of your choice each and then wear it all around town like a walkin' advertisement for me? It'd be a huge help for me.”

The girls nod eagerly, and I lead them over to the cabinet, opening it up to reveal a sparkling array of necklaces, bracelets, and earrings. They ooh and aah, admiring the intricate designs and the glittering crystals on display.

As they start trying on different pieces, I step back, watching them closely and making mental notes of which ones would photograph best. The girls are natural models, posing and preening for the camera as I snap shot after shot, adjusting the lighting and composition until I get the perfect photos.

Once I've got what I need, I thank the girls and let them keep the jewelry they've modeled. They leave the shop, chattering excitedly about their new accessories. Feeling lighter and with a smile that can't be wiped off my face, I turn my attention back to my book.

But as I read, my mind keeps wandering back to Landry. I've been thinking about him constantly for the past few days and part of me wonders if he's thinking about me too.

And as luck would have it, there's another rattle of the bell and this time when I look up, my heart skips a beat as Landry steps through the door. His eyes lock with mine and as he walks toward me, we just stare at each other. I take him in, his dark hair is tousled as if he's been raking his hands through it, his usual cowboy attire of dark blue jeans, black tank, and open rusty red plaid shirt framing his strong wide shoulders. I can feel my entire body heat up, my skin tingling, my pulse racing, and as hard as I try to compose myself and cool my jets, my body is having nothing of it. Instead, I offer a warm, welcoming smile.

"Hey," he says, his voice low and smooth as he comes to a stop on the other side of the counter.

"Hey," I reply, clenching my hands out of sight as I try hard not to let my nerves show.

"How are you?"

I nod, my tongue suddenly feeling ten times too big. "Good," I say, swallowing hard before clearing my throat. "Great."

And still, he doesn't seem to be able to tear his eyes away from me. We end up standing there awkwardly for a spell, a quiet chuckle eventually escapes him as he rubs at the back of his neck. *Maybe he's feeling this weird energy sparking between us too.*

It's not a *bad* weird. It's just... strange. Other than me storming in and making a scene, this is the first time we've really spoken to one another, or been alone together. It's just... *different*.

His dark brown eyes twinkle with amusement. "This is awkward right?"

I giggle, shaking my head as I try to play it cool. "Yeah, a little."

"It's not every day you speak to the man who's supposed to be your destined partner."

"Can't say I've ever spoken to a man like that, no," he replies with a growing smirk that sends my heart thumping inside my chest.

I grin back at him. "I don't suppose you have."

"How are you?" he says before wincing. "I mean, how have you been?"

"To be honest, I don't know. I feel bad for the way I spoke to you. I hope you know I'm real sorry about that."

"Just so you know, I didn't know about the Call shiftin' to me," he says, looking down at his feet.

"I guess it's not exactly somethin' that announces itself. I thought for sure it would be like one of those big gongs you see in Kung Fu movies. One hit and everyone knows."

He snickers and the sound has me relaxing even more. Then his eyes lift to the counter where my book still lays open, and when he leans over to get a better look, my breath catches when I realize that the Polaroid photo is sitting right there for him to see.

He reaches over with his big rough-looking hands and runs the tip of his finger over the photo. "Where's that from?"

My head jerks up, my wide gaze roaming his features for any sign of annoyance, but all I find there is curiosity. "So, that might take some explainin' and I definitely need one of my special smoothies to do it. Would you... I mean... would you like one?"

His eyes flash with surprise before warming. "Yeah, Star. I'd like that."

"Cool. Cool. I mean... good," I say, rambling on. "And I'm due for a break

anyway. Do you want to—I mean you don't have to—but um—"

"Star?"

"Yeah?"

"Take a breath, babe." He winces straight away. "Dammit. Sorry. I know you don't like bein' called that." A wave of guilt washes over me when I remember yelling that at him.

But right now, him being nice and calling me babe doesn't seem so bad after all.

"I um... it's OK. I don't even know why I said that. I don't know if you call anyone babe so I can't really..."

Landry dips his head so that he's all I can see. "I don't call anyone that. You're the only one."

"OK," I say, letting out a huge sigh. "Good."

"Star, relax. The last thing I wanna be doing is makin' you uncomfortable. Yeah?" His soft smile makes all the awkward tension I was clinging to disappear. *He could smile like that at me any day and I'd always wanna smile back.*

"Yeah," I whisper

"Do you lock the door when you're taking a break?"

I nod, watching him with wonder. He's nothing like I expected. He's kind and gentle and from what I can see, there's none of that cocky confidence I expected. Then again, either he was hanging outside my shop for so long because he just liked the smell of my incense, or maybe he *was* a little nervous to talk to me. *Why does that idea make me feel good?*

"How 'bout I go lock the door and turn the closed around, and you go make us that smoothie so we can talk some more?"

I tilt my head and quirk a brow. "You don't have to get back to the ranch?"

"The only thing on my schedule right now is sharing a smoothie with you, babe. Everythin' else can wait."

"Oh, OK." I know I'm blushing again, but I'm starting to wonder if that's going to be a permanent state when I'm near this man. "I'll go do that."

"Do you want help makin' it? I'm no chef, but I do know my way around a kitchen."

I'm already shaking my head. "No, No. I'll be right back."

"And I'll be waitin' right here," he replies without missing a beat.

Once I've calmed my breathing down and given myself a silent pep talk

so that I don't get all flustered again, I make the smoothie, doubling my normal mix and adding in some blueberries from my small bar fridge.

Walking back out into the shop, I find him sitting on my spare stool on the other side of the counter. His face lights up when he sees me and as I hand over the mug of green drink, I realize he's holding the Polaroid of us in his hand. Instead of asking me about the photo again, he nods to the book that's open between us.

"What are you readin'?" he asks, his voice filled with genuine interest.

I glance down at the book I got at the bookstore yesterday. There's a shirtless man on the cover just like all of Aster Hollingsworth's books. "Oh, just a little something to pass the time. Research maybe..." I say, feeling my cheeks heat again. *What is it about this man?*

His eyes linger on the cover. "It's a good read," he says, his voice a little rough.

My heart quickens at the sound of his voice, and I can feel a blush spreading across my cheeks. "Yeah, it's not bad," I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

"I'm readin' it too"

"You are?" I blurt out. "Really?"

Landry flashes me a lopsided grin that I realize I could soon get addicted to. "Yeah. Greg at the bookstore gave me a copy. Said I might learn more about this whole Call business by readin' Aster's books. Are you enjoyin' it?"

"I am," I say, excitedly. "It's intriguin' and enlightenin' all at once."

"Mmm. It's a lot to wrap your head around when you find out about it. The mountain callin' two people together that may not have otherwise met."

"Is that why you're here?" I say, apparently having lost my filter now. "To meet me?"

Then I catch a slight blush of his cheeks and I melt a little. "I um..." he clears his throat. "I wanted to come and say hi for once." His quiet laugh is like a sweet melody to my ears. "You know, instead of hangin' outside like your friendly neighborhood stalker."

"I did wonder about that. Was I too intimidatin' to come in and talk to?"

He shakes his head with a grin. "Nah. I just didn't want to come off as too eager or anythin'. I was a bit nervous too."

"Oh... *Ohh..*" That admission makes me feel all gooey inside. *What is this voodoo magic?* "I'm glad you finally came in."

"Me too," he says, his eyes locking onto mine. "And I truly am sorry for

how things went down between us before. I hope we can start fresh."

I nod, feeling a warmth spreading inside of me at the sincerity in his words. "Me too, Landry."

We sit there for a few moments in comfortable silence, sipping our smoothies. I can't stop watching him. It's like whenever I try to look away, my gaze is magnetized to snap back to his face. He's fascinating, and I'm realizing that there's a lot more to this man than I ever could've realized. I *want* to know more about him. Is this the work of the mountain or just two people being interested in one another? I guess that's something I'll only find out if I actually *try* and put myself out there.

Before I can say anything about that, he slowly lifts the Polaroid photo. "So this?"

I take a fortifying gulp of my drink before lowering it back to the counter. "Funny story that."

He arches a brow and my breath catches at how the action makes him look even more handsome. I itch my hand, wondering why my skin feels all tight and tingly again. "Hmm?"

"Before I go on, I need to tell you that I've told them to stop investigatin' you." He frowns and I quickly continue. "Well you know that my Gramma and her friends—"

"The Sunday School Sallys?"

I snort and nod. "Yeah. That name still makes me laugh. Like who even came *up* with that moniker?"

Landry bounces a shoulder. "To be honest, I always thought they named themselves that."

"Who knows? Anyway, they sort of took it upon themselves to investigate you."

His eyes jump wide. "Me?"

"Yeah. As they put it, they wanted to make sure that the mountain had chosen the right one for me."

"OK..." He hasn't run out of the shop screaming yet so I forge on.

"Yeah, and please believe me, I've asked them to stop and told them it's unnecessary."

"Why?"

"Why? I say with a jerk. "They've been followin' you around and takin' *photos* of you."

Then it's like a lightbulb goes off, his eyes jumping wide. "*That's* who

was watchin' me the other day in town. I thought I was being paranoid. Still doesn't explain why they were glarin' at me though." he says, rubbing his chin.

"If we're being honest, aren't they always glarin' at *someone*?" I say.

"You might be right there. Just can't remember a time when they were directin' their disapproval my way."

"Well they might be a little protective of me, that's all."

"Hmm. OK. So this photo?" He holds up the image. My fingers are itching to grab it back off of him. I love that photo because it captured such a sweet, potentially pivotal moment if the mountain spirit has anything to say about it.

"They may have also taken photos of you."

He frowns. "Like surveillance?"

"Yeah," I say with a wince. "I'm sorry. I didn't ask them to do it, I promise. But you know what they're like, any chance of an adventure and they're a law unto themselves. I don't think they've gone *too* far with it from what I could see on their evidence board."

"They have an *evidence* board?" he says, and I tense, expecting this to be the moment when he decides he's been stalking the wrong woman. Instead, I get to witness the beauty that is Landry Graham throwing his head back as he bursts out laughing, making me smile.

"Oh well," he says once he's composed himself again, still chuckling under his breath though. "I guess you should let them have their fun."

"What?" I stare dumbfounded, wondering whether I heard him right.

He shrugs, lifting his mug to take another drink, not seeming to care that his mustache is now tinged with green smoothie goodness. "They mean well and as long as they're not gonna keep glarin' at me for no reason whenever I see them, it's kind of sweet in a way."

"You're surprisin', Landry Graham." Yep, I just blurt that right out but his answering slow-growing grin is so worth it.

"Now *that* I like. I wanna be surprisin' to you, babe. I wanna be surprised by you too."

We fall silent after that as I try to work out what to do or say next. I'm never short of words, and I'm not right now either. I'm just not sure what the protocol is for two almost strangers who seem to like each other or are at least intrigued by one another, let alone the fact that my body seems to go haywire whenever I'm near him.

"Well, don't let me keep you any longer. I know you're probably busy. But I appreciate your hospitality and this delicious smoothie." He finishes his drink and moves to his feet. Then he shocks me by grabbing my empty tumbler, and dipping his head to me with a grin as I swear I start breathing heavily.

He rounds the counter and takes the dishes out to my kitchenette. I spin in my chair and listen to the sound of him rinsing them off and quickly turning back again before he reappears. I hold my breath as I wait. Is he going to just say goodbye? Will he go back to just watching me through the window? Because now that the seal has been broken—or more so, that he's crossed the threshold inside the shop to talk to me—I don't want to go back to him just hanging outside the shop. I'd rather he sit with me like this, drinking smoothies and talking. I think we could talk about almost anything and I'd never get bored.

"I was wonderin'," he says, breaking the silence and putting me out of my self-imposed overthinking.

I lean forward in my chair. "Yeah?" *OK, maybe that sounded a little too eager.*

"Would you let me take you out for dinner at the Loaded Hog later this week? I'd like to get to know more about you." His voice is cool, calm, and collected, but he's holding his shoulders so tight I'm surprised they're not hanging up by his ears. Knowing I'm not the only one who's nervous makes my heart sigh and my stomach flip in the best way.

I shoot him a soft smile. "I'd love that," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "Would Friday night work for you?"

"Friday's perfect," he says, the tension leaching out of him and his shoulders lowering to their normal level. "I'll pick you up from home around six if that works for you?" He freezes. "Or if you wanted to meet me there..."

"No, you can do that. Pick me up, I mean."

"Good. Great," he says, I nod, feeling a thrill of anticipation run through me. I don't know how it happened, but even from just spending this time with him today, he's got me hooked. *And who would've seen that coming?*

It's like we've seen each other—the real us—for the first time, and it's exhilarating.

After saying our goodbyes and Landry turning to wave at me before he goes to leave, I can't help but feel that something special could be brewing between us. And despite not being able to tell what my future holds right

now, I can't wait to see where this thing between us might lead.
Starting with dinner on Friday.

LANDRY

I get to my truck after walking on air from Happy Auras. I feel electrified and at peace all at once. The mountain spirit chose well, and as I already knew, Starchild is amazing. She's so kind and funny and beautiful, god damn is she gorgeous. Today she was wearing a pink and peach tie-dyed shirt that was gathered into a ring on her hip and a white cloth-like skirt that skimmed her ankles. I didn't get to see her feet, but she usually wears these thick woven looking sandals on them when she's working in the shop. But like every time I've seen her, she took my breath away. Then again, she could wear a burlap sack and still be gorgeous in my eyes.

The smoothie was surprisingly nice. I never asked her what was in it but when I stare at myself in the rear-view mirror, I almost punch myself in the face trying to wipe off the green smoothie mustache that I'm wearing. I groan and headbutt the steering wheel.

She still agreed to dinner with me on Friday night *despite* having this gunk on my face. Surely that means she likes me—or at least is *open* to liking me. And we've swapped numbers. So that's something new too.

Just as I'm about to start the truck, I get a text from Toby to pick him up from the Saloon. He wasn't joking when he said he'd come into town to support me. The truth is, he said that if I didn't walk into the shop, he'd throw me over his shoulder and *make* me go in there.

A few minutes later, I'm in the parking lot of the tavern, the engine idling as I watch Toby walk out through the wooden swinging doors of the bar with a huge grin on his face, and if I'm not seeing things, a bulge of money in his pocket that wasn't there when I dropped him off an hour ago.

I give him a nod as he approaches the truck, and hops in the passenger seat with a loud grunt.

"*That* was a successful outin' to the Cow," he says, patting his pocket. "Won three games of pool in a row, then two rounds of darts. Our beer fund just got that little bit bigger today, brother." He beams at me, tilting his head as he sweeps his eyes over me. "And you're smilin' too. Does that mean it went well?"

I nod. "It did."

"Good," he says, cupping my shoulder. "See, I said you just needed to talk to her. Can't exactly get workin' on the Call if you're not spendin' time with your One, you know."

Rolling my eyes, I turn the wheel and head back out onto the road leading out of town and toward our ranch.

"So what's next? Are you gonna bring her out to the ranch and show her where she'll be livin'? Maybe start askin' her about what she wants in a cabin so you can start buildin' it? I'll contribute the beer fund towards it if you want."

I splutter. "What? God, Tobes. We just spoke for the first time today. That doesn't mean I'm gonna be droppin' to one knee and askin' for her hand any time soon."

"Dammit. Why not? I've always wondered why you all take so long to complete the call. Lee and Colt took *forever*. It's just wastin' time if you ask me."

Arching a brow, I shoot him a quick side glance. "You sayin' you're gonna lock your One up in marriage as soon as you know who it is?"

"Of *course* I am. As I said, if you already *know* you're destined to be together, why waste time? You can get to know each other *while* gettin' on with your lives."

I chuckle and shake my head. "Not sure it works that way, Tobes."

"Well, it should."

As we drive along the winding road, I think back to just how right I felt when I walked into Happy Auras for the first time today and saw her there, surrounded by crystals and incense, her energy emanating throughout the small shop. Then I try to imagine her at the ranch and what she might think about it.

"Do you think she'll like the ranch?" I ask, breaking the silence in the car.

"Don't see why not. It's beautiful out there. Plus, we're surrounded by

nature. There are fields for miles and everyone loves the mountain. Think of all the places she could meditate or do yoga or whatever she does. It almost seems like the most perfect place for someone like her," he replies.

"Like what?"

"A free spirit. One with nature and the world. Those crystals she has hangin' in her window, they're borne from the earth. She draws energy from there. She's a wanderer, a lover of peace and harmony. She'll *love* the ranch, Land. Don't you worry about *that*."

"OK," I say, my mind racing with possibilities now.

I feel a wave of excitement wash over me as I think about the possibility of her being at the ranch with me. I imagine the two of us taking long walks together, talking about anything and everything, and meditating in the fields, surrounded by the beauty of nature. The two of us sitting on the porch, watching the sunset and sipping on whatever smoothie concoction she wants me to eat, a bunch of animals around us while we just watch the world go by.

But before we can even get close to living that life, there's our date on Friday night.

"Hey, Land. Can you slow down for a sec, I think there's an animal ahead on the side of the road."

"You sure it's not Duck Norris tryin' to cause a wreck again," I muse.

"Nah. Though I wouldn't put it past him. Can you see it yet? Up ahead, on my side."

I slowly slow down the truck and look out the windshield. Sure enough, there's not one but *two* white-furred animals—one large, one small—on the side of the road. As we get closer, I realize it's a mountain goat and its kid.

I pull over, making sure to keep some distance between us and the animals so we don't scare or startle them.

"Damn. Can you see she's bleedin'?" Toby asks, his light mood all but disappeared now.

"Yeah. That Mama ain't lookin' too good."

"You got anythin' in this truck to help her?"

I stare at him as if he doesn't know me. "Of course I do. I'm a Graham."

"Too right you are. OK. Let's get whatever we've got that'll help from the back and let's see if we can help them."

But once we've hopped out of the truck and looked at what I've got, Toby turns to me with a frown. "What would help a wild mountain goat? They'd be more like sheep than cattle, right? I know bulls, I don't know squat about

damn goats.”

"Me either. This is Lee's territory," I say. Colt may be a co-owner of the ranch, but they're both currently living in Colorado while she finishes her Veterinary studies. Not that it helps us right now.

We hop out of the truck and rummage through the back, grabbing a blanket and a couple of water bottles. As we approach the animals, a familiar small animal hops out of the woods behind the two goats.

"Quack. Quack."

"Not now Duck Norris," Toby mutters. "He's gonna scare them."

Except the closer we get, I see the Mama goat's eyes are closed and she's not flinching. A quick look at her has me realizing that we're too late to save her. That leaves us with the baby, a white furry kid who is eyeing us warily. It's got a narrow head with pointy ears, and a small but already stocky body that Alaskan mountain goats are renowned for.

There's blood on its front legs but I'm not sure if it's hurt or if the blood has just been transferred from the mom. By the way the baby is shaking though, I know we need to act fast. Who knows how long it has been out here for.

"Hey there, buddy," I say softly, holding out my hand so she can sniff it. "We're not going to hurt you. We're just here to help." The goat kid nuzzles my hand, making me smile. Its big brown eyes are making my insides melt faster than summer snow.

"There you go," I murmur.

"Quack!"

"Shh, you damn duck," Toby grinds out in a stage whisper.

"Quack!" Duck Norris replies to Toby, his tone more indignant than I've ever heard from a bird.

I look back over my shoulder to my brother. "Looks like we've got ourselves a new resident at Bull Mountain Ranch."

"Quack!" Duck Norris hops up and down on his one leg, flapping his wings and I swear if he could talk, he'd be saying "yay."

"You're right. We can't do anything for the Mama, but I ain't about to leave an orphaned baby goat on the side of the highway." Toby looks to where the larger goat lies prone. "You take care of the baby and I'll move the mama over away from the road."

"Do you think we need to get her to a vet," I say, covering my arms with the blanket as Toby crouches down to help lift the goat kid into my arms. I

wrap her up tight and stand up, cradling the still-shivering animal close to my chest.

Toby nods in agreement. "We can call Lee and see what she says. If anythin', she can at least tell us how to go about rearing this wee thing."

As if the goat knows we're talking about her, she lifts her head and nuzzles into the crook of my neck, rooting her nose against my skin as if looking for food. When she sucks against my throat, I pull her away, earning a laugh from my brother.

"Have fun explaining *that* mark to your One."

"What?"

"Got yourself a little love bite there, brother. You're gonna have to tell Starchild that she's got herself some competition from a wee Nosey Nelly here." He reaches up and ruffles the fur at the top of her head. "Lucky she's cute. Star won't be mad for long as soon as she sees this cute thing."

"Hang on," I say, watching as Toby does what he has to do with the mama goat's body. "Who says this is *my* goat?"

He straightens and walks over to me, grabbing a bottle of water from the ground where we'd dropped them and washes his hands clean. "Well it ain't *my* neck she's markin', is it?"

"Quack!"

Our heads both snap to the menacing duck that's made himself a member of the ranch family too. Some say he does the work of the mountain spirit. Most of us just think he likes stirring the pot and annoying people—mainly our family.

"Baaaa," Nelly—hey, we don't pick names, names pick us—replies.

"Hey there, Nelly," I say, rubbing her back through the blanket. She calms down at the sound of my voice and I'm not scared to admit, I'm a goner for this goat already.

"Looks like she's got a name now too."

"Quack!"

"*What?*" Both Toby and I ask the bird as if we expect him to talk back.

Of course he doesn't answer. Instead, he flies toward my truck and makes himself at home on the roof, standing there all cool and calm like it's his *right* to be there.

"Looks like we've got another passenger too."

Toby snorts. "What's one more? Gimme the keys. I'll drive while you keep cuddlin' your goat, and we'll call Lee on the way home."

And that's exactly what we do. Duck Norris doesn't stay on the roof though, he hops down into the bed of the truck, making himself at home.

Once we're back on the road, Toby puts his phone on speaker and calls through to Lee and Colt.

"Why did I know you'd be callin'?" Lee says by way of an answer.

"Um... because I'm your *favorite* cowboy?" Toby replies.

I snort whereas Lee just laughs. "Nope, Tobes. Try again."

He grins. "I'm your favorite Graham brother?"

"Hmm... I might have to think about that one," she replies.

"It's me, right? That's why you're not answerin' him. You're tryin' to let him down easy," I add.

"Yeah. Landry. That's the truth. I'm glad you know me so well." Her voice gives away her teasing. "How can I help you two?"

"We've got ourselves a baby goat," Toby explains. "We found her on the side of the road with her passed away Mama so we've got her in a blanket and Landry's got himself a new baby lady to look after.

She giggles. "Oh, that's so cute. I hope Starchild won't mind."

"Hang on, how do you know about Star? Oh wait, you don't need to answer that. I know. Your dreams, right?"

"Not this time, Lan. For some reason, I've been dreaming of goats myself. Goats, cross-eyed, one-legged ducks, and clowns. Colt has been thinkin' I was losing my mind. But does this mean you've talked to her now?"

"He did! He's all happy and smilin' and stuff," Toby replies.

"That's excitin'. I'm so happy for you," she says and I can tell she's smiling by the sound of her voice.

"So back to you," I say with a frown as Toby and I exchange a look. "How do you know about me and Star? Not that there *is* a me and Star—"

"Yet. There will be though. Cora and Tess and Mags have been blowing up my phone with updates. Apparently, you've got the Sallys on the case too," she replies.

Groaning, I drop my head back against the top of the car seat. "Damn that women's network you've got goin' works fast."

"You know it! So back to Nelly then." My eyes bug out of my head because there's *no* way she could know that.

"How did you...?" I ask.

Lee just laughs. "I'm right though, aren't I? So funny story, with all these goats in my head while I've been sleepin', only one of them had a name, and

her name was Nelly Nosey Parker. She's white and doesn't seem to grow very big, but she's a character and she ends up being best friends with one Duck Dilbert Dickward Norris."

"Oooh, you hear that Duck, Leah just full named you!" Toby shouts out the window.

"Quack!"

"He's there too?" Lee says with a laugh. "Well of course he is. You know what all of this means right, Landry?"

"I have no idea," I say as Nelly goes for my neck again. Thankfully this time I manage to ward off her vampire ways before cuddling her close. "But I'm sure you're goin' to tell me."

"This has the mountain spirit written all over it." She sounds almost gleeful over this development.

"Me finding a pet goat?"

"Yep," she says, popping the P. "Nelly means somethin'. I just don't know what. But she was meant to come into your life, Land. And that means you have to look after her."

I glance down at the goat in my arms, locking eyes with hers. And if goats could smile, I swear she would be right now.

"But what does it *mean*, Lee?"

"I think you've been claimed by the goat. And Nelly Nosey Parker is gonna help bring you and Star together," Toby announces. "This is cool!"

"He's right, you know," Lee says. "She's chosen you. You're her new goat daddy."

I groan and they both chuckle. "I think y'all have lost it."

"Oh I lost my mind years ago," Toby replies. "But that doesn't mean we're wrong."

"The mountain spirit works in mysterious ways, Landry. And it's not up to us to question her. We've just gotta go with it," Lee says.

"So I'm now a goat parent?"

She giggles down the phone. "Yep."

"And somehow this is supposed to bring Star and I together?"

"Oh yeah," is Lee's reply. "And don't worry about knowin' what to do. Goats are pretty easy. Just like calves. I'll email you some information but basically, feed her every three to four hours, and then after a few days, spread it out to four feedin's a day. Droppin' to two or three in a few weeks. Then twice a day after that."

“What do I feed her though? It’s not like we’ve got goat’s milk just layin’ around the ranch.”

"Well, I'd say you can just use milk replacement until you can get to the supply store in town for some goat-specific replacement. Just cuddle her, keep her warm and feelin' safe," she explains.

“He’s already doin’ that. She’s given him a hickey and everythin’,” Toby helpfully replies, making me groan again.

“Don’t say that. It sounds weird.”

I swear I hear Lee swoon down the phone. “Aww. I love this. You’re gonna be a good goat daddy, Landry. And I bet if you ask Star, she’ll be more than ready to adopt the kid with you too.”

“Bet there hasn’t been a mountain’s call involvin’ *animals* before,” I retort.

“Oh yeah. If you wanna read about it, I think Trace Cooper and his One had *raccoons* to raise.”

“There ain’t no raccoons in Alaska, Lee. You of all people should know that.”

"That may be true, but I also know there were three baby ones at Moose Mountain when they were fallin' in love. That's all I know. Anyway, I've gotta go get back to class. We're going to a cattle ranch to check for pregnancies."

“That’ll come in handy for us soon enough,” Toby quips.

"Yep, so I better get all the practice in. Any problems, just text me, Landry. Otherwise, say hi to Nelly for me. Bye." Then she ends the call just as Toby turns into the driveway to our ranch.

“Baaaaa,” Nelly says, sounding so soft and fragile, it brings out all my protective instincts.

“It’s ok, kid,” Toby says, reaching over and rubbing her back over the blanket. “Your goat daddy is gonna take real good care of you.”

I groan and he laughs at me again. “That’s gonna be all you call me from now on, isn’t it?”

“Yes, yes it is.”

STARCHILD

Starchild: Good Morning. How was your night?"

Landry: Hey, Star. My night was... interesting.

Starchild: What happened?

Landry: Can I call? I prefer talking to messaging and I'd rather start my day off with the sound of your voice.

OK. I'm not a woman who swoons but my heart now feels like it's floating in my chest singing love songs. Is this the same man that would hang around outside my shop and walk by because he was nervous to come in? Now he's telling me he wants to hear my voice? *Maybe this mountain's call business isn't so bad after all.*

Starchild: I'd like that.

Moments later, my phone rings. Thankfully I'm just doing a stocktake so I'm not busy.

"Hi," I answer with a smile on my face.

"Hey." He sounds tired, something that's confirmed by his loud yawn.

"Damn. Sorry. The yawn is Nelly's fault, not yours. I swear."

I snicker. "That's OK. Bad sleep?"

"Something like that. Yesterday was an eventful day."

"Oh really? You seemed pretty happy when you left me," I reply.

"Believe me, I was. Then Nelly came and turned everything upside down."

I frown because I've never heard of a Nelly in town before. "Nelly?"

"Yeah," he says, biting back another yawn. "So it turns out I'm a dad.

"What?" I gasp.

"To a kid."

I'm shaking at this point and I don't even know why. *Am I going into shock?*

"A child? Well, I guess that would definitely make your night interestin'." He can't miss the shock in my voice.

"Shoot no. A *goat* kid." I huff out my relief, making him chuckle. "Not a Dad, Star. Not yet, anyway."

"Oh, that's good. I mean.. Great. Not that having a child would be bad. I mean--"

"Star?"

"Yeah?"

"Breathe, babe. I know you didn't mean anythin' by it."

I do what he says, slowly inhaling and waiting a bit before exhaling again, instantly feeling better.

"So a *goat* kid? I didn't know your ranch had goats. Then again, I don't know much about your land except you run cattle and you're startin' the bull stud." Then it hits me. I was having dreams about goats and now *Landry* has a goat. *What are the chances?*

"On the way home Tobes and I came across Nelly and her Mama. Unfortunately, the mother had passed, and Nelly took a likin' to me. So we bundled her up and brought her back here."

"Wow. Look at you being a Good Samaritan."

"I love animals and couldn't leave her there. She's small and was starvin'. Not sure how long she'd been there but she's definitely not hungry now."

"She kept you up all night feedin'?"

"Yeah. We called Lee—you know, Colt's fiancée—and she told us Nelly should feed every three hours or so, except my goat kid didn't seem to get the memo," he sighs. "Lucky she's cute."

"Is she white all over?" I ask, thinking back to the wild mountain goats I've seen before.

"Sure is. Wanna know something strange though? Lee was talkin' about how she's been dreamin' of goats. So this is a bit of kismet. Maybe a sign from the mountain or something."

"Mmm..."

The line falls quiet for a moment. "That mmm sounded like you're thinkin' about somethin'," Landry muses.

I scrunch my nose up. "Does Lee have gifts too?"

"Sure does. How much do you know about the mountain spirit and the Call?"

"I'm learning about it in that Aster book I'm readin'," I explain."

"OK. So every mountain has a person who the spirit communicates with in some way. For us, it's Lee. She sees scenes play out in her dreams. As she explains it, it's like watchin' a movie sometimes."

"Does that mean she's a Seer?"

Yes," he replies. "Exactly that. Back on Eagle Mountain, it's a Vet called Kendra. She runs a horse rescue center. On Bear Mountain, it's—"

"Tim aka Gandalf."

"You got it. By the way, Cora told me how you found out about the Call and I'm sorry 'bout the way you did. I've met Gandalf and he's a real hoot, but he'd never have told you if he thought you didn't know. He's not like that."

"I know," I say with a sigh. "I've had a few weeks to think about it and I know he didn't mean anythin' by tellin' me. When he *did* say it, he was a little imbibed too. I guess it just threw me for a loop at the time."

"I bet. Being told you're destined to be with a man you barely knew would *definitely* be a surprise."

"Just a little bit."

"So what was he drunk on? Let me guess, his honey whisky? We've had some of that before, it's so strong it put even *more* hair on my chest." My heart runs a race at the imagery, my palms growing clammy. I quickly dry one hand on my skirt before switching the phone over to do the same to my other one. It's winter but I'm suddenly overheating.

I clear my throat in the hope I'll get my thoughts back in line. "It was hemp vodka. His latest experiment."

"Hemp vodka? That sounds... interestin'," Landry says with a chuckle.

"Baaaaa."

"Hush now, Nelly Nosey Parker. You just ate," Landry coos, and now I'm not overheating, I'm melting in another way.

"Aww, she sounds so sweet."

He chuckles. "Yeah. She has her moments."

"Does this mean dinner's off tomorrow?"

I hear a sharp intake of breath. "No. I mean. Did you *want* to call off

dinner?"

I'm already shaking my head even though nobody can see me. "No way. I just figured that you're a goat dad now, you've got responsibilities." Just the thought has me smiling.

"You're grinnin' right now, aren't ya?"

"Maybee."

"Bet you're cute doin' that too," he mutters and I have to bite back a happy sigh. This man is as sweet as sugar and I'm totally here for it.

"Nell, no food. Stop buttin' my leg." Then there's rustling and murmuring down the phone before he speaks again. "Sorry 'bout that. She's a bit of an attention seeker. But I've got her wrapped up and cuddled to my chest now so hopefully she won't be interruptin' us again."

"Sounds like she's got you wrapped around her little hoof," I say with a giggle.

"As I said, lucky she's cute."

"Does that go for future soulmates too? As long as I'm cute, I can get away with things?" I realize I'm flirting with him but it feels right so I'm going to run with it.

He barks out a laugh, earning a bleat from his goat kid in reply. "You're more than cute, Star. But yes, apparently I'm a bit of a pushover for cute females."

"Good to know." There's no wiping the smile off my face now. He thinks I'm cute.

It's then that the bell over the shop door rings and I spot a new customer coming in. I wave their way with a friendly grin and watch as they move toward the rack of knitted scarves and hats.

"Hey, I've gotta go. But we can talk more about your soft spot for cute females tomorrow night if you want."

"Sounds like a plan. Thanks for talkin' to me. It seems now that I've started, I like doin' it." Blow me down with a feather, this man has *got* to stop being swoon-worthy.

"I like it too. See you tomorrow night?"

"Yeah. I'll pick you up at six. Is that still OK?"

"Sure is. See you then. And have a good day with Nelly."

He chuckles and I commit the deep melodic sound to memory. "Will do. Cross your fingers she lets me get some shut-eye tonight."

"OK. I'll do that," I giggle.

"Bye, babe."

"Goodbye, Landry," I say before ending the call and moving toward the customer.

It's not until after they buy a matching hat and scarf set made from cashmere that Aunt Dottie knitted that I realize I never told Landry about my goat dreams.

Starchild: Wanna know something strange?

Landry: Nelly has just sucked a hickey onto my hand so I need a distraction right now.

I snicker as I type out my reply.

Starchild: Should I be worried that there's competition for your attention?

Landry: Oh my god, don't make me laugh. Nelly nips me more if I jostle her around too much. I've already got a mark on my neck from yesterday and now my hand too. I don't want any more, people at the diner might start talking.

I can't stop giggling now.

Starchild: You sure she's not some kind of hybrid vampire goat?

Landry: I'm starting to wonder that myself. What did you wanna tell me?

Starchild: I've been dreaming about goats too.

Landry: Really? Have you dreamed of them before?

Starchild: Nope. Just for the past few weeks. There's something else. I can't see my future either. It's like it's a giant blur.

Landry: What?!?

Starchild: Yeah. I can still see people's auras and do crystal readings and the like. But whenever I try to look at what might be coming my way, I can't see a thing.

A few minutes pass before he replies but that doesn't mean he's not typing... and deleting... and typing again.

Landry: Do you think it's because of the Call?

Starchild: It would be a big coincidence if it wasn't.

Landry: I'm sorry about that. It must be frustrating.

Starchild: It was worrying me but now I'm wondering if it's happening for a reason.

Landry: And what's that?

Now I'm the one pausing before sending a reply. I only made the connection with the Call last night after seeing Landry and mulling over the whole situation. Then, after going to bed and reading the rest of Aster's new book, it hit me that there might be a reason for the blocking.

Starchild: I think the spirit wants me to live in the moment rather than see what's coming my way.

Landry: That makes a lot of sense...

Landry: Can I ask you one more thing?

Starchild: Anything, Landry. We're getting to know each other and the only way to do that is to spend time together, talk, and ask questions.

Landry: OK.

I watch the messaging box come up then stop before starting again and stopping... *again*.

Landry: Sorry, I'm nervous to ask.

Starchild: Please ask Landry. Just know that I'll always be honest and all I expect is the same in return.

Landry: Damn, just when I thought you couldn't get any better, you go and say that. Ditto, by the way.

Starchild: Landry, please ask your question...

Half a second later, I'm glad he did.

Landry: Now that you know about the Call, are you still against it?

This time, I don't hesitate in answering.

Starchild: No. I'm starting to think I might just believe in fate after all.

LANDRY

"OK, so I've fed her dinner. All you've gotta do is just make sure she doesn't make a mess of her bed," I say to Red, his son Wyatt who's sixteen going on fifty, Toby, and Austin as they all sit in the living room of the ranch house.

"You *do* know that most of us have been lookin' after all kinds of animals longer than you've been alive," Red muses.

"Speak for yourself, old man," Toby retorts, taking notes on the back of what looks like a receipt. "And how much do we feed her?"

"I've set up the bottle in the kitchen. Just warm it up in some hot water and it'll be fine," I explain.

"Lan, your goat is gonna be fine," Austin says, his voice full of amusement. "You're just nervous as all get out because you're goin' on a date with your One."

I rub the back of my neck, pinning my eyes to the goat kid making herself at home in the makeshift bed I made for her in a plastic laundry basket. Putting my work shirt from the day in there for her might be overkill, but I was reading last night about animal bonding, and by the way Nelly has taken to me, I know she's put me in the place of a foster parent. And since I'm all she's got, I take that responsibility seriously. Hence the shirt.

As I watch Nelly sleep peacefully, I can't help but feel a sense of apprehension about my upcoming date. I'm not nervous, per se, it's more the anticipation. This is my first dinner with Star. And yes, it's a hell of a lot easier now that we've talked and cleared the air—so to speak—but now we're going out in public and I have to pick her up from Miss Ruth's door. Hell, maybe there are some nerves there, but not about Star, it's all about having to

face the Sallys.

Red notices my apprehension and gives me a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, Lan. This isn't your first rodeo—so to speak—and if it helps, nothing can compare to your *actual* first rodeo."

"Damn, you just had to remind me of that, didn't ya?" I reply with a laugh.

"You chased after a bull, slipped on the tassels on your pants, and landed on your ass. You were lucky I saw it happen and launched myself at you to get you out of the way from the horns that were about to gore you."

Austin snickers, Wyatt snorts, and Toby grins like a loon.

"Oh yeah, that was a good one. At least with those jeans you're wearin', you know you can't trip yourself up," he replies.

As always, my family—by blood and by choice—have done what they set out to do and distracted me from my nerves.

"Thanks. You know, for watchin' Nelly and for gettin' me out of my head."

Austin gets up and walks over to me, gripping my shoulder and giving me a gentle squeeze. "This is your time, Lan. You said it went well with Star the other day, and tonight is just the next step. It's dinner. It's not dancin', it's not a sleepover. It's just two people eatin' and gettin' to know each other."

"And out of all of us, eatin' is the thing you're best at. If it's edible, you're demolishin' it," Toby pipes up.

"Yeah," I say, rubbing the back of my neck like I tend to do. "This is just important, you know?"

"And you turnin' up lookin' like that, all dressed up and *clean*, Starchild's gonna know that. Believe me, brother," Austin says. "We all know how important this is to you."

I nod, my palms sweaty but at least now my pulse has calmed down a bit. With one last ruffle on top of Nelly's head and a wave to the others, I head out the door and turn my truck in the direction of town.

When I park up outside Star's grandmother's house, my nerves return. But it melts away when I'm halfway up the path and Star appears in the doorway. She's even more beautiful than she was the other day and my heart pounds double time as I walk toward her, stopping at the top of the steps to take her in.

Her hair is piled up on her head with waves falling down her back. There's a blue and green scarf wrapped around her head like a headband,

drawing my gaze down the long curve of her neck. Her long, flowing dress hugs her body in all the right places. It's a deep forest green that matches not only her scarf but also brings out her hazel eyes.

"Hey," she says, smiling up at me.

"Hey. You look amazin', babe."

She blushes and I realize it's the first time I've seen it. If I have my way, I don't want it to be the last. "Thank you," she replies as she makes a show of looking me over in return. "You're lookin' very handsome too, Lan." It's the first time she's shortened my name and although my family does it all the time, it feels different coming from her lips.

I grin back, feeling my nerves slowly dissipating. I want to reach out for her but I'm too much in my head to act on it. As if sensing my uncertainty, she holds out her hand and turns her palm up, splaying her fingers. I release a silent sigh of relief and lace my fingers with hers, staring in wonder as my big hand engulfs her small dainty one. Tiny pinpricks of awareness cover my skin where we touch and I know then without a shadow of a doubt that Star is definitely meant to be mine.

"Shall we go?" she rushes out, sneaking a glance over her shoulder.

Just as we're about to move down the steps, the doorway to the house is filled with not just her grandmother, but also Dottie, Aggie, and Frankie. I tense, bracing myself for the Sunday Sally's inquisition.

"Nobody expects the Sally's inquisition" I mutter to myself, grinning when Star lets out a muffled snort next to me. *Ah... a fellow Monty Python fan, she must be my One.*

"Good evening, Landry Graham," Ruthie says, sounding not at all friendly. Star and I stop mid-step and turn to face the women who are all looking us up and down as if subjecting us to an inspection.

"Good evening, Miss Ruth," I reply politely. Star gently squeezes my fingers and a side glance her way shows a wry smile playing on her lips.

"You're looking very smart. I don't think I've ever seen you out of a plaid shirt," Dottie says, looking me up and down. "Don't you think, Aggie?"

"Hmm," the other Sally replies. "Anyone would think you're tryin' to make a good impression on our girl Starchild here.

"That I am, Miss Agnes. Star deserves nothin' less."

"Mmm hmm," she says, all four of the ladies sharing an unreadable look. I feel my muscles tense but another squeeze and a slight snort from Star has me relaxing again.

“Gramma, is there a reason you’re holding us captive on the doorstep?” she asks.

The smile Ruth gives her is soft and gentle. “No, child. We’re just seein’ you two off, that’s all.”

“Riiight,” Star replies with a giggle.

Dottie makes a show of placing her hand on her chest and gasping. “I don’t think she believes our intentions to be true.”

I play along. “No one would *ever* question your intentions, Miss Dorothy. I can assure you.”

Dottie's eyes narrow on me and I meet her glare head-on with a smile. “Mmm...” she hums in reply, her scrupulous gaze unrelenting as she looks me over.

“And where are you two lovebirds off to tonight?” Frances, the quietest Sally asks. Miss Frances was one of my teachers at elementary school. She was strict but kind and was one of my favorites.

“We’re going to the diner for dinner, Aunt Frankie.”

I clear my throat. “Actually, I’m plannin’ on surprising Starchild with a slight change of plans.”

The simultaneous raising of brows shows I’ve caught all the Sallys off guard. “Oh *really*?” Starchild’s grandmother replies. “A *surprise*?”

“Yes, ma’am. I thought the diner might be too loud and busy for a first date and gettin’ to know each other. So I’ve made arrangements for somethin’ a little more private.”

I realize my mistake when their gazes all narrow on me. “*How* private?” Dorothy asks. “I hope you’re not going to do anythin’ that would call our girl’s virtue and reputation into question, young man.”

If I could shake in my steel-toed boots, I would be right now. Thankfully, Star seems to decide she’s had enough.

“Aunt Dottie, Aunt Aggie, Aunt Frankie, Gramma, I love you all dearly but we must go. I promise that my reputation will be *more* than fine and I’m sure Landry has no other nefarious plans for my virtue for our first date.” She enunciates slowly and clearly so that there’s no room for misinterpretation. If we were in a place where I could, I’d totally kiss her right now. My Starchild is a force to be reckoned with when she wants to be and I like this determined side of her. She’s not a pushover. I knew it already when she stated her opposition to the idea of the Call at the beginning, but seeing her step in to defend me from the undoubtedly well-meaning Sallys is amazing.

All of the women smile in reply. “Yes, child,” her grandmother replies. “We mean well.”

“Yes, I’m sure you do.” Star’s voice is soft and there’s no doubt she loves these crazy ladies.

“Have a good night,” they all say in unison and I can’t help myself, I chuckle as they wave us off. I give Star’s hand a gentle tug and lead her down the stairs and toward my truck, opening the door for her and closing her inside once she’s situated.

It’s not until I’m behind the wheel and we’ve driven down the street out of sight that she speaks again, turning in her seat to face me.

“I’m so sorry about that. I knew they might do something but I never imagined they’d interrogate you.”

I burst out laughing, smiling when Star joins me. I reach over for her hand again. “I was thinkin’ that was rather tame considerin’ all the scenarios I had goin’ through my head today. So that went a lot easier than I was expectin’.”

She stares at me with her beautiful hazel eyes and when I come to a T intersection where there are no other cars, I take the opportunity to stop and look at her. “You’re a surprise, Landry.”

“A good one?” I ask.

Her slow-growing smile mesmerizes me and I imagine a life staring at her gorgeous face. “A very good one,” she replies. “Now, are we really not goin’ to the diner? I’ve been hankerin’ for Corned Beef Hash all day.”

Feeling bold, and wanting to do it more than my next breath, I lift our joined hands and lean in, brushing my lips against her knuckles, not missing the spark of awareness that tingles against my skin or the way Star’s breath catches and her body trembles at the contact. *Damn, now I’m thinking of things I shouldn’t.*

“So have I. So how ‘bout you let me surprise you. I promise you’ll still get what you want,” my voice is rough but I don’t hide it. I want this woman to know what she does to me.

She doesn’t disappoint, her gaze sparkling with heat and amusement when she issues a challenge I’m more than ready to accept. “OK, Landry Graham. Let’s see if you can surprise me.”

STARCHILD

When Landry pulls his truck into a parking spot outside the diner, I'm even more puzzled. Don't get me wrong, I love a good surprise and Landry has obviously put thought and effort into the night. That warms my heart and proves to me that my growing fondness for the man is not misplaced. I never thought it was, but not being able to use my gifts to help guide me through any of this has thrown me off my game. For the first time in a long while, I'm having to use my intuition and my instincts, and ultimately, my heart.

Yes, there is a prophecy at play, and yes, I'm starting to believe that certain people are brought into your life for a reason... I just don't know what the reason for Landry and I is yet. But the more time I spend with him, the more we talk and message each other, the more I want to find out exactly what the reason for this journey together is.

He shuts down the engine and turns his body toward mine, his expression warm but as yet unreadable.

There's a fluttering in my stomach that I can't quite shake, a good one though. Thinking back, every single time I've been close to Landry in person, my body has had some sort of physical reaction to him. The tingly skin, the spark whenever we touch, the heart palpitations which have happened even when I've switched to decaf for my morning coffee. I even wondered if I'm allergic to his shampoo or soap or something because I couldn't come up with a reason for why I was feeling all these things when I'm with him.

After finishing Aster's book, I read another one, and after reading five of them—thank heavens for ebooks—I've realized that I don't need to stock up on Benadryl, it's all the mountain spirit's fault. It's proof that my body, heart, and

soul know I'm meant to be his and he's meant to be mine. But I'm not a girl who jumps in without dipping her toes in first, so I'm taking all of this one day, one phone call, and now, one *date* at a time.

"So, what's the plan, Lan?" I ask, my lips twitching. Landry grins at me with a mischievous glint in his eye. "Well, we'll still be eatin' Corned Beef Hash. I even asked Mags what your favorite drink with dinner usually is." *Well hell, how is a girl supposed to dip her toes in when a man is this thoughtful?* "But because the diner is a bit loud and there could be surveillin' Sallys about, I figured we could do with a bit of privacy."

My curiosity is piqued, and I can't help but smile back at him. "Now I'm intrigued. You're very thoughtful, did you know that?"

He shrugs and I swear there's a tinge of pink on his cheeks. "I want to get to know more about you and don't wanna do that worryin' about being watched or people listenin' in. Is that OK?" The way he's so open and honest with me is going a long way to making me want to forget about toes and wade in to my ankles. *And we haven't even started our date yet.*

"I want that too," I say quietly, reaching over for his hand again, loving the way his fingers curl all warm and strong around mine. "Good. Then let's go."

With that, he gives me one last squeeze before letting me go. He hops out and rounds the hood of the truck before opening the passenger door and holding out his hand again. Helping me out, he locks up behind me and leads me safely to the sidewalk.

I hadn't noticed our height difference until he came into the shop, but now that we're standing side by side and the top of my head comes to the tip of his nose, I find that I like the idea of looking up at him. It makes me feel safe and protected because I know Landry would never let anything bad happen to me. Not that anything bad happens in our little town. Everyone knows everyone and we all look out for each other. It's one of many things I love about the place.

"Where to now?" I ask.

Still holding my hand, he winks. "Follow me."

A thought of 'I'd follow you anywhere' crosses my mind.

"Good to know," he says, his grin widening.

My step falters before I right myself again, realizing that I spoke out loud. "What?"

"You said you'd follow me anywhere. I like that. I like that you said it

too. We're just goin' this way."

"Lan?" I say, a little unsure when he leads us around the corner of the diner.

He stops at the bottom of the same stairs I stormed up a month ago and turns to face me, his fingers laced with mine, holding tight. "Trust me, Star. This isn't anything other than what I've said. Our first date, dinner, drinks, conversation, and a quieter environment than down here."

Staring into his soft gaze I know he's telling the truth. And the fact that he's taking me back to the bookstore when the last time we were both here, I was yelling at him like a loon, says a lot about the man standing in front of me. There's no malice, no hard feelings, I don't even think he's the type to hold anything against anyone. He's just a genuinely good guy.

His dark eyes roam over my face as if looking for any sign of discomfort. "Let's go. You promised me Corned Beef Hash and my Acai smoothie with coconut milk."

His lips twitch. "Coconut milk? Can't say I've tried that. Then again, we don't have any women livin' at the ranch right now so our eatin' habits aren't exactly fancy, or all that healthy most of the time."

"Oh really?" I say, unashamedly looking him up and down.

"Let's get upstairs," he says gruffly before a sly smirk adorns his lips. "Ladies first."

I feel his eyes on my butt the entire way up the two floors of stairs before he leans in and opens the door to the bookstore, waving his arm out to usher me inside.

The moment I step inside, I realize that moving our date to the bookstore was just the start of his surprise because instead of the normal couches in the alcove area by the front window, there is a small round table with two dining chairs and tea light candles placed around the room.

My gaze jerks to Landry who watches me closely. He shuts the door behind us and leads me toward the table, pulling out my chair and pushing me in before sitting down himself. In front of us are two silver cloches like you see on those TV cooking shows, an opened bottle of beer for him, and a tall glass of purple coconutty goodness for me. And let's not forget the vase full of the most beautiful pink daisies, which just happen to be one of my favorite flowers.

"How did you...?"

"The daisies?" he asks, a smile playing on his lips.

“All of it but yeah, the daisies, the candles, the delicious smelling food I’m guessing is under these domes...” My brows furrow. “I thought you were workin’ all day?”

His dancing eyes tell me he’s enjoying my reaction. "I was so I had to be resourceful and call in reinforcements." I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. He leans back in his chair, taking a swig of his beer. "Cora and Mags, Rhett got called in to help too. Mags is a romantic at heart and loves any excuse to plan something special. She loves love. The fact she's been married a few times before doesn't mean she doesn't believe in it, she just hasn't found her true soulmate yet."

"She will though," I say with a knowing smirk. It's a slip of the tongue but I know Landry won't be telling anyone.

His brows jump high. "Oh *really*. Now that *is* interesting." He takes a sip of his beer again. "But yeah, I asked them for a little help and this is it." He gestures to our surroundings, and I can't help but smile at the thought of Landry enlisting help to plan this surprise. It's sweet and thoughtful and just another example of how much he cares. It's also another sign that he's fully committed to the mountain's call.

"Well, they did a fantastic job," I say, lifting the dome off my plate to reveal the Corned Beef Hash. "And it smells amazin' too."

He chuckles. "You doubt Mags's cookin'? Don't let *her* hear that."

"Goodness, no. Nothing beats her food." I lean forward and drop my voice to a whisper. "But don't tell the Sallys that, especially Gramma. They'd all be mighty offended."

Landry mimics locking his lips. "I'll take it to my grave."

As we start to eat, the silence that stretches between us is comfortable and sweet. The food is delicious, and I can't help but let out a satisfied moan as I take a bite of the hash. Landry watches me with a glint in his eyes, and I can tell he's enjoying my reaction to the food.

"So I have a question," he asks.

I take a break from the food and lean back in my chair with my drink. "Ask away."

"Where did you go after leaving here that night? I went to check on you and saw the sign up at the shop."

"I was all over the place." His face falls and I quickly continue to reassure him. "Not just about that. I'd been feelin' a bit overwhelmed for a while I guess. So I went to spend a week at a wellness retreat near Eagle Mountain."

"Oh wow. How was that?"

"It was good. I think I needed to get away from everythin' and everyone to have a reset."

He nods. "Did it help?"

"It did for the most part. I stayed an extra week before coming back home because I still felt a little blocked, you might say."

He tilts his head. "How so?"

"I'm still not sure, to be honest. But when I came back, I was eager to work out what it was. And to speak to you."

"But I'd gone away by then, " he adds.

"Yeah," I say quietly. "I spent that time watchin' for you outside the shop. I wasn't sure when you were comin' back. Then I had lunch with Mags and Cora and they told me you were with Red on the rodeo circuit."

"Sure was. You weren't the only one who was distracted after that night. Red near on dragged me out of town."

"So you're sayin' the rodeo is like your own kind of wellness retreat?"

He chuckles. "Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"Do you enjoy it? Working on the circuit?"

"I do—well, I did. We all worked on the road at different events for a long time while Rhett was competin' and when he retired, we all decided to commit ourselves full-time to the ranch and the bull stud."

"You must miss it? Cora was tellin' me how you're one of the best."

That brings a slow but now less beaming grin to his face. "I do miss it, but I also like the way my life is now. Travelin' around all the time gets tirin' and sometimes you just wanna stay in the same place and just be. I guess I never really gave a mind to doin' anythin' else but workin' the ranch."

"Bet you used to get a lot of attention from the crowd," I tease. "I can just imagine all the fangirls you had watchin' you, puttin' your body on the line in the name of entertainment."

He laughs and I find myself smiling at the sight and sound of it. "Nah. I just enjoyed it, you know. Seein' the kids in the crowd all happy and being wowed by whatever crazy antics we'd get up to. Sometimes it's just fun to make a fool of yourself to get some laughs. It's freein' in a way."

"So after Red dragged you out of town, you came back..."

"Sure did. And can I say that I'm real glad I got the courage to finally cross the threshold and talk to you. Wouldn't be sittin' here enjoyin' a nice dinner and even better company if I hadn't."

I tilt my head and study him. "Do you think you would've eventually approached me, even without knowing that the mountain spirit wanted to bring us together?"

His features go molten warm and as soft as melting butter as he reaches his hand over and holds it palm up for mine, closing it again when I slip my fingers in with his. "I'm brave enough to admit that I've had a big ol' crush on you for a while now, Star." *And ain't that the sweetest thing to hear?*

I lean in and drop my voice to a whisper. "You wanna know a secret, Landry Graham?"

He mimics my pose. "Yeah?"

"I have a big ol' crush on you now. How's *that* for a coincidence."

His eyes crinkle at the sides as his lips tip up. "It almost sounds like fate."

"Hmm. Maybe it is."

As we get back to eating, Landry and I talk about anything and everything. He asks about my family and how I came to live with Gramma. I tell him about growing up on the road and the decision to come back home and open the shop. Then we talk about normal date-like things like our favorite movies, all the places we've traveled to, and all our bucket-list destinations too, like London for me and Texas for him.

He's easy to talk to and to be around. There's no pressure and no awkward and stilted conversation, just comfortable and companionable silence when we need it. It's something I've always thought was important to have with a partner.

After we finish eating, Landry stands up and stops in front of my chair, holding out his hand and helping me out of my seat. "Come on," he says, his deep voice sending shivers down my spine. "I have one more surprise for you."

He leads me to the back of the bookstore, where a door I've never noticed before is slightly ajar. Pushing it open, a small set of stairs is revealed. Moments later, we're standing on the roof of the building, looking up at the clear winter night sky.

"Wow," I gasp, taking in the stunning view of the stars twinkling above us. "This is incredible. I never knew this was here."

"Thought you'd like it." He stands next to me, his head tipped upward. "Greg brought me up here a few years ago. It's a nice place to escape to. It's also the *second*-best place to stargaze and see the Northern Lights. The best being the top of Bull Mountain, of course."

"I'd like to see that one day."

"That can definitely be arranged," he rasps.

I stare up at the sky in awe. "If I had this above my shop, I don't think I'd ever leave," I breathe. It doesn't matter how many times I've seen the multitude of colors dancing in the sky, it always leaves me speechless.

We stand in silence for a while, lost in the beauty of the display. When the crisp cool air makes me shiver, Landry shrugs off his coat and covers my shoulders with it. Surrounded by his jacket and the heady clean smell of his cologne, I lean into his side, smiling against his shoulder when he drapes his arm around me and pulls me in close.

"It's so peaceful up here," I whisper, breaking the silence.

He nods. "It is. It's a good place to think. About life and what's important. And about the people you care about."

I turn to look at him, my heart thumping hard as his eyes lock onto mine. There's a raw intensity in his gaze that makes my whole body come to life.

He brushes the back of his fingers over my cheek. "You're under my skin, Star. I hope you know that. I want to get to know you more, spend more time with you."

My heart races at his words, and I can feel the heat rising to my cheeks. "Me too."

He leans in, his mouth stopping a whisper's breath away from mine. "I'd really like to kiss you now," he murmurs. I wrap my arms around his waist and tilt my head up further. "Please," I say just before he brushes his lips against mine in a first gentle kiss. It's soft and sweet, but there's a fire simmering just below the surface. I turn so that we're chest to chest, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him closer as he deepens the kiss, our lips moving together in a perfect dance.

We stay like that for what seems like hours, lost in the moment and the slow, simmering passion that's building between us. Standing out here, the sky putting on one of the most beautiful shows in the universe, it feels like we're the only two people in the world. It's the perfect end to a perfect first date, one I don't want to end.

Finally, Landry pulls away, his eyes dark with desire. "We should probably head back down," he says, his voice husky.

I nod, feeling breathless and more alive than I ever have before. "Yeah..."

He kisses me once more, soft and slow before shifting back and smiling down at me. "If we don't stop now, I don't think I'll be able to." *I don't think I*

want him to.

"You might be right there," I reply, my voice soft and husky, telling him just how affected I am.

He smiles, his eyes hooded and dark and I know he's feeling the same.

Reluctantly, I follow him back down the stairs, my whole body tingling. We clean up the dishes and blow out all the candles. Landry even finds a bag from behind the counter and wraps up the daisies for me to take home too.

Just as we're about to step outside the door to leave, he stops and pulls me back into his arms.

"Thank you for tonight. I had an amazin' time. I don't even know why I was so nervous beforehand."

My lips part as I stare up at him with wonder. "You were nervous?"

"Oh yeah. I was drivin' the family crazy."

"That's so cute!" I say, unable to wipe the grin from my face.

He screws his nose up. "Not sure cowboys are meant to be cute, babe."

I lift up on my toes and brush a kiss over his lips, loving the way his breath catches when I do it. "You are. You wanted to give me the best first date and you were nervous about it. That's cute. It's also incredibly sexy."

That gets a small smirk tugging the corner of his mouth. "Hmm, is that so?"

"Oh yeah."

"Might have to do it again then?" he rumbles.

"Another date?"

"Would you like to come out to the ranch sometime? Maybe on Sunday if you don't have other plans. I'd like to show you around and introduce you to Nelly and the family."

"Nelly Nosey Parker the vampire goat?"

He laughs, pressing a kiss to my forehead that almost makes me melt more than the hot and passionate ones we shared up on the roof.

"I'd like that."

His face breaks out into a grin, revealing his perfect teeth. "But now I should get you home so I don't have your grandmother hunting me down."

"OK."

"And you're keepin' my jacket. I may not be able to kiss you goodnight on your doorstep like I want to, but I can sleep with a smile on my face knowin' you've got somethin' of mine with you."

"Lan..." I breathe, this time letting myself sag against him. "Stop makin'

me wanna keep kissin' you."

He dips his head down, pressing his forehead to mine. "Never." Then he kisses me one last time, and he does it with a smile.

LANDRY

"What on earth are you doin'?" Austin asks from somewhere behind me. I can't see him because I'm bent over the couch with the vacuum cleaner in my hand, trying to reach the bottom of what I swear is the crevice of doom. Nelly is sitting on the couch cushion, tucked into a cute little ball. I never thought I'd think a vampire goat who seems to be obsessed with me to be cute, but my girl seems to have this knack for making everyone love her. This was proven when I got home from my date with Star the other night and found Red asleep in his armchair with Nelly on his lap.

"Has anyone ever cleaned behind here before?" I mutter as I give up and stand up straight, turning to face him.

He looks at me like I'm a stranger, not his brother who he's known for thirty-three years. "Behind the couch?"

"Yes," I sigh, spotting some loose dirt from outside on the floor and quickly cleaning it up before examining the whole room again.

"Landry," Austin actually sounds worried now. "You feelin' OK?"

"Yeah, of course I am."

He looks me up and down as if seeking an answer to some unspoken question. "Why are you cleaning?"

"Because we all live like animals. In fact, I think animals might be a hell of a lot tidier than we are."

"OK..." He drags the word out like he's not sure what else to say.

I look at him and sigh. "The place is a mess and it needs cleanin'. We can do better."

He nods and crosses his arms over his chest. "I get that, but why now?"

I turn off the vacuum and face him fully. "Would you want to have visitors and have them see *this*?"

He raises his eyebrows at me. "Not sure any guests would be inspectin' behind the couch, Lan."

I roll my eyes. "They might!"

He nods slowly. "Who's comin' to visit, Lan?"

"Don't know what you're talkin' about." I check that Nelly is still sleeping before unplugging the vacuum cleaner and carrying it past Austin toward the hall closet where it lives.

"Well, the only other time I've caught you cleanin' was before Ma and Pa were comin' for Christmas. So vacuuming behind the couch means it's a special occasion," he calls out behind me.

I shoot Austin a glare as I walk back into the room to continue cleaning. "It's not like that. I just want the place to be clean."

Austin chuckles and flops onto the couch. "Sure, Landry. Whatever you say."

My eyes dart to Nelly, who's jostled by my brother's movements. She lifts her head to glare at him before turning my way.

"Baaaa"

A muted growl rumbles in my chest. "Austin, you woke her up."

He turns his head and grins at my goat, moving across the couch to get closer to her, rubbing her head and making friends with her again. *Traitorous goat.*

"Nah, you're all good. Aren't ya, Nelly?"

"Baaaa"

Then because she's a part animal/part vampire, she latches onto his shirt and tries to rip it with her tiny ineffectual mouth, making me laugh and Austin grumble.

"Good goat," I praise.

"You know she shouldn't be on the furniture, right? It's teachin' her bad habits."

I shrug, taking another look around the now sparkling-clean room. "She likes it."

"Mmm hmm..." he says, his lips tipping up.

"So who's comin' to visit, Lan-dry," he says in a sing-song voice just as Toby walks in the front door and makes his way over to us.

"Why's it so damn clean in here? And it smells like..." He closes his eyes

and sniffs the air before opening them again. "Is that like cinnamon or somethin'?"

"I might've baked snickerdoodles," I mutter.

Both Austin and Toby stare at me, their mouths agape and their eyes bugging out like bulls when their balls are cut off.

"You feelin' OK, Lan? Did Star break your heart or somethin'?" Toby asks, he's not razzing on me anymore. He seems genuinely worried.

I roll my eyes. "No. She's just coming out to meet Nelly and see the ranch."

Austin whistles. "Man, you must really like her if you're cleaning the whole house."

"I just want to make a good impression, that's all," I reply with a disgruntled sigh.

Austin chuckles as he lifts Nelly into his arms and gets up from the couch, walking over to me and handing her over before clapping my shoulder. "I'm happy it's goin' well for you. I know you've liked her for a while."

"It's a hell of a lot more than that now. She's amazin'," I say with a smile. I've been doing that a lot since Friday night. Whenever I think about our date I get all moony-eyed. If it was any of my brothers I'd be teasing them about it.

"I think we should help you out then, 'cause I'm not sure if you've seen the state of the bunkhouse today but it ain't pretty, especially if you're plannin' on takin' her in there."

I gasp and make a show of covering Nelly's ears. "Not in front of the kid," I stage whisper, earning chuckles from my brothers.

"This isn't just *some* woman coming to the ranch, Toby. It's *Star*. I want her to like it here. You know that."

"Yeah, I do. And I already told ya that she'll love it here. Not sure why you're stressin' about it. She's your One. The mountain spirit already chose her for you. There's always a reason she chooses the women she does. They *fit*, Lan. Remember that."

"I don't want her just because she's destined to be with me, I want her to *want* to be with me. Just as I already want to be with her," I say. "Is that weird?"

"No, it's not," Austin says, his voice gentle. "You do this whole Call business the way *you* want to do it. Don't be like Tweedle-dum here who's

been in a rush since the minute he was born. Just you wait, I bet he'll propose the day he realizes who his soulmate is just to complete the Call and get it over and done with."

Toby's eyes flash. "Yes!" he says, pointing at Austin. "See! That's what I told him. If you know, you know. Why drag it out. Just propose, get married, and smooth out the wrinkles after that. It saves time."

That's when we realize we're not alone, Red and Rhett both standing in the kitchen listening to us. "That plan would never work, Tobes. It's not always about getting the belt—or the girl. It's about all the time and effort you put in to get the win," Rhett replies before his eyes shift to me. "Proud of you brother. Putting in the work to reap the reward. Believe me when I say it's always worth it."

"Even if you did take your sweet ass time hanging outside the woman's shop just sniffing her incense to get a hit of her," Red rumbles, making all of us laugh.

"Yeah, OK. I get it. But now that I *have* spoken to her, I'm not sure I would change any of it."

"Don't suppose you would," Red adds.

Nelly nuzzles against my chest and I realize it's probably feeding time. "OK. Well, I'm gonna feed this little vampire, then I'm gonna go wash up and get ready."

"We'll be here waitin'," Toby says with a shit-eating grin.

"No you won't," Rhett announces. "We're all going to Sunshine Farm. Cora's got a wild hair of an idea to add on to the barn so we're gonna be spendin' the afternoon clearin' out the area around it."

Toby groans, Austin just nods, and Red laughs at the two of them before catching my eyes. "You'll have the place to yourself, Lan. Make sure you show her all the places you love about the place. But Toby's right about one thing."

"Wait, I am?" Toby asks.

"Yeah, once-in-a-lifetime moment. Don't get used to me saying it," Red quips, getting Toby's middle finger for his comment.

"Star's gonna love the place just as much as we do. Just be yourself. The mountain may have given you a reason to get to know Star, but she wouldn't have chosen you for each other if she didn't already know you'd be perfect together. Yeah?" I nod, letting Red's words sink in. "Besides, if you manage to win the Sallys over, most of the hard work is done, right?"

"Not sure I've done that yet."

Red smirks. "Maybe not, but I've got no doubt that you will. You're from Bull Mountain. There ain't nothin' not to like."

"Baaaa" Nelly says, wiggling in my arms.

"And look at that, even your goat kid agrees. You've got this, Lan. Don't you dare think otherwise."

An hour later, Nelly's asleep in her bed in my bunkhouse bedroom and I'm standing in the kitchen window looking out for Star after she messaged me to say she was on her way.

I see her car pull up outside and just like that, my heart skips a beat then starts running a marathon. It's not worrying me now though, I'm getting used to the way my body reacts whenever I even *think* of Star, let alone the way every part of me feels drawn to her when we're together. I take a deep breath and try to calm myself down before walking out onto the porch to greet her. When she steps out of the car and her beaming smile meets mine, I feel at home. It's weird because I already *am* at home, but it just feels right to have her here on my land.

Instead of her trademark tie-dyed dresses, today she's wearing a pair of tight jeans and a white form-fitting top with what looks like embroidered holes in it. I remember my Mom wearing similar stuff growing up, but on Star, it looks a *whole* lot different. Her hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, with a few strands left loose to frame her face, making her look even more beautiful.

"Hey," she says, her smile getting impossibly bigger as we walk toward each other. I don't hesitate to pull her into my arms and press a soft kiss to her lips before lifting my head.

"Hey. Was the drive out here OK?"

"Oh yeah. It's beautiful scenery. And that mountain, whoo wee. She's even more breathtaking up close." She turns to look up at the twin peaks of our mountain neighbor.

"You're the one who's breathtaking," I say, earning a blush from her that makes me want to kiss her again. But I resist the temptation and instead take her hand, leading her up to the porch. "I'm glad you're here."

"Me too," she says as she looks at the house. "Where is everyone?"

I open the door and move my hand to the small of her back as we step inside. "They're at Rhett and Cora's clearing up around the barn. Cora wants to extend it so Rhett rallied the troops."

"Not you?"

"Nah, they knew I had much better plans for my afternoon," I say.

"Hmm. Yes." I can't help but hope there's more to her words. Now that I've kissed her, I can't stop touching her and wanting to be close to her. And doing yard work would be last on the list of things I'd rather be doing today.

"What's that delicious smell?"

I lead her over to the stovetop where I left the cookies to cool down.

"You baked?"

"I did," I beam, my chest filling up.

Handing one to her, I watch as she takes a bite and closes her eyes, humming as she chews. "They're delicious." And damn if my mind doesn't drift elsewhere with just the look of happiness on her face.

She tilts her head and looks up at me. "You're not havin' one?"

"Nah," I say, a grin tugging at my mouth. "Think I might just sit here and watch you."

She gently nudges me as she laughs. "Charmer."

"Only for you."

Her lips part as if I've surprised her. "I like that you know."

"Like what?"

"The way you look at me. It makes me feel like I'm the most fascinatin' thing you've ever seen."

I reach out and place my hands on her hips, pulling her in close. "That's cause you are."

She finishes the cookie and my smile widens as I reach a thumb up to wipe away a stray crumb. "You've got a little bit there."

"Just there?" she says, her voice breathy and soft.

"Hmm..." I dip my chin, my eyes dropping to her mouth. "Maybe I should check..."

Star glides her hands over my shoulders and up into my hair. "I think you should. It's what a good host would do."

With a growl, I brush my lips against hers, the taste of sugar and cinnamon hitting my senses. When she parts her lips, I kiss her again, my tongue delving inside and tasting her and the cookie but there's no contest,

she's definitely sweeter.

As she moans into my mouth something snaps in me. Without pulling away, I slide my hands around her back and down to her ass, lifting her onto the counter, bringing her to the perfect height for me to hold her close and devour her.

"So good," she hums against my lips as her hands slide down to my waist.

Bringing my lips to her ear, I nip her ear lobe, loving the way she shivers against me. "You have no idea."

"I think I do," she says as we slowly ease back from each other, sucking in much-needed air.

I can't tear my eyes away, it's not just her kisses that are addictive, it's just her. She's like a bright light and I'm a moth that can't get enough. *I don't think I ever will.*

Kissing the tip of her nose, I take a step back because I know if I don't, we'll be doing more than just kissing in the kitchen. And my Star deserves far better than that from me.

That's not to say the pout she gives me when I move away isn't cute as all get out. "I should give you a tour. There's more to the ranch than the kitchen and cookies."

"And kisses," she adds as I help her down from the counter. "I hope there's more of those on the tour."

I growl, earning a giggle that I want to hear a lot more of.

"I can guarantee there'll be more of that. Just know that I didn't bring you out here for that."

"Well, I'd hope not," she says before leaning in. Her voice drops to a whisper. "Though I wouldn't be disappointed if you did either."

"Damn," I say, trying and failing to discreetly adjust my now-tight jeans. "Don't tempt me, I'm a patient man but I'm a man nonetheless."

She winks and reaches out to lace her fingers in mine. "I'll keep that in mind. Now, time for the tour. And don't forget, I wanna meet the other female in your life that's takin' up all your time."

"She's in the bunkhouse so I'll show you around this place and outside and we'll go there last."

"Sounds like a plan."

As I show her the ranch house, she asks lots of questions about when we bought the place and how that came about. She's impressed and amazed when I tell her our plan to bring the mountain back to her green, lush beauty after

the previous owners razed her slopes of all the old trees to make money.

I tell her stories about the rodeo and how Rhett met Red, and all the adventures we've had since moving here, including Duck Norris's antics.

As we walk out of the barn, she stops and turns to me. "So he's a one-legged, cross-eyed duck that you suspect is connected to the mountain spirit somehow?"

"Yep. There are just too many coincidences. Especially when Lee and Colt say that he brought them together and then him tauntin' and terrorizin' Cora and her dog. He even sat on her porch and had a splash in Bruno's bowl like it was one of those fancy day spas," I reply.

"Do you mean *that* duck?" Star says, pointing over my shoulder. I spin around with a frown, my body freezing in place when I see that not only has Duck Norris returned, but he's standing on the back of *my* goat.

"What in the world," I mutter, staring wide-eyed at Nelly walking toward me with the duck riding her like a chariot.

"Aww they're friends, it's kinda cute," Star says.

"They've never really interacted before." *Not since the duck was there the day we found her, anyway.*

"Really? Well, it looks like you've got some competition for *Nelly's* affections now. Just like I've gotta fight with her for yours," she teases.

I smirk over my shoulder at her. "There ain't no competition, babe. You'll win every time."

I watch her melt, her eyes growing hooded and my body starts gravitating toward hers as if we're puppets on a string. I lock my knees and stop because I know if I touch her lips again, I'll be hard pressed to stop. It was hard enough in the kitchen, but knowing there is no one around, there'd be nothing to stop me dragging Star back to my bedroom and stripping her bare.

"Hold that thought because I like where your mind is goin', but we've gotta catch Nelly first."

She nods, her sexy smirk telling me we're both on the same page.

Except that's when something spooks Nelly. "Baaaa" is all she says before she turns and runs, the duck hopping off her back and standing there on his one webbed foot watching her go.

"Shit!" I say as I run after my goat. "Try and get the duck!" I shout over my shoulder.

"On it!"

STARCHILD

I watch Landry run after a surprisingly fast Nelly before looking down at the duck he told me about, studying him as if trying to get a read on the animal.

"You don't seem that bad. Come 'ere, ducky."

"Quack!" he says, snapping toward my outstretched hand.

I jerk it back. "Well no, that's just rude."

"Quack!"

"You should be nice to everyone. Then they'll be nice to you," I say with my hands going to my hips.

"Quack?"

"Yes. You should. If they didn't like you, they would've had you for supper ages ago." I wince. "Or somethin'," I mutter.

"Quaaaack," he replies. I'm starting to think the damn bird understands what I'm saying. I shake my head because that's a dumb idea. He's a duck. He can't talk. *Right?*

Then the strangest thing happens because this time when I look at him and scan his little round head, I can make out a brown aura around it. "Hmm. Well, that's interestin'," I say to myself, and I guess to him. I haven't told anyone that I've started to get some of my powers back, or that it seems to be connected to spending more time with Landry. I still can't see my future or anything surrounding that though, but I'm a little relieved—OK, a lot—that I am starting to see some things now. Even duck auras, it seems.

"Quack!"

"Yes, it *is* interestin' because I haven't been able to see auras all that clearly lately, and I guess that's because of the Call. Maybe you can talk to

your favorite mountain spirit about helping me out with that? But now that I'm here and close to the mountain, I can see yours. And it's brown, Duck Norris. Do you know what that means?"

"Quack?" I swear I can hear the question in his answer.

"It generally means you're a bit selfish and like to take. But if you helped bring soulmates together, that means you *do* like to give occasionally."

"Quack! Quack!"

Clomping footsteps divert my attention from the weird conversation I'm having with the homely-looking bird and I turn my head in time to see a heavy-breathing Landry heading our way.

"Quack!" Duck Norris says angrily, or maybe it was more like an "Oh no, I'm in trouble" quack because he starts hopping away, making his escape.

"Get that duck. He needs to learn to leave my poor Nelly alone!" he says. The duck darts around the side of the barn and I watch Landry change direction to cut him off. I move the opposite way, hoping that we'll corner him around the other side, except I find the bird standing around the other side with one of the cookies from the kitchen in his mouth.

"What in the—"

"There you are, you damn bird," Landry mutters as he goes to dive for the duck. But of course, the duck senses him coming and flaps his wings, somehow launching himself toward me. I step back to get out of the way and lose my balance, closing my eyes as I wait to hit the ground. But Landry catches me and slowly and softly lowers me onto my back.

His eyes scan over my face, his features pinched with worry. "You OK?"

I quickly assess my body, no pain anywhere. Except while doing that, I realize Landry is now lying on top of me with his big burly body pressing into mine, all the good parts aligned with mine, and a warmth of a different kind starts burning inside of me.

That's when the whole world around us disappears. There's no duck. No goat. Nothing but me and Landry, and there's only one thing on my mind. It's like it's the only thing I can think of.

"I need you," I pant, my breaths coming short and fast now.

His brows furrow as he lifts his head and looks deep into my eyes. "What?"

Grabbing hold of his shoulders, I pull him down, gliding my hands to his face and framing his jaw as I jerk his lips to mine. "I'm hot all over and it's like I'm on fire. I need you, Landry."

I see the moment it not only registers with him, but his own body takes over, almost like he cannot stop himself.

"Shit. Why. can't. I. stop," he grinds out as he rolls his hips against mine, making my body arch off the ground to get closer to him.

"Don't stop, Lan."

"Can't anyway," he rasps as he moves his hips again, his hard length delivering delicious torture over the seam of my jeans.

His breathing is hot and heavy as he plunges his tongue between my lips, devouring my mouth like he's starving and I'm his only meal. Not that I can talk, my entire body feels like it's on fire and that Landry is the only thing that can help save me. I've never felt like this before. It's like I can't get close enough, can't kiss him enough. I wanna climb inside his skin and never come out again.

Landry drags his lips over my jaw and down to my throat, burying his face there as he stills and we both try to catch our breath.

"As much as this kills me to say, we need to stop."

I sigh because I don't want to and I can tell he doesn't either. But he's right. We're on the dirt ground out in the open, next to a *barn* and we were seconds from ripping our clothes off and jumping from *whoa* to *go*. *Not that I'd be opposed to a little more than whoa, and a level below go.*

I sigh and slowly rub my hands over his shirt-covered shoulders. "Yeah..." I whisper.

He lifts his head, bracing his arms on either side of my head as he looks down at me with a devilish grin. His hair is poking in all directions thanks to my hands running through it, and his eyes are still full of lust and want. It's a very nice look on an already handsome cowboy, that's for sure. "If you didn't know it already, I really like you," he says, making my heart sigh and my soul soar.

"I really like you too. And just so you know, I really enjoyed *that* too. Feel free to do that again any time," I whisper, leaning my chin up so that I can brush my lips against his again. "Just behind closed doors next time. Can't be scandalizing any more farm animals."

His answering grin morphs into a frown. "Nelly's not here though. She's supposed to be in her—"

Then Landry jolts, causing him to turn his head to look behind us.

"Baaa!"

Then I feel my shoe slip off. Then my sock. Followed by a "Quack" and

another "Baaaa" and that's when we realize that not only is Nelly cute, but she's also easily led astray by a certain duck. And that can only spell trouble.

LANDRY

It's been two weeks since Star came to the ranch and today will be the first time I see the Sallys again. Not that I haven't seen Star many times since then though because if I thought I had a mild obsession with her before the soulmate showdown, it's worse now that we're getting closer. I still can't stop touching her, but we've managed to keep our mini makeout sessions away from dirt floors and kitchen counters—so far, anyway. *No promises in future though.*

We meet for lunch whenever I can make it into town. Red and Rhett are getting used to me offering to go to the supply shop or the grocery store. They don't say no, instead they just eye me knowingly and tell me to say Hi to Star.

When our lunches aren't at the diner where I *know* we're being watched like we're the hottest news in town, we hole up in her shop, putting the closed sign up and just cuddling and talking. I tell her about Nelly's latest antics and Star fills me in about the Sallys and all the town gossip that's *not* about the two of us. She's also introduced me to a few more of her unique smoothies—making her version of the diner's Acai and coconut milk concoction, as well as a green kale, wheatgrass, and banana drink that I swear looked more like sewerage than a beverage. Luckily, it has ended up being one of my favorites.

Today I'm helping Star with the Happy Auras stall at the Spring Haven Winter Fair. It's a long-held town tradition, but it's the first year that I'll be working it rather than just wandering around with my brothers, trying all the free food samples and trying to outdo each other at all the fair games. That's not to say I don't plan on retaining my title of the best water pistol shooting

champion for the third year in a row. But that'll have to wait until later because first I have to work out how to get this damn stall tent to stay put inside the church hall.

“Do you have the plastic feet for this?” I ask over my shoulder, but instead of Star standing behind me, I find the Sallys—yes, all four of them—inspecting my behind.

“Mmm hmm,” Aggie says, not hiding her gawking.

“Now I see this whole soulmate thing,” Dottie remarks.

I quickly get to my feet to face the women—and protect my backside. “Good morning, ladies,” I say before focusing on Star’s grandmother. “Miss Ruth.”

“Hello, Landry. And how are you today?”

“I’m good, Miss Ruth. And you?”

“I’m good too. But you’re still in the “to be determined” category, young man,” she says. She tries to stay serious and stern, but Star’s told me that under that tough exterior, she’s a big ol’ softy.

I stand, turning my ogled-at butt away from them. “It’s lovely to see you, Miss Ruth, Miss Agnes, Miss Frances, and Miss Dorothy.”

“So polite,” Dottie murmurs.

“Nice to see you here to help our Starchild,” Agnes says.

“Wouldn’t wanna be doing anything else, Miss Agnes. I’m at Star’s service today. She’s the boss.”

“As it should be,” Ruth replies.

“Gramma... what are you doing?” Star asks with obvious amusement as she appears at my side.

“Oh nothing, child. We’re just sayin’ to Landry here how great it is to see him at the fair this year.”

“Gramma, Landry’s here every year.”

“Well, yes. But not helping with the stalls or selling their wares,” she replies.

“Bit hard to sell a cow at a winter fair, ma’am,” I reply, earning a snicker from Star who wraps her arm around my waist as I do the same to her shoulders. A public claiming. I was letting Star take the lead with that and I’m pleased as punch she has done it. Because now I don’t have to even think about it.

I know Star’s mine and she’s given me every indication that I’m hers, and now she’s putting it out there for the town to see at one of the most attended

events on the Spring Haven calendar. *Anyone would think she really likes me.*

"What has you smilin' like that, Lan?" I turn to see Rhett, Red, and Wyatt walking our way.

All three men—well Wyatt *almost* being one—tip their hats to the Sallys as a way of saying hello.

Star lifts onto her toes to bring her mouth to my ear while the others talk amongst themselves. "I spotted your family arrivin' and was worried Gramma would come to interrogate you about why I was late home last night, so I figured a distraction was necessary." She finishes with a soft kiss on my neck.

I *was* late getting Star back home last night, but it's not because we were up to no good. It's because we fell asleep after having an eighties movie night at the ranch house with everyone. By the time I'd woken up from an impromptu nap on the couch, it was nearly midnight, and from Gramma's questions, I *know* she was either still awake or had *someone* on the lookout for us.

Looking down at Star, my eyes run a line from her lips up to her all-knowing, lustful gaze. The physical pull between us keeps getting stronger. And as every day passes, I have no doubt in my mind that Star is the only woman I want to spend the rest of my days with. I just don't want to take that final step to complete the call until I'm sure she's as ready as I am.

"Did you tell her *why* we were late?"

"Yep," she says, her lips pursing on the p. "But for some reason, they think we were out necking at the highway lookout"

"I would never," I gasp dramatically, getting everyone's attention,

"You would never *what*, Landry Graham?" Frances asks with an arched silver brow and twitching lips. I don't dare chance a look at Red and Rhett because I know they'll make me crack and soon I'll be laughing like Star is about to do.

"Nothing, Miss Frances," I say, sounding just like I did back at school when Toby and I would get caught doing something we shouldn't.

Star bites her lip, her gaze dancing with mirth.

"You're tryin' to get me in trouble with the Sallys, aren't ya?" I whisper.

"Who me? Well I never," she replies, accentuating her twang.

"You know... we could always go necking after the fair tonight," I murmur for her ears only.

"Oh yeah?" Her voice is that sexy breathy rasp that never fails to get my

blood pumping in all the right directions.

"Landry," Gramma calls out, grabbing everyone's attention, but most importantly mine. "We're havin' roast duck this week. Ben the Butcher found one for me." I stand there like I've been struck mute, my mouth flapping open like a storm door in a squall. Because there's no way she could've... I look at Red and Rhett who are staring right back at me, their expressions unreadable. *Gramma wouldn't do anything to Duck Norris... that's just crazy talk. Right?*

"A duck?" I squeak out, my throat tightening. "Where did you... um... where did you say this duck was from again?"

That's when Starchild's grandmother proves she's got my number and that she's more than prepared to call it. "Do you like duck, Landry?"

The Sallys are watching me like hawks, waiting for the first sign of weakness so that they can zero in for the kill.

I clear my throat, trying to regain my composure. "Uh, yes, ma'am. I love duck."

"Good," she says with a smile. "Then you'll be joining us for dinner tomorrow."

I nod, and soon they make their goodbyes with Red and Rhett promising to call by later.

Maybe I'm being tricked, or maybe I'm a lamb being led to slaughter, but I'm not going to cower to Gramma Ruth or the rest of the Sallys. I'm standing strong for Star and the mountain's call. If it's important to Star's grandmother then it's important to Star, which makes it important to me. I'll sit at Gramma's table and withstand whatever the older woman wants to throw at me. Who knows, I might surprise her and win her over.

"It's just dinner, Lan. We'll get through it. Just don't tell Duck Norris. He might take it as a declaration of war," Star says once we're alone again.

I snort and quickly cover my mouth to stifle my laughter, loving the dazzling smile that lights up her beautiful face. "I didn't think she'd serve me up our own duck."

She looks over to where the Sallys are standing at a fresh fruit stall at the other end of the large room. "Hmm. A bit of a coincidence though."

"Just a bit."

"Were *these* what you were looking for to finish the tent?" she asks, holding up a set of plastic feet.

"Yep. That's all that I need. Now I can get back to work since I was interrupted." I lean and drop my voice to a whisper. "It's my first day workin'

with the boss. I want to make a good impression."

"Yes, you do, but I'll let you in on a little secret," she says, whispering back.

"What's that?"

She kisses my cheek and drops back down with a grin. "You've already won the boss over."

And wouldn't you know it, for the rest of the day, and the next, there isn't anything or anyone that can wipe the goofy grin I'm wearing off my face.

Then again, I'm finding it's something I do a lot whenever I'm around my One.

I knock on Gramma Ruth's door with a bottle of wine in one hand—a red to go with the duck—and two bunches of daisies in the other. One is pink for Star, the other purple for her grandmother. I called a flower stall on the side of the highway and asked the owner which color represented peace and unity, and purple was the closest fit.

Am I even hiding the fact that I'm trying to make a good impression? Not at all.

Gramma Ruth opens the door with an unreadable expression. Except when she sees the flowers in my hand her face slowly brightens with both surprise and a wry smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Well, well, well," she says, taking in the wine and flowers. "You're certainly pulling out all the stops, young man."

I grin, feeling a little sheepish. "I was taught to never turn up for dinner empty-handed."

She nods approvingly. "Mmm, hmm. Your mother was always big on manners. Well, come on then. I hope you weren't thinkin' of standin' outside all night."

"No, ma'am."

She puts her hand on my forearm. "I think we're past the Ruth and ma'am stage, Landry Graham. If you're gonna be part of the family, I think you should start callin' me Gramma like Star does."

"Um... OK," I stutter, admittedly a bit suspicious about the change in Gramma's mood toward me. With the investigating and following me around,

I figured I wasn't high on her approval list. I wonder what's changed since yesterday.

"C'mon now," she says as I slip my boots off and leave them by the door. "Star's been asking about you all day."

"I have not!" I hear from the kitchen.

"Don't lie to your grandmother, child," Gramma calls back, making me chuckle as I follow her into the house, my heart racing at seeing Star again.

We had a fantastic day at the winter fair yesterday. It was so inspiring to see Star do what she loves, talking to all the townsfolk and sharing her wares with everyone that came by the stall. It gave me visions of what our future might look like—her working in town at her store, maybe having an office and craft room in our dream house where she can channel all of that creative energy of hers. If I didn't think she was amazing already, seeing her do her thing yesterday and make people smile just by shining her light on them would've done it.

"Hi," the woman in question says as Gramma leads me to the kitchen, the smell of roasted duck wafts through the air, making my mouth water. A pang of guilt hits me as I think back to Duck Norris. Surely he won't *know*, right? He's a smart bird but it's not like he has psychic abilities...

I hold out the bouquet of pink daisies for my One, not hesitating before pulling her in for a hug and kissing her cheek. "Hi," I whisper before stepping back. I am a gentleman after all, and we *are* standing in her grandmother's kitchen.

A glance in Gramma's direction shows I did the right thing, but the twinkle in her eyes tells me she *knows* all about my thought process. "Dinner's ready so if you two want to move through to the dining room, I'll bring it out."

"Gramma," I say, getting used to the new name. "How about *you* go sit down and Star and I can bring in the dishes along with the wine."

if I hadn't witnessed it myself, I wouldn't have believed it possible, but Ruth actually blushes as she nods before walking out of the room. Although I should've known she'd always be one to have the last word. "Don't think I don't know what you're plannin' on doin' in there, Landry Graham. No neckin' my granddaughter in my kitchen."

Star giggles, bumping me playfully with her hip as she grabs the plates and I pick up the dish with the roast duck that's waiting to be carved along with mashed potato, what looks like honeyed carrots, and green beans.

Once everything is laid out on the table and I've poured the wine for everyone, I feel the tension between Gramma Ruth and me slowly dissipating. She even passes me the mashed potatoes without comment.

"So, Landry," Gramma Ruth starts. "Did you enjoy yourself at the fair yesterday?"

"I did, Miss Ru—" I stop when she shoots an amused glare my way. "Gramma." I earn a nod which just makes me smirk. "Star's very talented."

"Yes. And driven too," she adds, lifting her wineglass to her lips.

I nod, taking a bite of the succulent duck. "Her ambition is one of the things that I like most about her."

"Really?" Gramma says. "Now that *is* good to hear."

Star blushes at the praise, but her eyes sparkle with happiness. "I love what I do," she says with a small smile. "It's what makes me happy."

"And that's all that matters," Gramma Ruth says, her voice softening. "It's important to find something you love and do it every day. Just as much as it is to have a supportive partner, a soulmate that puts your happiness and fulfillment ahead of his own." I feel Star's hand slide onto my thigh, her fingers flexing against the denim of my jeans as I meet the old woman's eyes.

"Gramma, I wouldn't ever want Star to change her life or give up what she loves. Happy Aura's is her dream and I know she works hard for it. Whatever happens in our future, you can trust that I'd never ask or expect Star to give up her dream. All I want to do is love her and be loved by her, and for us to create a beautiful life together."

The room falls so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Then the silence is broken with the sweet and until now unheard sound of Gramma Ruth laughing with glee. "That, right there, is exactly what I was hopin' to hear, young Landry. And now I can tell you what I've known all along. You're the perfect soulmate for my Star."

I stare at the woman who everyone in town sees as the leader of the Sunday School Sallys, my mouth wide open as speech evades me.

A glance at Star tells me she's feeling the same way. "Gramma! You've approved of Landry all along?" she shrieks.

"Well, of course. They're a good, hardworkin' family—him, his brothers and young Red." I chuckle at that because I can't remember the last time someone called the forty-eight year old Red 'young.'

"But you investigated him. You *followed* him. You had him so paranoid he thought something untoward was goin' on," Star continues.

To her credit, Gramma just grins and gives us a little "oh well" shrug. "One can never make things too easy for these rugged rancher cowboys. They can get easy with just a look and a smirk. Have you *seen* his butt in those jeans?" She then renders me speechless by giving Star a thumbs up.

Star splutters out a giggle, staring at me while doing it and making me smile.

"Gramma!"

"What? I may be old, child, but I can see a good butt from a mile away."

"I guess I should say thank you for complimenting my rear end," I reply, struggling not to laugh again. "And I hope you know you're welcome to come visit the ranch whenever you want to, Gramma," I say. "I can come into town and get you and the rest of the Sallys any time."

She winks at me. "It's a date, young man. Now, let's not let the meal get too cold. I know you're a growing boy. And eat your greens too."

"Yes, Gramma," I snicker.

Sneaking a glance at Star I find her soft big eyes looking right back at me. "I really *really* like you," she says quietly.

"I really really like you too."

I should've known that Gramma giving me her approval wouldn't be the only surprise she'd spring on us. At least this next one is a hell of a lot sweeter.

As soon as dinner is finished and Star and I have cleared the plates away and done the dishes, Gramma calls us into the living room where she retired after leaving the table.

We sit down on the couch, Star snuggled into my side as Gramma Ruth reaches for a photo album on the coffee table. "I want to show you something," she says, flipping through the pages until she comes to a photo of a young couple on their wedding day. "This is your granddaddy and me." Gramma points to the photo. "We were the same age as you two when we got married."

I feel Star's hand tighten in mine as we both study the photo, the love between the couple in the picture almost palpable. "We had our ups and downs, but we were in love until the day he died," Gramma Ruth continues, her voice softening. "And I want you two to have the same kind of love, the kind that lasts a lifetime. I know you haven't come together most conventionally. It's not every day you get chosen to be together by a mountain spirit. But from what I've read about the mountain's call, and from

the couples I've seen that she's brought together, she doesn't choose wrong and there's always a reason she chooses two people to be with one another."

I meet Star's eyes and I know we're both thinking the same thing. We want that kind of love, one that withstands the test of time. The type you *know* to the depths of your soul that you'll have forever.

Gramma Ruth's words linger in the air, filling the room with a sense of warmth and hope. For a moment, we all sit in silence, lost in our own thoughts. Then, Star takes a deep breath and speaks up.

"Gramma, I know you said that Landry and I haven't come together under normal circumstances, but I want you to know that now that I've gotten to know Landry and seen the honest-to-goodness man he is, I've never felt so sure about anything in my life. I trust him and I hope he trusts me."

"I do, babe."

She smiles at me and snuggles in closer. "I may not be able to see what's coming up for me like I used to, but I know that whatever *does* happen, I'll get through it because I'll have him by my side."

My heart swells with love and gratitude for the incredible woman by my side. I was pretty sure I was falling for her and falling hard, but after tonight, I know it to be true. I'm in love with Starchild. I may have already been falling for her before I got to know her but I'm starting to think that my soul knew first. And if that's true, maybe the mountain was working on our Call long before we realized.

Gramma Ruth smiles at us, her eyes shining with pride and affection. "Good. Now, time for some Jeopardy. You like jeopardy don't you, Landry? Because if you don't, I might have to take back my approval. No man can be with my Starchild if he doesn't like *Jeopardy*."

I grin and nod my head. "Put it on, Gramma. And while you're doin' that, how about I go top up your wine before I impress you with just how *much* I like Jeopardy."

She grins up at me as I take her glass from her. "You'll do, Landry Graham. You'll do."

STARCHILD

Tonight we're all going to celebrate a big win for Bull Mountain Ranch after Landry and his family got the good news that six of their "chosen ones" have been confirmed to be pregnant. This means that the first calves for the Ranch's bull stud will arrive later this year.

That's not all Landry and I are going to be celebrating tonight though because when he picked me up from my house, I made a point of putting my overnight bag in the back. When he raised a single brow at me in that sexy way that he does, I just smiled and gave him a jaunty wink before announcing I was having a sleepover with my girl, Nelly. The heated grin I got told me all I needed to know about the direction my night would go in. Which is probably why he hasn't left my side ever since we arrived at the tavern.

As we sit at the bar, Landry's hand rests possessively on my thigh, his fingers tracing circles on the denim fabric of my shorts. I can feel his hot breath on my neck as he leans in to whisper in my ear, "You gonna be my dance partner later?"

I jerk back and send him a blank look. "But I don't dance."

He stares at me wide-eyed, his mouth dropping open like I've just shocked him. All part of the plan. "That's OK. I can teach you," he says, quickly recovering.

I shrug and return to the fruity cocktail Cora ordered for us, locking eyes with him. I lift it to my lips and take a slow measured sip, loving the way his nostrils flare and his gaze heats. "Or maybe, I've already got a full dance card."

He laughs and shakes his head. "You had me goin' there for a minute."

Bouncing a shoulder, I shoot him a smirk. "Gotta keep my man on his toes. Can't make it too easy for him."

Watching Landry chuckle while pulling me close and holding me tight may just be one of my new favorite things.

As the night wears on, our group gets bigger, Toby and Austin bringing over some tourists passing through town after they whooped their butts at pool. That means we've had to move to the front corner of the bar, taking up several tables and chairs.

Red stands up, his presence commanding our attention.

"Before y'all get too randy and rowdy."

"Speak for yourself, Red," Toby hollers, earning a round of laughter.

"Yeah. Yeah, Tobes. You'll keep. Don't forget it's your turn to muck out the Bull's paddock tomorrow."

"What?" he replies. "We don't muck out paddocks. It's God's fertilizer."

"We do now," Red quips with a wink before turning his attention to the rest of us.

"Tonight is about celebratin' what Rhett, Austin, Toby, Landry, Colt, Wyatt and myself have been workin' toward ever since we signed the papers to take over Bull Mountain Ranch. We wanted to give back to the land and return the mountain and the ranch to what it used to be. What it should be. And I like to think we've made good inroads toward achievin' that."

"Here, here," Landry calls out, getting some hollers of agreement in reply.

"Then we wanted to give back to the rodeo and especially the animals that work just as hard as the workers and the competitors by lettin' them live their best life after retirement."

"By sowin' their wild oats far and wide with all the willin' heifers," one of the old timers at the bar yells.

Red's lips tug up. "Somethin' like that. Except we're choosin' the willin' heifers for them." *A bit like the mountain's call*, I think to myself

As the night goes on and everyone starts to let loose, fueled by rounds of beer and shots that the Graham brothers seem to keep supplying, Landry and I move to the dance floor. The live band plays "Die a Happy Man" by Thomas Rhett as we press up against each other, his body flush against mine as we move to the beat.

"So you can dance," he murmurs as his bearded cheek presses against mine.

"Hmm. Maybe you're just a good dance partner," I whisper.

"Never been called that before but from you, I'll take it."

I smile, turning to kiss his cheek, happy just to be close to him, our heartbeats thumping in sync.

"I could die a happy man," he croons in my ear, and just like that, Landry Graham lets me see another side of him.

I pull back with a slow-growing smile. "You've been holdin' out on me," I say, playfully hitting his chest.

"With what?"

"You can sing!"

His cheeks pink and I remember just how adorable that one habit of his is. Not that I'd ever call him adorable out loud. He's a big, gruff rancher cowboy, but I love that he lets me see everything beneath the surface too.

"It's nothin'," he mutters, pulling me in again.

I turn so my lips brush against his ear. "Maybe you can sing me to sleep tonight." I don't miss the rumbling groan that passes his lips or the way his arm around my back flexes.

That's when Landry shows me another side of him that really makes me happy. "If our activities before we sleep don't leave you exhausted, then I'll sing you to sleep. But babe, I don't think you'll be needin' any help in that department tonight."

After the song ends and especially following Landry's promise of what's to come later, I'm not sure who ends up leading who. All I know is that we make quick work of saying our goodbyes before rushing out to the truck and heading back toward the ranch.

Except Landry seems to have other ideas, pulling into the highway lookout about ten minutes out of town. And since most of the town seemed to be at the Secret Cow tonight, the place is deserted. Which is probably a good thing because as soon as Landry turns off the engine, he reaches over and pulls me in for a hard and hungry kiss.

Our hands are everywhere, his sliding under my top to run over my stomach, then up to cup my breasts through my bra. I moan into his mouth as I glide my fingers under his shirt to smooth over the warm skin of his back, my heart punching in my chest and my entire body lighting up under his touch. It's the same hunger I felt outside the barn, I can't get enough and from the feel of Landry's hungered kisses and raspy groans, he's feeling the same way.

I pull away for a moment, gasping for air, as we stare at each other, my

tongue running over my swollen lips as I look over his roughed-up features, my body moving all on its own as if gravitating toward him.

"Just need a taste. Can't think, can't concentrate, can't drive till I get a taste of you." He moves his seat back before pulling me over to straddle his lap, my fingers sliding into his hair, holding him in place as I crush my lips to his. He makes quick work of opening my jeans, his hand flattening as he delves inside, his thumb stroking between my thighs like a man on a mission.

"Feels so good," I moan as I arch into his touch, my body burning from the inside out. I bury my face in his neck, kissing and licking his skin, just breathing him in as I roll my hips against his hand and feeling his hard length pressing against me.

"So damn hot. So beautiful. The sounds you make," he murmurs, as if he's talking in tongues but it's the most beautiful sound. I grab his jaw and kiss him deep, our tongues tangling together in a dance that's ours and ours alone. My thighs tensing, my body coiling tight, my brain clearing of anything and everything except what he's giving me. Stroke after stroke, he takes me higher and higher, but when he slowly pushes first one and then two fingers inside of me, I ignite, riding his hand as we breathe each other's air, his guttural groans turning me on so much I start bucking against him, chasing the climax that I know only he can give me.

"Wanna hear you, Star. Wanna have your moans ringin' in my ears till I get home then I'll finally make you mine like you're always gonna be."

That's my downfall, and with one last roll of my hips and thrust of his fingers against me, I let myself go.

"Lan," I cry out as wave after wave of pleasure rocks my entire body from head to toe and everywhere in between.

He kisses me soft and slow as he brings me back down to earth, taking care of me the way he always does. He fixes my jeans and rights my shirt before cuddling me close in his arms as our breaths slowly turn from hard and fast to soft and slow.

"That's a whole lot more than neckin', Lan," I say with a giggle.

His arms tighten around me. "A whole lot better too. But let's get home so that I can see if I can best it."

I sit up so that I can look him straight in the eye, framing his face in my hands so that I know I have his full attention, suddenly filled with an overwhelming need to tell him just how much he means to me.

"I love you, Landry Graham. And that's not because we're meant to be

together or because of some prophecy. It's because of you," I say with a flex of my fingers. "It's all because of you."

He huffs out a huge sigh of relief and a breathtakingly handsome smile takes over his face. "I love you too. Think I have since the moment I first caught sight of you through the shop window."

"I'm glad you finally stepped inside then."

"Me too."

This time when we kiss, it's soft and slow, a promise of what's to come and a thank you for what's been. It's everything.

"Lan," I whisper against his lips as we slowly pull apart.

"Yeah, babe?"

"Take me home and make me yours."

"With pleasure."

LANDRY

My body is still vibrating as I pull the truck to a stop outside the bunkhouse, my hand squeezing Star's on the seat between us where we've held on to each other for the entire drive home. Hearing her cry out my name in pleasure as I showed her just how much she means to me, has cemented everything. Star is—and always will be—the woman for me. And soon, she'll be mine in all ways just as I'll be hers.

“Wait there, I'll help you out,” I say, lifting her knuckles to my lips before reluctantly letting her go and exiting the truck, making my way around to the passenger side and grabbing her overnight bag. When I open her door, she grins down at me, taking my offered hand and following me as we walk toward the bunkhouse.

“You'll have to excuse the accommodations. It's Toby and me in the bunkhouse for now. Austin lives in Rhett's old cabin,” I ramble.

Star pulls me to a stop, tugging on my arm to turn me to face her, her eyes soft and warm as they sparkle in the moonlight. “Lan, you could sleep in a tent and I'd still wanna be lyin' next to you tonight. OK?”

My heart swells with love and admiration for this woman standing in front of me. Without a word, I pull her close, savoring the feel of her body against mine. I lean down and capture her soft lips with mine, kissing her deeply and passionately, pouring all my emotions and love into the kiss.

She moans softly into my mouth as her hands tangle in my hair, pulling me close. It's so good it takes me a moment to pull away, my breath coming in short gasps when I do.

“Come on,” I say, taking her hand and leading her inside the bunkhouse

and toward my room at the back of the building.

Stepping inside, I try to imagine it from her eyes. The room is dimly lit, a night light covering the area in a muted glow. My double-sized bed is pushed against the wall, with a handmade nightstand Austin made for me a few years back next to it. Then there's a matching dresser against the front wall, and a rug on the ground to save my feet from the cold concrete floor in the mornings.

"It's not much, but it's home," I explain.

Suddenly I want to give her more than this bunkhouse bedroom. I want to give her a home that's ours and ours alone. A sanctuary where she can light her incense and do her readings and live the very best life I can give her. I want her to have anything she could ever want and need. I want to give her everything.

"It's lovely, Lan." She walks over to the smooth bed frame, running her small dainty hands over the wood. "It's very *you*. Understated but masculine, strong, but not too much... it's perfect."

My throat grows tight in the same way my body has been all night and it takes everything in me not to forget my responsibilities and lose myself in this woman.

"I have to go check in on Nelly and make sure she's settled. If you wanna stay here and make yourself comfortable, I'll be right back." Star's pursed lips and dancing gaze makes it register what I just said. I groan and drop my head. "Damn. I didn't mean it like—"

She giggles and lifts her hands to frame my jaw, her eyes locking with mine. "I knew what you meant. Just take a breath, Lan. I promise I ain't goin' nowhere till mornin'. Go check on your Nelly and I'll be right here when you come back. And Lan, I'll make *sure* to get comfortable for you."

Unable to resist another taste, I give her a slow, measured kiss that quickly takes on a life of its own, one that gets my body all riled up *far* too soon for my liking. I have plans for my One tonight, and nothing and no one is going to stop us from having an unforgettable time.

Pulling away again takes every bit of willpower I have, and I barely make it outside without turning back around again.

I walk—OK, jog—down the dirt path toward the main house. The ranch is calm and quiet, the cattle quiet for once, the night sky clear and filled with stars, the full moon illuminating the night sky as it sits above the mountain's twin peaks.

Bull Mountain Ranch is a land rich in history. She's been mistreated and downtrodden but together with my family—by blood and found—we're bringing her back to her beautiful best, along with the mountain that stands tall over it, protecting it and us alike.

It's my home. It's where I belong. It's where my heart longs to be and it's also where I hope to live and grow old with Starchild at my side. Completing the call with her tonight is just one step toward our long and happy future. One where I'll cherish and love her for the rest of our lives together.

After quickly checking on Nelly who's adorably sleepy and barely nudges my hand when I ruffle her fur, I top up her water for the night before making my way back to the bunkhouse, smiling to myself when I hear the shower going in the bathroom.

I strip off as I walk, stepping inside the steam-filled room and dropping my shirt to the ground, getting my first look at Star's mouth-wateringly bare curves as she stands under the water. She turns her head and shoots me a soft sensual smile, looking me up and down and nodding to my jeans. "Hope you're not gonna keep me waitin', Lan," she says, her voice rough with the same lust I'm feeling just looking at her.

I don't hesitate for a single second, peeling off the rest of my clothes and not caring where they land before I step into the shower to join her.

The hot water cascades over our heads, and I moan as I feel the heat penetrate my skin. I wrap my arms around her body, pulling her close and pressing my lips against the back of her neck. She shivers in my arms, and I take that as a sign to continue, dragging my lips over her wet skin to pepper kisses over her collarbone. My hands roam over her soapy skin, relishing every inch of her body that I touch and loving the way she arches into me, silently begging me for more.

I turn her around so that we're facing each other, and slowly take in the full sight of her naked bare body, my own body trembling with need as she melts against me, pressing her hips against my straining hard length.

Gliding my hands around her waist, I hold her to me, dipping my head to take her mouth in a slow, building kiss, swallowing her moans and whimpers, my fingers exploring her skin and sliding up between us to cup her breasts.

She loops her hands up over my shoulders, tangling her fingers in my hair and holding me in place while she nips and licks at my lips, smiling against me as we rock and writhe against each other.

"I've wanted this for so long," I murmur as she kisses her way down my

throat.

Pulling her mouth back up to mine, I thrust my tongue between her lips, loving the way she gives herself over to me but knowing that if we don't slow down soon, I'll be taking her against the wall of the shower and there'll be nothing and nobody that could stop me.

"Let's get cleaned up," I say as I pull back slightly to grab some body wash, dragging my gaze over her and watching my hands as they rub over her soft-as-silk skin, every inch of her calling to me.

My resolve to take this slow is threatened again when she washes me, her fingers tracing over the lines of my muscles and down my chest to wrap around me, her grip firm as she strokes me from base to tip. I brace my arms against the wall as she lifts her face up to mine. Our lips touch and we just breathe each other in as she drives me crazy with pleasure.

Driven by an overwhelming need to take care of her—and not end this night earlier than intended—I shut off the water and step out, grabbing a towel and drying her *thoroughly*, until she's panting. Her pupils are blown, her lips swollen from our kisses, and my body throbs with the need to claim her and do it now.

Tying a towel around my waist, I lift her up, and with her legs wrapped around me and her mouth buried in the crook of my neck, I take her back to my bedroom, kicking the door shut behind us. I carry her to the bed and gently lay her down.

"You're so damn beautiful," I say reverently as I strip off the towel and lower myself over her, covering her body with mine. She cups my cheeks and guides my mouth to hers, her addictive kisses making my heart thump.

"I need you," she whimpers and with one last deep, probing kiss, I drag my lips down her body, shifting my weight as I circle my tongue over her breasts and lower still, planting myself between her legs and holding her wide as I taste her for the first time.

She lets out a gasp as I spread her open and suck against her swollen nub before slowly easing my fingers inside her. Pleasure and need courses through me, my skin tingling with desire as she pulses around me.

Her body tightens and arches up off the bed. Her hips roll up against my mouth and her grip on my shoulders hardens as I continue to give her exactly what we both want. The air around us is filled with her moans and cries and my groans as I feel a sense of calm and rightness wash over me when my entire being is screaming for more.

My tongue lashes over her, taking her higher and higher before her whole body tenses, her nails leaving marks I'll wear with pride as her pleasure consumes her and as she cries out my name again, I'm driven by an overwhelming need to bury myself inside of her.

So much so that my name is still on her lips as I surge back up the bed, covering her mouth with mine as I notch myself between her legs.

I lift my head and look her deep in her hooded, glazed eyes. "I love you, Star. You're the one I've been waitin' my whole life for."

She rests her palm against my cheek, a soft, sated smile playing on her lips. "I love you too, Lan. Make me yours. Make us complete," she murmurs, pulling me down to brush her lips to mine as I rock my hips and fill her to the hilt.

Our heavy breaths mingle as we rock and roll in perfect harmony, our tangled bodies moving together as one. She wraps her legs around my waist as I push inside of her again and again, both of us trembling from the intensity and depth of feeling. I don't even want this to end, but I'm so turned on, and she feels so damn good, so right, so *mine*, that I can't stop. I race toward my climax, that tell-tale tingle at the bottom of my spine right down to my balls tightening with the need to let go.

"Come with me, babe," I say through gritted teeth before kissing her again, burying myself hard and deep inside her as her muscles clench around me. She tears her lips from mine as she cries out her pleasure.

"Lannn," she moans as I plant myself as far as I can go and give myself over to the white-blinding light of my own orgasm. I slow my thrusts, bringing us both back down to earth as we breathe each other in.

I collapse onto the mattress beside her and pull her over into my arms, her body draped limply over mine as she rests her head on my shoulder.

"That was..." she rasps.

"Amazing," I cut in, my chest still heaving. "Perfect. You are perfect."

We lay there in silence for a little while as we drift back down from our incredible high. My lips, my skin, my entire core buzzes, a warm glow shrouding us as we hold on tightly to one another.

I turn my head to meet her eyes. "Love you, Star."

"Love you too," she murmurs sleepily as her eyes slowly close, her lips curved up into a satisfied smile.

And I should know, because that's the same way I fall asleep, happy and replete with my One exactly where she belongs, where she's always meant to

be. In my arms.

STARCHILD

A smile curves my lips when I slowly open my eyes to the morning sun peeking through the blinds of Landry's bedroom, memories of our wonderful night together flashing through my mind.

The man himself may not be next to me right now, but I know he'll be back soon because he made sure to kiss me goodbye before leaving for his morning chores a few hours ago.

I'm also smiling because waking up here on the ranch feels right. I don't feel out of place at all. The energy around the mountain and the land feels like home. I figure it's all connected to the Call, but it's also got everything to do with Landry as well.

Looking around the room, I take my time to get a good look around Landry's space in the light of day. From the photos hanging on the wall of Landry and his family, of the brothers and Red at the rodeo, and the Graham family hugging outside the ranch house with Bull Mountain standing tall behind them, all of it confirms that my man—my One—is the loyal family man he's shown himself to be.

And to think, a few months ago I was quick to dismiss the prophecy and the spirit's matchmaking that has ultimately brought us together. If there's one thing I've learned through all of this, it's that destiny is not something to fight. I was *meant* to fall in love with Landry. It was inevitable.

A soft thudding sound outside the bedroom door captures my attention. I barely have time to prop myself up on my elbows to peer over the bed when Duck Norris hops into the room, stopping next to the bed and staring at me.

"What are you doin', duck?" I say as if expecting the bird to answer.

“Quack!”

I sigh, shaking my head. “OK, buddy. I told you last time that I don’t speak duck.”

“Quaaaack.”

“Yeah, yeah. OK. I agree. You’re right. I’m wrong,” I reply, thankful that no one’s around to hear me having this ridiculous one-sided conversation.

“Quack.” This time he sounds happy that I’ve agreed with him. *What a strange bird.*

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and stand up, making my way over to where my clothes have been folded and left for me. Except the one-legged duck surprises me with his speed, hopping toward the pile and swiping my underwear, shaking them from side to side in his beak.

"Duck... I need those," I say, my voice laced with both an edge of warning and a bit of worry. I quickly scan the area and grab one of Landry’s plaid shirts, slipping it over my head to cover all the important bits. Duck Norris may be a duck, but he doesn’t get to see me naked.

"Quack!" he replies before moving to run—OK, *hop*—off with them.

"Duck Norris, *please!*" I beg.

He stops halfway to the door and tilts his head. "Quack?"

"If you could please leave me my underwear, I promise to not chase you through the bunk house," I say calmly, trying not to scare the animal.

That’s when I hear an indignant-sounding "Baaa" from somewhere else in the building followed seconds later by Nelly running into the room like her hooves are on fire.

"Quack"

"Baaaa"

"Quack. Quack."

I reach over to grab the blanket off Landry’s bed, holding it up to cover me fully. My head switches between the bickering animals because I have no other option right now. Do I chase and risk traumatizing them? Or worse, bring attention to the fact there are *more* clothes to steal?

I breathe a sigh of relief when I hear *human* footsteps heading my way, hopeful that whoever is coming to rescue you might be able to help.

"Nelly, what are you doin' in here?" A voice that is *not* Landry says. Not wanting anyone else to see me half dressed and being held hostage by a duck *and* a goat, I jump back on the bed and pull the covers up so that only my head is poking out.

"Hello?" I say just as Toby sticks his head in the doorway.

His lips twitch as he takes in the scene, looking from me to the goat and the duck who stand there in a ranch standoff. And yes, my underwear are *still* hanging from Duck Norris's beak.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" he asks.

"Me being tormented by a duck and Nelly comin' to my rescue?" I reply.

"Hmm," he says, rubbing his bearded jaw. "Are we sure it's not the other way around? Duck Norris here has developed a habit of leadin' others astray. I'm startin' to think he's creatin' himself an army of menaces."

"Quack! Quack! Quack!" the bird in question replies, as if agreeing with him.

"All I know is that I'm being held captive in bed and the duck has my underwear. So if you would be so kind as to—"

"Don't you worry, Star. I have a plan," Toby says, surveiling the room. "We just need to shut away the goat, and corner the bird, and then—"

"Appreciate the suggestion, Toby, but there's another problem. *Those* are my clothes, and I'm wearin' nothin' but Landry's shirt."

His eyes dance with amusement, quickly followed by recognition of my predicament. "Right. OK. So how about we do a two-prong attack."

"OK..."

"First, we get Nelly out of here. I'll take care of that," Toby says, and he quickly moves toward the goat, who looks up at him with big, innocent eyes. Toby whispers something in her ear. It's as if he's an animal whisperer because as soon as he picks her up, she nuzzles into his neck, and I see first-hand why Landry calls her a vampire goat.

"Dammit, Nells. You've gotta quit *doin'* that," Toby mutters, carrying the goat kid out of the room. I hear a door shut before he reappears, leaving us to deal with the homely-looking duck.

"So Nelly is shut up in my bedroom. Now we just have to corner Duck Norris."

"How do we do that?" I ask, still under the covers.

Toby grins. "We'll use his one weakness. Food."

With that, Toby leaves the room again briefly before coming back with a muffin.

"Do you just have baked goods lyin' around in wait for these kinds of *situations*?" I ask, waving my hand his way.

He takes a bite out of the muffin, leaving a trail of crumbs all over his

short-kept beard before shooting me a messy grin. "I do when we have baked-good lovin' ducks hangin' around causin' havoc. Not that we've had any panty-stealing incidents as yet. This is a first."

He drops down into a crouch and holds out the muffin for Duck Norris to see, the bird starts quacking excitedly and hopping up and down.

"Quack!"

"Yes, Dilbert Dickward Duck Norris," he says, confusing me with the extended name. *How many ways can you name a duck? Plenty it seems.* "You want some of this? You know what you've gotta do then." Toby goes to take another bite which spurns the bird into action, my underwear all but forgotten as it drops to the floor and the duck hops over to snatch the muffin out of Toby's outstretched hands.

"Ha!" Toby exclaims, quickly stepping out of the duck's way as we both watch the menacing animal hop out of the room with the muffin jammed in its mouth, the thuds getting further and further away as he leaves.

"Thank you," I say, glancing from the offending item on the floor before moving my gaze back to Toby's grinning face.

"My job is done here. I'll let you get dressed. Landry's on his way to bring you to the ranch house for breakfast. Feel free to tell him I'm your new hero. He'll love that," he replies just as there's a crash next door.

I giggle and shake my head. "I don't think he'll like *that*," I say, nodding toward the wall.

"Dammit. That goat is so impressionable," he mutters before giving me a wave and shutting the bedroom door, giving me some much-needed privacy.

There's definitely no way you can say that living on this ranch wouldn't be interesting, I think to myself as I quickly jump out of bed and get dressed, stopping dead when I realize that I'm imagining a life here on the ranch with Landry.

And I'm still smiling about that as Landry walks into the bedroom a few minutes later with a puzzled look on his face.

"Why is Toby tellin' me he's your hero?" he asks.

I giggle and cross the room to snuggle into his waiting arms. "I don't think you'd believe me if I told you."

"Try me, babe. Because if the mutterin's he was making as he took Nelly back to the barn is anythin' to go by, I'm thinkin' my goat has been led astray again."

"Oh yes. She bit his neck *and* she's bein' corrupted by your duck."

He groans before a chuckle escapes him. "That's what I was worried about," he replies before staring down at me with his warm brown eyes. "Just another fun day at Bull Mountain Ranch."

"If this is your life, I'm not sure who's more entertainin'—the animals here or the Sallys and their schemin'," I muse.

"Probably about even, I reckon."

I grin up at him. "Toby thinks Duck Norris is creatin' an animal army."

"Not sure that he's wrong."

"He tried to steal my underwear," expecting any other response other than Landry laughing.

"Don't blame him. They're nice underwear."

"Landry!" I shriek, my eyes bugging out at him.

"What? He says with a laugh before simmering to a smile as he lowers his lips to mine. "Mornin', beautiful."

I melt against him. "Good mornin'."

"You ready for breakfast?"

"Yes please, someone had me workin' up an appetite last night."

Tilting my head, I shoot him a teasing grin. "Hmm, maybe that someone can have you working off your breakfast too."

"Maybe..."

And with one last hot and heavy, un-PG kiss, Landry leads me out of the bunkhouse before we forget about eating all together.

LANDRY

Since work on a ranch is never done, it's all hands on deck today for replanting on the side of the mountain. So once all the daily chores are done and and we've checked in on the pregnant heifers, we pack up two Gators with trailers full of Quaking Aspen seedlings and head up the slopes.

I've even brought Nelly with us. She may be a lot bigger than those months ago when Toby and I found her, but she's still very much my shadow. She follows me everywhere, and if not me or Star, then Toby is her next favorite.

Giving her a pat, I stare at the bright pink collar around her neck. Star made it for her and we put it on yesterday. There's a small Amethyst in the center and although I was initially unsure about giving my pet goat a crystal to wear, Star assured me that it would bring protection and ward off negative energy. If nothing else, I figure it might stop Duck Norris from corrupting my little goat girl.

After a good few hours of back breaking work, Rhett announces it's time for lunch and I make sure I'm first to get some food before Toby comes along and eats it all. Topping up my travel mug with some of the strong cowboy brew that we've all become addicted to since Lee showed us how to make it. She learned from her Aunt Ellie at Eagle Mountain and without the caffeinated nectar of the gods, I'm sure we wouldn't get nearly as much work done on hard days like this.

The coffee is hot and strong and warms me up from the inside out as I take a long sip and look out over the view halfway up the Western side. We still have a long way to go in bringing the mountain back to her lush beauty,

but after years of neglect and misuse by the ranch's previous owners, seeing the progress we've made in just a few short years is one of the most rewarding things we've ever done.

As we eat our lunch of egg salad sandwiches and vanilla pound cake that Austin packed up for us, we all joke and laugh, ribbing each other and laughing as Toby tells us all about him getting shot down by a bunch of traveling tourists passin' through town.

"I thought for sure I'd be able to get at least *one* of them for a dance," he says.

Austin struggles to stop snickering for long enough to speak. "Except all they wanted to do was play pool and score free drinks. Turns out they were all married bar one, and it was her *Bachelorette* party."

Toby groans, burying his face in his hands. "How was I to know? I'd never flirt with a married lady. That's not my style." It's true, Toby is one of the most up-front, honest men I've ever met, but it's still funny that he got taken for a ride by a bunch of traveling women looking for a cheap night out in our small Alaskan town. At the very least, it would've given the old-timers at the bar some good entertainment.

"Weren't they wearin' weddin' rings?" I ask.

"Well *yeah*," Toby replies, the 'duh' in his voice as clear as day.

"And yet, you kept offerin' to keep their glasses full and they kept you *supplin'* those drinks by being friendly," Austin says with a snort. "It was like a train wreck I couldn't stop watchin'."

We all chuckle and finish off our food as I look at Toby, wondering whether his carefree and footless approach to life will help him find his One.

With Star, it took a little drunken Seer intervention to get our Call started, and for me to build up the courage and make that first move. But now that I have Star and I *know* that she's always going to be there—especially when I give her my name one day—I want my brothers to have it too. Rhett has Cora, Colt has Lee, and Red *had* his late wife. Toby and Austin—and yes, Red too—all deserve to feel the love of their destined soulmate. Toby may be impulsive and determined to 'lock her in' whenever he finally *does* meet his One.

Austin is a little more subtle. He's very much the loner of the family. Quiet, dependable, and loyal to all of us. He's the first one to help anyone in need and when we were working on the road, he was the first to rise and last to bed, always making sure that we were taken care of. He's the caretaker out of all of us, and it's because he wants to be, not because he has to be. It would

be nice to see him with a woman who lets him do that for her, and who looks after him in return. But since Toby is the one going out there and *looking* for his One, I suspect he's gonna be next in line. Maybe *then*, Austin will get his reward, just like the rest of us have.

It's during a lull in conversation that I catch Red and Rhett sharing a look. Past experience with those two means that a silent look means more than a lack of words. It means there's news of some sort that they don't know whether to share.

"Spill it," Austin says, cutting through the silence.

Rhett jerks. "What?"

"Landry's thinkin' the same as me," Austin says, sliding his eyes my way before sweeping past Toby. Now we're all staring at the two older members of our ranch family. "Just tell us and we'll deal with whatever the problem is. We always do."

Red clears his throat and leans forward, his eyes locking with mine. "Got a call from Rod this mornin', and Rhett and I were disagreein' on whether to tell you about it."

Rod is the rodeo circuit owner and it was him that Red called in a favor to all those months ago when we went on the road after the soulmate showdown. His daughter Josie is also the wife of one of the brothers at Eagle Mountain Ranch and we've already bought a few retired rodeo bulls from Rod. So he's a good connection to have for the ranch and the bull stud operation we've started here.

"Why wouldn't you tell me? It's Rod. Can't be a big secret. Does he want to buy some bulls from us? Does he want a bull back? What is it?"

Red purses his lips. "He wants to offer you a job back on the circuit, Lan. He saw you at those last two events we did and he wants to talk to you about you goin' full time again."

I frown, totally confused. "But I'm retired."

Rhett shakes his head. "No, *I'm* retired, Lan. The rest of you just followed me. You've all been doin' that since you were old enough to go on the road. I appreciated it, don't get me wrong. You all kind of fell into this life with me and we had a hell of a lot of fun along the way, but you loved it, Lan. We know you did."

Red nods. "He's right. I saw you in Kodiak. You had a lot on your mind but when you were in that arena, you were free, you were happy. It was like you were *made* to do it. Some do it for the cake. Some do it for the glory—"

“Rhett,” Toby coughs, earning himself a round of laughs and a middle finger from our older brother.

“He’s not wrong,” Rhett continues. “You all may have been workin’ the rodeo to support me, but Lan, you *thrived* there.”

“I thrive here, too. I've got Star and Nelly,” I look over to where my goat kid with her ridiculous pink collar is trying to attack a shovel. “I want to build a life here with my One, and with all of y'all, just like we always planned to do. I can’t do any of that if I’m on the road travelin' the state for weeks at a time.”

“The ranch ain't gonna fall over if you're not here, Lan,” Rhett replies.

“Thanks for makin’ me feel welcome,” I retort with a wry grin.

He rolls his eyes. “You know what I mean. You own this land just as much as the rest of us. Colt too. But you’re not *tied* to it. We can hold the fort while you’re out there doing what I truly believe you were born to do, brother. If it makes you happy, who are we to try and stop you from doin’ it.”

I turn to Toby who’s watching me with a thoughtful expression. “You agree with them?” I ask despite his answer being written all over his face.

Toby nods, a small smile playing on his lips. “You know I do. You were always the one to light up the arena, Lan. I've never seen anyone get the crowd goin' like you. You had them wild even before the bull ridin' started.” He shoots a smirk Rhett's way. “Used to think they were there for the oldest Graham brother, but somewhere along the line, they also started comin' along for you too.”

I close my eyes, remembering the exhilaration and rush I'd get when I'd throw my leg over the railings to rile up the punters. Then the excitement and focus when you’re playing the role of barrelman and your only job is to distract a two thousand pound bull so the bull riders can jump to safety.

Then there’s all the traveling and seeing the countryside, meeting new and different people you might not otherwise have met, and seeing the smiles on all the kids' faces when you make a fool of yourself just to make them laugh. All of it has my heart swelling in my chest and a smile curving my lips.

“I don't know. I've got Star to think about. She's livin' her dreams too and they're just as important as mine. I can't be apart from her.” I look over at Rhett. “Just being here when she's in town hurts like hell. Can't imagine I'd stand being away from her for weeks on end.”

Realizing that Austin has been quiet throughout this whole discussion has

me turning his way, finding him looking up at the mountain's peaks, deep in thought.

"You're forgettin' something, brother," he says before sliding his eyes to me.

"Yeah? And what's that?"

"Your girl's a traveler. A wanderer. A free spirit. She's lived the nomad life and from what you've told us and what she's told us, she's all for people livin' their best life and makin' their dreams come true. Just like she has with that shop of hers. She wanted to put down roots and create somethin' that was hers and hers alone, and she's done that. And in our little Alaskan, blink-and-you-miss-it town where the very *last* thing you'd expect is a shop sellin' incense, crystals, and tie-dyed clothes that not many people can pull off. Your girl did it though, and continues to do it."

Just thinking of Star has my smile widening.

"And I'll let you ponder this. We all know you'd never ask Starchild to give up her dreams for yours, we also know she'd hate knowing you are dismissin' the chance to get back on the rodeo tour because of her. Let alone not discussin' it with her. You get me?"

I nod, feeling all their attention on me but I can't think straight from all the strings being tied and tangled in my brain.

Looking over at Red and Rhett, I sigh. "You're sayin' I should go and leave y'all shorthanded? We're comin' into Spring, then Summer. Then there are the calves, and the replantin' and—"

"Lan?" Rhett says, interrupting me.

"What?"

"Breathe, brother. We've already been thinkin' about bringin' on some hired hands to help out. There's already a lot of work to be done with all of us here, and you're right, the load isn't gonna get lighter any time soon. But this ranch is our life, it's our future, it's the land we're gonna be handing down to our children, and our children's children, and none of it is worth it if we're givin' up our own happiness. This ranch and our family give back to the land. We protect the mountain and bring back balance. Giving up our dreams for that was never part of the plan."

"And you think me workin' the circuit is gonna bring me balance?"

"We think it's gonna make you happy. And I think that your *One* should know that the offer has been made. Hell, you won't know *what* she thinks about it till you ask her and give her the option," Red says. "I know better

than any of you that you can have a family *and* the rodeo. I lived it for years before we came to Bull Mountain. But if you're worried about what may come, why don't you talk to Lee. She's the Seer and out of anybody, she might be able to give you some advice to help guide you through all of this."

"One thing to keep in mind though, brother," Toby says, his lips tugging up at the side. "You can have the rodeo, the ranch, *and* Star if you want. There's no either-or in this situation. And whatever you decide, you'll have all of us cheerin' you on."

I mimic his smirk. "You just want the bunkhouse to yourself, don't ya."

He snickers and shakes his head. "I won't be gettin' that if you leave anyway. We'll have some hired hands to keep me company. Hey, you never know, we might hire the future love of my life. Stranger things have happened."

That gets a round of groans, eye rolls, and a chuckle.

"Anyway, these trees ain't gonna plant themselves," Red says, getting to his feet, calling an end to our lunch break. "And you, Lan, talk to your One before you call Rod back and tell him your decision. Star is just as much a part of this as you are."

For the rest of the afternoon while we finish planting all the seedlings we could carry up the mountain, talking to Star is all I can think about.

Later that night, instead of writing down my thoughts like I usually do when I'm alone, I grab my phone and sit up against my headboard, bringing up my group chat with Lee and Colt.

Landry: Hey. How are things in chilly Colorado?

Lee: Probably not as cold as things up there in freezing Spring Haven

Landry: It's not too bad right now. Spring is here so that means it's warm AND cold, all at the same time.

Lee: My favorite season. God I miss home.

Landry: Does it help if I said we all miss you guys too?

Lee: A little. Not long till we're back for the Summer. Then you'll be wanting me to take Colt back to Colorado.

Landry: Aww I dunno. Colt's not too bad in small doses.

Colt: You two DO know that I can see all of these messages. I'm feeling the love right now.

Lee: You know I love you, fiancé. You're my favorite cowboy.

Landry: Now I'm the one who should remind you two that I can see all these messages too.

Lee: OK, we'll behave. So what's wrong?

Landry: Who said anything is wrong?

Lee: You texting us instead of spending time with your One?

Landry: I'm a little torn.

Lee: Because of the rodeo offer?

I sit there, my mouth gaping as I look down at my phone. I didn't expect her to already know about the rodeo offer but I shouldn't be surprised. Lee has a way of knowing *everything* that goes on here without being here.

Landry: Who told you?

Lee: Well I was dreaming about your cute little goat riding a kangaroo in a big arena. She lasted the whole eight seconds if you want to know and had a cute pink belt around her tummy. There was also a woman with them. I've never seen her before but she was a brunette with big brown eyes and she was dressed like a cowgirl.

Landry: A kangaroo? We don't even have those here.

Lee: I know. It was very weird. But also, I know that your heart has been torn between the rodeo and the ranch for a long time now.

I sigh, realizing that I must not have been hiding it very well.

Landry: I do miss it. I didn't know how much until I went on the road trip with Red.

Lee: And that was after the Call was activated. So let me guess, you're worried about Star?

Landry: I can't be away from her. I feel tired and sick and it HURTS when she's not here with me.

Lee: And does she feel the same way? Wait, don't answer that. I know she does.

Landry: So what do I do? My dream is her and the life we're going to build together. But she also has her own dreams and ambitions, and she's living them with her shop. Her grandmother is here too. And her friends...

Lee: You do know that the rodeo life doesn't mean living on the road for the whole season. It's an event here and there and you can go home in between.

Colt: Also, believe me when I say, being away from your One is hell. If you're feeling it when Starchild isn't with you at the ranch, it'll be ten times worse when you're hours away.

Colt and Lee weren't going through the call when Colt first came to our ranch, but as soon as he went back home to Eagle Mountain and the spirit made sure the two of them got together, they haven't been apart since. It's the reason why Colt is with Lee in Colorado while she finishes her studies. When they move back to Spring Haven in a year, she'll be a qualified Veterinarian, and they'll be settling down and building their new life right here at Bull Mountain.

Lee: The only advice I can tell you is from experience. The mountain spirit does not bring two people together only for them to be apart.

Landry: So that's the answer then. I can't leave.

Lee: I didn't say that. You won't know how Starchild feels about anything unless you talk to her. It's Relationships 101, Lan. But whatever you decide, make sure you do it together. Because if you haven't realized, your life is and will always be better when you have your soulmate by your side.

Colt: She's right, you know. She always is.

Lee: I'm going to get that on a bumper sticker for your truck back at Bull.

Landry: Haha I'd pay to see that.

Lee: OK, it's a deal. How's Nelly Nosey Parker going?

Landry: She's getting bigger and eating everything she can find.

Lee: Perfect. I can't wait to meet her. Colt and I can even look after her when you're on the road with Star.

Landry: That's IF I accept Rod's offer and if I do, Nelly will be coming with us. She's already lost one parent, she's not losing me too.

Lee: Damn, Landry. I'm low-key swooning right now.

Colt: And that's my cue. Bye, Lan. Say Hi to everyone from us. I have a swooning One to go love on.

Lee: COLTON!

When I put my phone down on the nightstand, I do it with a smile on my face and a refreshed mind. I have to talk to Star about the rodeo offer, and I owe her the chance to tell me what she thinks about it. It's what you do in adult relationships—you communicate.

And since I've been wanting to take her up to the top of the mountain for a while now, I come up with a plan to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak.

Decision made, I pick up my phone and call the one person I know who can help me.

"Hey, Landry. What's happenin'?" she says when she answers the call.

"Mags. I need your help."

"Name it and it's yours," she replies.

And after spending a good ten minutes coming up with a plan, I hang up the phone and slump back on my bed, falling asleep knowing that tomorrow I'll see Star and hopefully, we can come up with a plan on how we can have each other and everything we want too.

Because Star's my number one, but I can't deny that I miss the road. My only hope is that somehow, some way, I can have both.

STARCHILD

I swear I'm walking on air and have been for months now. Better still, I'm no longer blocked. This is why I'm sitting at the diner, an Acai and coconut smoothie in a travel tumbler next to me, and my favorite set of tarot cards in my hand.

With Landry and I being happier than ever, I've been back to feeling like my normal, free-spirited self. But I've held off on giving myself a reading because of something my parents always told us growing up—you don't want to rock the boat when the water is calm.

The one thing that my journey with Landry has shown me is that sometimes it's good not to know what's coming, you can enjoy the journey as it comes without worrying about what's up ahead. This is why I haven't wanted to do a reading on myself, I didn't want to have questions raised that I didn't want to answer, and that's generally what happens—different possibilities are presented, considerations are made, and potential actions are suggested.

And since I'm the happiest I've ever been and life is good, I haven't wanted to get in a metaphorical boat, let alone risk rocking it.

Lan and I have fallen into a routine over the past month since that amazing—and eventful—first sleepover at the ranch. I spend my weekends at the ranch with him and his family, and he brings me lunch to share with him at the shop during the week. We talk about books, the Sallys, our hopes and dreams, stories from my childhood, and how big of a family we want to have—Landry would be happy with three whereas I want to leave it up to the universe—and about the life we hope to have together in the years ahead.

I've also met his parents and we've spoken to mine over the phone and on a video call when they borrowed my brother's cellphone while they were all camping somewhere near Manitoba, Canada.

Landry and his family have also won over the Sallys, but I never had a doubt it would happen. Gramma in particular is one of Landry's biggest fangirls, and all four of them now have Lan and Toby on call for any little jobs that they need done around the house. It's cute, and somewhat funny because I ended up having to ask Aunt Aggie and Aunt Dottie to stop making the men do their yard work shirtless. Although Aggie's giggled agreement to my new rule was worth me having to put my booted foot down.

Nelly has also adopted me as her new foster mom after a few weeks of delinquent-goat mischief. It was tough going there for a while. I suffered more than my fair share of boots being chewed, shins head butted, and items of clothing being stolen away and hidden in the barn, not to mention the numerous nips she made to claim Landry as hers and hers alone. She finally trusted that I wasn't gonna take her new Daddy away from her and she now sleeps in a bed on the bedroom floor with us in the bunkhouse.

So with life back to normal—I've decided it's time to see what our future holds because I'm excited to know.

I've always seen tarot readings as a chance to delve deeper into our lives and to use the questions raised as a way to build trust in our own inner wisdom and explore potential outcomes ourselves. Encouraging people to become more intuitive and trust their own mind. It's not about predicting the future, but gaining a greater insight into our current situation and consider future paths.

With Landry, I have no doubt in my mind that our life together will be amazing. It's that old adage of 'when you know, you know' and even without the matchmaking mountain spirit's meddling, I believe that Landry and I were inevitable. Especially now that I know him so well.

"You gonna turn the cards over there, hon, or just sit there and shuffle them for prosperity's sake?" Mags asks, standing in front of my table.

I shoot her a grin. "Just gettin' in the zone, Mags. You know how it is!"

She chuckles and shakes her head. "I never got into all that woo-woo stuff, but you go ahead and do what you gotta do, Starchild. It's your thing and just like those rad clothes you wear, you own it."

"I made a promise to myself a long time ago to just be me and not let anyone make me wanna change that."

Her gaze fills with approval. "And you haven't."

"Nope," I say, turning my attention back to the clear table in front of me. I shift the cards into one hand while I take another sip of my smoothie before closing my eyes and taking a slow deep breath. When I open them again, I look over at my friend. "OK, Mags. I think I'm ready."

"Mind if I join you? Always wanted to see one of these up close and in person."

"Course not." I wave my hand out toward the seat across from me. Shuffling the cards a few more times, I cut the deck and lay out three cards face down.

The first one I turn over is an upright Wheel of Fortune card.

Mags leans in, fully invested now. "What's that one?"

"It's the Wheel of Fortune. It represents the ebb and flow of life," I explain with a smile. "The ups and downs that we all experience. It also can mean karma, good luck, destiny."

She leans back, her brows arched. "Like the Call and meetin' your One? Sounds like the universe and whoever's deliverin' these cards to you knows what they're talkin' about."

I wink at her before turning over the next card.

"That's the Lovers card. Even *I* know that one. And so not a surprise," she muses.

I laugh. "Yeah, I'm glad this one came up. It represents the deep connection between two people, a union of souls."

"Kindred spirits and soulmates? Destiny bringin' you and Landry Graham together? Uh, *duh*, universe. We all knew *that* one," she says, making us both snicker.

The last card I turn over is an upright Ace of Wands.

"Now this one is a sign of good news and new beginnin's."

Mags rubs her chin. "That makes sense too, right? A new beginning as you start your lives together?"

I nod. "It could mean that. It could also indicate taking action or physically starting something new. Or the discovery of a new passion, enthusiasm, or spark."

"Wow, OK. So these cards can mean a lot of things all at once?"

"Yes, ma'am," I reply. "That's the beauty of it, you can deduce what they might mean and relate it directly to your life and what's going on in it."

Mags's eyes narrow. "As I've said to your beau and his brothers many,

many times, call me Ma'am and I'll ban you from my Corned Beef Hash for life."

I gasp and shake my head. "No, Mags. Don't do that. I'll never say it again, I swear!" I rush out, putting a hand over my heart for added drama.

"Good. My Mama would be ma'am, and I ain't my Mama, and I'm definitely not as old as she is."

I hold my hands up in surrender. "OK, Mags. Never again will I ever call you ma'am."

"Now *that* is the best apology ever," she replies. "OK. So back to the Ace of Wands was it?"

I take a deep breath, staring back down at the card and feeling a mix of excitement and curious trepidation all at once. "I think this means that there's going to be a decision to make, maybe one that could affect our lives moving forward?"

"Not a bad kind of decision I hope."

I shake my head and lift my eyes to hers. "No. Nothin' like that. Just a change that might come and somethin' only Landry and I can choose." I look over the cards again. "I just don't know what that might be yet, or when it might happen."

Mags leans forward, her eyes focused on the cards. "Could it be another journey? Because haven't you two just been on one with the Call? Surely the mountain isn't goin' to give you more hoops to jump through. I know she makes people wait, but to delay the inevitable any longer would just be plain cruel."

I'm not one to share my business around, but now that Landry and I *have* completed the call many times over, it's strange to have those close to us know it's been done...so to speak.

"I don't think so. Everythin' I've read in Aster's books says that the journey ends once the Call has been completed. This is a bit different though. It could be a decision or a choice that has to be made, somethin' that will change our path, not shift it. That's how I'm readin' it, anyway."

Mags nods, her expression serious. "Well, whatever it is, I know you two won't be bothered by it. You're two of the best people I know and I can tell you're the real deal, whether some higher being played a part in bringin' you together or not."

I reach over and squeeze her hand. "Thanks, Mags. You know, I could always do one of these readin's for you one day. Have a sneak peek into your

future," I say, waggling my brows. "See if there's a future husband number four on the horizon."

She throws her head back with laughter, her dark salt and pepper curls shaking as she does. "Thanks for the offer, hon. But there ain't ever gonna be a number four. Three is *more* than enough. I tried, then tried, then tried again. That soulmate of mine is either lost in the mail or the mountain has decided not to reward me. Besides, I'm happy with my lot in life, and it means I get to sit back and watch all of you fall in love and give me adoptive grandbabies."

I grin up at her as she stands and flips her hand towel over her shoulder again. "Yeah. But not too soon, we've got a goat kid now, remember."

"Yes, Nelly the vampire goat. Tell your man that unless she becomes an emotional-support goat, she can't come in for corned beef hash again. You hear?"

Now I giggle. "Yes, Mags. I'll tell Landry that. *Again.*"

"Looks like you're about to get your chance to do just that 'cause look who just arrived." She nods toward the front window. I turn around in time to see Landry exiting his truck and walking toward the diner.

"We're not supposed to see each other till tonight."

"Seems that man of yours can't stay away from you. A match made in heaven, you might say," she says with a wink.

"A match destined by the mountain spirit you mean," I say, unable to tear my eyes away from my sexy rancher as he opens the door and steps inside.

"That too. And it's lucky you only ordered that smoothie 'cause your man asked me to put together a picnic basket so you two can have a nice date."

My heart jumps in my chest just knowing that I don't have to wait until tonight to see Landry again. It's weird to admit but I feel like a piece of me is missing whenever we're apart for too long. My stomach starts to get tight and my chest hurts. Last week we had two nights apart and I had a headache the entire time. It's almost like we can't be away from each other—which is *fine* by me. He's one of my most favorite people in the world now. And with him comes his family at the ranch, all of them embracing and welcoming me like I'm one of their own now.

I'm already jumping to my feet and collecting my cards up when Landry reaches me, wrapping me up tight from behind and pressing a kiss to the sensitive skin below my ear. "Hey, babe."

Turning in his arms, I beam up at him, lifting on my toes to meet him halfway for a soft, quick, but no less meaningful kiss hello. "You and your

surprises. I wasn't expectin' to see you until tonight."

"Gotta keep you guessin', Star."

I kiss him on the cheek. "I love it."

Mags appears at our side. "And here's the basket you ordered, Lan."

"Thanks, Mags. I'll fix up the bill," Lan says, taking the food from her and moving toward the register.

"You can fix it up next time. Go treat your woman here. She just had some good and intriguing news come from those tarot cards of hers. Maybe she'll tell you about it."

Lan's brows furrow as he turns from Mags to me. "So you finally did a readin'?"

"Sure did."

Lan's gaze roams mine as if looking for any sign of trouble, but I know he won't find any. I may be puzzled by the Ace of Wands card, but I'm not worried. It simply means that we may have completed the mountain's call, but there might still be a fork in the road up ahead. "And we didn't get a Five of Cups card so we're golden."

His brows knit together. "Five of Cups?"

"Yeah. That could mean disappointment or sadness."

Lan smirks. "Don't want that one then. As long as the universe tells you that you're gonna live a long, fulfilled life in God's country under the shadow of a twin-peaked mountain with a dashing handsome rancher whose only desire is to make you happy, I won't worry."

I shake my head, a snicker escaping me. *This man...* "Hmm. There may have been an indication that could happen, yes."

"Good to know," he muses, lifting my hand to kiss my knuckles as he lets go and moves his hand to rest on the small of my back. "Time to go, Star. The universe told *me* that you're gonna be spoiled by a dashing handsome rancher today."

"Now isn't *that* a coincidence? Lead the way. Maybe we'll meet him there."

LANDRY

We take Nelly up the mountain with us, because she loves exploring the ranch with me. Although it does mean that the normal walk of just under an hour takes a little longer with many side trips. But when we finally get to the saddle between the two peaks, Star's gasp of wonder and awe makes the trek worth the wait.

"This is..." Her beautiful hazel eyes widen as she looks over the expansive view laid out before us, tears swimming in her gaze when she turns back to me. "It's amazin', Lan," she says before looking back to the fields of the ranch and the buildings that look so small from up here and the long sweeping snow-tipped range which includes the mountain we're standing on.

Checking that Nelly is still exploring and safe from the edge, I move toward my One, wrapping my arms around her from behind and leaning my head against hers as she melts into me. "We all say that we're closer to the mountain spirit when we're up here."

"I can see why. She may live deep within the earth but when she chose her home, she did it with this view in mind," Star replies.

"Been wantin' to bring you up here for a while now. Seeing you and this view together, it's like a dream come true," I whisper into her ear, feeling her shiver under my touch. I turn her to face me and plant a soft kiss on her lips, tasting the sweetness of her mouth.

Star responds eagerly, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me closer. Of course—as is her way—Nelly isn't one to leave us be, and bleats loudly, cutting through the serene silence. We laugh and break apart, walking back from the edge hand in hand to find our pet living up to her name,

moseying into the picnic basket and trying to get it open.

"What are you doin', Nells?" Star asks, crouching down to pat the curious animal.

"Baaa"

"I don't think there's anythin' in that basket for you, but I'm sure your Dad bought *some*thin' for you to munch on up here. Right, Lan?" She looks up at me and it's a moment I think will forever be etched in my mind, the sunlight casting a golden glow on her face and her eyes sparkling with joy and love.

"Of course. Gotta look after *all* my girls." I reach into my backpack and take out a container of hay pellets for her. Scattering them on the ground away from the picnic basket to give us a chance to get set up before she comes back to try and steal our lunch.

Star and I settle down on the blanket, admiring the stunning view and enjoying the delicious sandwiches and freshly baked donuts Mags packed for us.

"I haven't had a picnic in so long," she says once we've finished eating. She leans back against my chest, sitting between my legs on the blanket with Nelly now curled up next to my thigh.

I smooth Star's hair from over her shoulder, "I thought for sure you'd have seen many mountain tops in all your travels."

"Hmm. We did. Ma and Pa would make sure that we'd see all the sights whenever we'd pass through a new town. Until now, I thought the Canadian Rockies were my favorite mountains. But they can't beat this."

I press a kiss to the curve of her neck, resting my lips there just to breathe her in. I wonder whether my heart will ever stop pounding whenever I'm near her.

Reaching out to cup her cheek, I turn her face toward mine, loving the way her eyes are filled with so much love. It's overwhelming because I feel free, grateful, and blessed all at once.

"Love you, Lan," she whispers.

I lean in to press my lips to hers, tasting the sweetness of her mouth once more. The kiss is slow and passionate. I run my hand through her hair, tangling my fingers in the soft strands as I deepen our connection even further.

When we pull apart, our breathing is labored and my body is begging me to do more and do it now. The knowing glint in her gaze telling me she's feeling the same way has my smile widening

"Love you too. More than anything in this world."

Her lips twitch as she glances toward Nelly. "Even Nelly Nosey Parker here?"

As if she knows we're talking about her, Nelly lifts her head, slowly opening her dark brown eyes, a half-hearted "baa" rumbling in her chest.

"Hmm. I'd say you two are about equal."

I chuckle, pulling Star closer to me and watching as Nelly decides to get up and wander off again, her tail flicking in the air behind her. "Well, she does have her moments. But you're *both* irreplaceable."

The tinge of pink on her cheeks makes me wanna stay here forever. But then I remember why I wanted to bring her up here today.

"So I've got somethin' I wanna talk to you about," I say. Star must feel my muscles tense because her expression turns to one of curiosity laced with an edge of concern.

"Damn Ace of Wands," she murmurs before turning in my arms and sitting back down on her bent knees in front of me. "OK. What's goin' on?"

My eyes widen. "What makes you say that?"

Star sighs and points to herself. "The readin' I did this mornin'. They usually leave me all awash with predictions and feelings which puts my senses into overdrive. At first, I was wonderin' *why* you were surprisin' me with a picnic, and now I know that it's not just to feed me and share this view with me. It's to tell me somethin'."

"It's definitely the first, but yes, there *is* somethin' I want to talk to you about."

"OK," she says, her body language open, her eyes fixed on mine.

But first I'm curious. "Does this mean you *did* learn somethin' in your readin' today?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. It gave me a hint that somethin' might be comin', but not the what, the when, or the where."

My lips tug up on the side. "Or the who or the how?"

She snickers and rolls her eyes. "Unfortunately my gifts don't work like that."

"Sounds like Lee. She can't see *when* the Call is comin', but she can generally see *who*."

Star tilts her head. "So she saw me being chosen for you?"

"That's the one time the mountain spirit decided to surprise all of us. We had no idea. When we called Lee after the bookstore blowout to see if she

knew, she was just as shocked as I was.”

“Not shocked now though, right?”

“God no,” I groan, reaching out to grab her hips and gently pulling her forward until she’s straddling my lap. I just need to hold her close while I gauge her reaction to my recent offer.

“So, here’s the thing,” I start, my fingers idly tracing patterns on her thighs. “I love the ranch and I love what we’re doin’ here.”

“OK...” she says, her brows scrunching together but her expression is curious. “I sense a but.”

“Red got a call the other day, from Rod, the owner of the rodeo. He wants me to go back on the circuit for the new season.”

The smile that takes over Star’s face is as breathtaking as it is surprising. “Really? Landry, that’s amazin’.”

“Is it? I mean, it is. But...” I hesitate, trying to find the right words. “My place is here on the ranch. And in town. *Your* place is in Spring Haven too. You’ve got your shop and Gramma. And—” I stop when Star presses her index finger against my lips and holds it there.

“Lan,” she says, her eyes as soft and warm as I’ve ever seen them. “Do you know one of the things that I love most about you?” I shake my head, my mind whirling at what she might say next. As always, I’m not disappointed. “You’re always puttin’ everyone first. If someone needs somethin’, you’re the person they come to. You’re always so thoughtful and lovin’ but from what I hear, you were *born* to entertain.”

“I loved it. But when Rhett retired, we all agreed that we’d come back to the ranch full time and dedicate all of our time and effort to gettin’ the ranch back to where it should be, and get the bull stud and rodeo sanctuary up and runnin’.”

Star looks back over her shoulder toward the ranch that’s spread out before us before looking back at me, her hands running up my chest to cradle my jaw. “The ranch ain’t gonna stop in its tracks if you take off to work the rodeo every few months, Lan.”

I sigh. “That’s what Red and the rest of them said.”

“They’re right. So what’s holdin’ you back? Because I hope to the mountain spirit that you’re not gonna say me.”

I glide my arms around her waist and pull her in close. “I’m not a selfish man, babe, but with you, I want to be. I can’t bear the thought of being away from you. Just a few hours and I feel the missin’ space where you’ve been.”

I'm head over heels *gone* for you, Star, and there's nothin' and nobody, not the rodeo, not anythin', that could take me away from you. I won't let it. Not when we've just found each other."

Unshed tears swim in her eyes as a soft smile slowly curves her lips. "Lan," she breathes. "You are the most beautiful, thoughtful, amazin' man I've ever met." She pauses before she snorts and shakes her head. "If you want to work the rodeo and do what I know you were *born* to do, somethin' you're obviously good at if they're desperate to get you back, then there's no way I'm goin' to stop you."

"But—" She silences me with her finger on my mouth again.

"*But* I ain't finished. Didn't your Mama teach you it's rude to interrupt a lady when she's impartin' some good ol' wise advice on you?" My lips twitch under her touch and I dip my chin, urging her to continue. "You, Landry Graham, are gonna call up this Rod fellow, and you're going to tell him you'd love to accept his offer."

"Star, I can't leave—" She narrows her eyes and the words get stuck on my tongue.

"You're *also* gonna tell him you're not comin' alone because your *One* will be with you at every event." My breath catches in my chest as her words sink in.

I gently wrap my fingers around her wrist and lift it to press a gentle kiss over her pulse point before lowering it between us, both of my hands covering hers. "You wanna come with me?"

She quirks a brow. "Well, I ain't gonna stay back here while you're out there performin' for the masses. Wherever you go, I go. You're my *One*, my soulmate, the other half of me, and there ain't no way I will be able to *function* let alone be happy if you're away from me for longer than a day."

I want nothing more than to slam my lips against hers and take her right up here on the mountaintop in front of the old Poplar tree that stands tall and strong between the twin peaks, but there's more to talk about because as much as I want her with me, I don't want her to give up anything.

"What about the shop? And Gramma? I can't ask you to give up your dreams for mine?"

"Here's the thing, Lan. I made a promise to myself to never let anyone change me or stand in the way of what I want. I wanted to move back home and open Happy Auras, I made it happen. I love my life, I love my family, I love this town, and I love *you* more than anything in this world. You're mine

and I'm yours and there's nothin' that could ever come in the way of that. Gramma has the Sallys, and it's not like we're gonna be gone for months at a time. It'll be like goin' on vacation with you every few months. Gramma is always askin' to work in the shop, and I know Aunt Aggie, Aunt Dottie, and Aunt Frankie would love to work there with her. And I can do readin's for people wherever I am. Maybe I'll get my website up and runnin' and take video calls so I can still keep up with the customers who like gettin' regular advice from me. There's a *world* of possibilities, Lan, but there's only one you."

My heart feels like it's about to burst as I take in her words. "Star, I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anythin', Lan. Just know that I'm with you, no matter what. And I know you'll be amazin' out there." Her hands cup my face, her thumbs brushing over my cheekbones. "If you don't know it already, I believe in you, Landry. And I believe in us."

"You're it for me too, Star. My first and last love. My future wife. The mother of my future children. All of it."

Now her tears fall and they're the most beautiful thing. "You're all of that for me too, Lan. My days start and end with you. You know that, right?"

I lean forward, pressing my forehead against hers. "I love you."

"I love you too." She pulls back slightly, a glint of mischief in her eyes. "Plus, I've always wanted to see you all dressed up for the arena. You're sexy in a cowboy hat. Can't wait to see you in *all* your cowboy glory."

I chuckle, pulling her in for a kiss, the important realization cemented in my soul. Our future is certain, the where and the how don't matter. I'll always be by Star's side and I know she'll always be at mine. Right where she was always meant to be.

It's then that Nelly lifts her head. "Baaa?"

"What about her?" Star asks, her gaze soft as she pats our furry pet.

"I was thinkin' she'd come with us. We can't abandon our kid now. She's our test run for when we're married and creatin' a family of our own."

"That's the second time today you've talked about marryin' me, Landry Graham. You got somethin' you wanna ask?" Her pink pouty lips twitch, making me growl before I crush my mouth to hers again, ignoring the insistent goat who's now butting her head against my side.

"When I ask you, you're gonna know it in your *soul*, babe. When I ask you, it won't be on this mountain with Nelly bruisin' my leg and you

straddlin' my lap makin' it hard to think straight." Star giggles. "It'll be the most memorable moment of our lives so far, and believe me, there won't be a single doubt in your mind when you give me your answer."

That's when Star pulls back and shoots me a wink. "Just so you know. There will never be any hesitation when I answer that question."

And that is how we end up necking on top of Bull Mountain, with my vampire goat nipping my arm before stomping off. But not before making sure she gets the last word in.

"Baaa."

STARCHILD

It's the night before Landry, Nelly and I will hit the road for the Kinleyville Rodeo, Landry's first event of the new season. I'm excited to travel again and as busy as the last two months have been for everyone, I know that we've made the right decision.

Hitting the road and traveling around is in my blood. But getting to do that with the man who makes my heart race, my body heat, and my soul sing, is a whole new dream.

Gramma and the Sallys insist on giving us a going away party despite me telling them more than once that we'll come back between events.

"This is the first time and we want to send you off right. Life is short, child, but my love for you is longer, so let your Gramma do this one thing for you two lovebirds."

"Are you ready to go?" Landry asks, walking into the bunkhouse bedroom where I'm standing in front of a mirror, putting on the new moonstone earrings that Mags and Cora gave me at lunch today. I can't tear my eyes away from the soft, watery opaque stone that suits my complexion and just so happens to go perfectly with the black and white tie-dyed maxi dress I'm wearing.

"Damn, babe. You look amazin'," he says, moving to stand behind me, his big hands coming to rest on my hips.

He dips his head and presses a gentle kiss to my shoulder before peppering a line of them along my collarbone, coming to a stop just before my ear. "So good I think we might have to be late." His fingers glide around my front, making his intentions clear.

“Gramma will *know* why we’re late,” I breathe as he buries his face in my neck again and begins to slide my dress upward, my body melting against him while his hand slowly runs up the inside of my thigh.

“Hmm. We’ll have to be quick then.” His voice is rough and sexy and all kinds of good, but despite everything inside of me aching to be with the man I love, I know I have to stay strong. Gramma seems to have a sixth sense about things.

“Want me to stop?” he rasps. By some miracle, I manage to lock my knees and stand straight. Righting my dress, I turn around to meet his hooded gaze, looping my arms around his shoulders and pushing up on my toes to kiss him. I sweep my tongue between his parted lips and he groans, weakening my resolve. But since one of my favorite things in the whole world is Landry’s all-consuming kisses, I let him ravage me before we have to pull apart, our foreheads touching as we suck in some much-needed breath.

“You distracted me,” he says, sounding turned on and amused at the same time.

I grin up at him. “I promise, that after tonight, you’ll be able to do that and more whenever you want, whenever *I* want, but tonight’s important to Gramma and the Sallys and I don’t want to leave them disappointed.”

“It’s important to me too. They may have stalked me for a spell, but they only ever had your best interests at heart. And they’re *my* interests too now, because you’re mine.”

“You’re *mine* now too, Lan. Don’t you forget about that when all those rodeo fans are fawnin’ over you.”

He jerks his head back, arching a brow as if to say I’m being ridiculous before a slow-growing, all-knowing smirk appears. “Like it when you get all possessive over me, babe. Makes me feel wanted.”

“You’re always wanted,” I say, brushing one last kiss over his lips. “And later, when we’re back home, I’ll show you just how much.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” he replies with an ‘I’m gonna get me some’ grin.

“I’m countin’ on it.”

Landry leads me toward the church hall and the moment we step inside, a huge cheer rings out from our friends, family, and all the other Spring Haven

locals gathered inside.

What makes me stop in my tracks is the way the whole room has been transformed into a sea of color with tea light candles lining every flat surface as well as draped streamers stretched between the beams above us. Around the edge of the room there are beautifully decorated tables with bunches of pink and purple daisies in the middle, along with two long tables of delicious smelling food in bain maries, complimented by a makeshift bar in the far corner manned by Greg, the bookstore owner.

"This is..."

"Beautiful, just like you," Landry murmurs, gently squeezing my hand as we move to where Gramma and the Sallys are standing. They're all beaming with happiness and pride and I have to bite my lip not to lose it when I step into my grandmother's arms for a hug.

"Thought you said this would be a small affair," I whisper in her ear.

"I said intimate, child. That doesn't mean small," she chuckles, pulling back and resting her soft frail hands on my arms. She makes a point of looking me up and down. "And I *do* like this dress on you. It's very *chic*. Is that what the kids say these days?" She looks over to Landry, the fondness in her gaze unmistakable. "Bet you're not complainin' about Starchild's style today. Are you, son?"

"No, ma'am. Then again, she's the most gorgeous woman in the whole county no matter what she wears," he replies. "Closely followed by you of course."

Gramma doesn't even try to hide her swoony sigh at his compliment before her eyes narrow. "What did I tell you about callin' me that?"

He grins guiltily. "Sorry, Gramma. A force of habit."

"Let's hope you break out of that when you're on the road. Ain't no grandson-in-law of mine is gonna make me feel old when life and time do that well enough on their own."

Landry's smile warms. "You don't look a day over sixty, Gramma."

When I see Gramma's blush, I can't help the giggle that erupts out of me.

"I hope you're not monopolizin' all of Mr. Graham's time, Ruthie. There's more of us old ladies for him to charm," Aunt Aggie says, sidling up to us.

Landry makes me swoon again when he looks around the room, his eyes searching for something before he turns back to the Sallys who are now standing around us. "I don't see any old ladies around here, just some wise and mature women who are aging beautifully."

All four of the Sallys take turns gasping, swooning, and sighing, before sending heart eyes at my man. He's one of a kind, that's for sure. *And all mine.*

I wrap my arm around Landry's waist and snuggle into him. "Now ladies, please remember that this smooth-talkin' cowboy is spoken for. The mountain made it so." His answering chuckle and the soft eyes of all four of my favorite Sallys bring a grin to my face.

"Oh alright, you can have that one. But that Toby... he's not bad," Aunt Frankie says with a wink.

"I heard my name," the man himself announces as he appears beside me, Austin closely following. "Ladies... you're lookin' mighty fine tonight". Cue more blushing and I decide it's time to steal a moment with my own man.

"Hey," he whispers, leaning down to brush his lips over my temple.

I marvel at the way my heart skips a beat from all the love and tenderness in his gaze. It still amazes me that every time I look at him, I feel like I'm falling deeper in love with him, and that's something I know will never change.

I may have been skeptical at the start, but there isn't a single speck of doubt inside of me now. My soul breathes for this man and I know that mine calls to his—something he reminds me of every single day.

"What are you thinkin' about? Your face just went all soft like it does when you've got somethin' good on your mind."

"Just about how lucky we are to have each other. And all of these people too," I reply, looking around the room.

"We're only goin' for a few weeks at a time, but I'm still gonna miss this place, and the people."

Turning back, I tip my face up for another kiss, this one soft and sweet. Until we're interrupted, *again.*

"Enough of that malarkey," Mags announces, looping her arm in mine and gently pulling me away from Landry, Cora taking his place on the other side. "We've got wine to drink and gossip to catch up on before you leave us for the road.

I roll my eyes. "We're gonna be back in two weeks, Mags. I'm sure you can hold out for a little while."

"I won't get to make your smoothies anymore," she says, putting on a pout. "What am I gonna do with all that Acai now? It's not like those Graham brothers are gonna be linin' up to drink it."

“I bet if anyone could get them to change their diner order and try new things, it’d be you,” I tease, bumping her hip with mine. “Tell Tobes the ladies love a healthy man, and he’ll be buyin’ it on the daily.”

Mags grabs my face, making sure she has my full attention. “Star, your visits are one of the highlights of my day. I can be as busy as hell, but if I look up and see you in one of your bright dresses and bright smiles, I know everythin’ will be alright.”

My throat thickens. “That’s probably the nicest thing you’ve ever said, Mags.”

“Good.”

“Good?” I ask with a surprised laugh.

“Yep. Cause it means you’ll come back just so I can say somethin’ else nice to ya,” she replies with a huge grin before her expression turns serious. “You’re one of a kind, Star. And I hope you know, you’ll always have a seat at my table—home or diner—as well as a place in my heart. You’re a traveler, a wanderer, a free spirit that cannot be harnessed, not even by a big, burly, handsome rancher like him. I’m pleased as punch you’re both spreadin’ your wings again and doin’ it together.” She jerks her head Landry’s way. “But *now*, we’re gonna drink and gossip, and you’re gonna tell me and Cora everythin’ you want us to keep an eye on while you’re gone.”

I meet Landry’s soft smiling eyes as I arch a brow his way. “Go,” he mouths. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” I call out as I’m led away.

I don’t mind it though because this is the last time that we’ll be able to see everyone we love all at the same time for a while. And at the end of the day, I know that Landry will find me and claim me by his side again.

Just like his heart did before the mountain activated the call.

LANDRY

I'm accosted by the gangsta grannies as soon as I step out of the restroom and pulled into an empty office off the hallway.

"Don't kidnap me!" I say in a panic. *It's the Sallys, who knows what they're capable of.*

Gramma stares at me like I've got two heads. "Why on earth would we kidnap you, son?"

"So that I don't steal Star away," I ramble, my heart still racing from the fright. *Maybe their acceptance has all been a ruse...*

Gramma rolls her eyes while the rest of the Sallys just giggle. "Don't court trouble, Landry. We just wanted to check if you were ready?"

I jerk back. "You told 'em?"

Miss Frances snorts. "Of *course*, she told us, Landry." She turns to Miss Agnes. "It's like he doesn't know us at all."

"I know all of you, just like you know all about me because you *investigated* me. Remember?"

"Ain't no way we're forgettin' that," Miss Dorothy quips. "Followin' you around was one of the best things we've done in ages."

"It was fun, wasn't it," Gramma says with a cheeky smirk. "Maybe we should start offerin' our services."

Miss Agnes's eyes light up and I bite back a groan when I realize that they're serious. *Heaven help us.*

"Hmm, what could we call ourselves? What about Sallys' Security?" Miss Frances quips before shaking her head. "Nope. We're too nice to be gangster grannies."

“Speak for yourself.” Miss Dorothy shoots me a wink. “Landry knows how scary I can be, don’t you, Mr. Graham?” I shudder at the memory of my school days and getting into trouble with her when she was my teacher.

“Mmm hmm,” I reply, deciding that staying agreeable is probably the safest bet with these four.

“I know, Sally Investigation Services–S.I.S,” Miss Agnes replies, as serious as a priest on Sunday morning.

Miss Dorothy nods. “Sis? Oooh, yes, I like that.”

Gramma clears her throat, glaring at the other Sallys before pinning me in place with a serious gaze. “Focus, ladies. Landry, are you ready?”

I’m bobbing my head before she finishes speaking. “Yes, Gramma.”

“Good.” She beams up at me while hooking her arm inside of mine and leading me toward the door. “Because I meant what I said. You’re not gettin’ out of making an honest woman out of my Starchild. She deserves nothing less than everythin’.”

Any lingering nerves I have completely disappear as I cover Gramma’s hand with mine, making sure I have her full attention before I speak. “I promise that I’ll never stop making sure *our* Star has everything and anything her heart desires. It’ll be my sole purpose in life from here on in.”

She rests her palm on my cheek and I feel the warmth seeping into my skin. “Well that’s good because all she wants is you. So you give her that—give her you—and you’re golden.” She taps my jaw twice before letting me go, leaving me standing there facing a wall of Sunday School Sallys all staring at me expectantly.

“Well, off you go. Time’s a wastin’. We’re not gettin’ any younger, you know,” Miss Dorothy says, tapping her foot for good measure.

Taking a deep breath, I give them my most genuine, honest-to-goodness smile. “I think we’ll miss seein’ you guys all the time.”

“Don’t get used to it, buddy. We’ll be here every single time you and Star get back into town and if you think Roast Duck wasn’t scary enough, I’ve been lookin’ up goat recipes. Gotta keep you on ya toes, son.” When my face falls, Gramma grins like the Cheshire Cat who just got *all* the cream. “Run along now, Landry Graham. I believe you have somethin’ to do.”

My heart races as I make my way over to where Star stands with my family. I move straight to her side, pulling her in close and claiming her, brushing a much-needed kiss over her temple as I do.

She looks at me curiously. "OK?"

"Yeah, babe. Perfect."

That earns me a smile before all eyes turn to Rhett. He walks across the small stage that's been set up at the front of the hall, the room falling quiet after he lets out a high-pitched whistle to get everyone's attention.

"I won't keep you long, but since this is a 'best wishes' *and* a 'goodbye for now' party, I figured we couldn't let it pass without a speech. Red and I drew straws which means y'all get to listen to me for a moment," he announces with a grin. "Now, y'all know that when I retired from bull ridin', my brothers and Red all decided to hang up their boots—so to speak—and dedicate all their time to our ranch and the bull stud. Now that it's up and runnin' and our first calves on their way, I'm happy that Landry has found his soulmate in Starchild, and proud he realized that just because I retired, doesn't mean he has to." Rhett grins my way. "My youngest brother may be one of the quieter ones out of the lot of us—"

"Probably because Toby won't let 'im get a word in," Red heckles, earning a chorus of laughter from the crowd.

Rhett chuckles. "You're right there.",

"I'm right here you know," Toby calls out, feigning offense.

"Yeah, Tobes. We *know*," I reply. "And if we didn't—"

"You'd tell us," Red, Austin, and Rhett reply in unison.

"I see how it is," Toby muses, his smile so wide you can't help but love him.

"Anyway. I said I'd keep this quick. So Landry and Star, this isn't a goodbye—because you aren't gettin' out of ranch work that easily—it's a see you soon, best of luck and safe travels. Enjoy the journey, relish the sights, and commit every single moment to memory because life can be short and it can definitely be hard, but sharin' it with the one you love by your side is the best journey you'll ever take."

"Here, here," Red calls out, holding his whisky glass in the air.

"So with that in mind, lift your drinks and give a loud cheer for our happy free spirits who will hit the road tomorrow. To Landry and Star," Rhett says.

The whole crowd offers up their best wishes causing a wave of emotion to wash over me. I dip my chin and kiss her soft and sweet before stepping

back and holding out my hand, catching her smiling eyes as I lead her toward the stage.

"Lan? What are you doin'?" she whispers.

"Trust me, babe."

With each step I take I'm not nervous or worried. What I am is one hundred percent focused on the future—the here, the now, and wherever Star and I may go. Knowing we'll do it together is all I need.

Stopping next to Rhett, he meets my eyes and I can read his unspoken question in them. It's a different one from what he's asked me over the years. Instead of an "Are you OK?" it's a "Are you ready?" And it's just the brotherly boost I need as I face the crowd full of expectant expressions.

I wait until Rhett has rejoined the family before speaking. "If you know anythin' about me, it's that I'm not one for public speakin' or drawin' any kind of attention my way unless I'm in the arena."

"Unlike Toby who courts all the attention he can get!" Mags calls out.

I chuckle. "Yeah, I think we can all agree that Tobes is loud enough for all of us."

"OK, OK. It's not 'pick on Toby day' people," my brother says with a roll of his eyes and a smirk on his lips.

"But on behalf of Star and myself, I wanted to thank y'all for comin'. We're so grateful for your support and although we both thought a party was a bit too much since we're not movin' away forever, we appreciate it all the same."

"Get on with it so we can get drinkin'," an old-timer down the back of the hall calls out.

That's when my girl pipes in. "Bertram Alexander. If you don't want me to put a curse on you so all the liquor you drink tastes like water, you might wanna hush up now,"

"You wouldn't," the old-timer Bert gasps.

"Well no," Star replies with a giggle. "But shush now. My man is talkin'."

"Sure thing, Star," Bert replies.

The smile that curves my One's lips is so bright it would light up the darkest room. "Back to you, Lan."

I pause, taking a deep breath and letting the weight of the moment settle in my bones before facing the woman who owns my heart, body, and soul and will do so forever.

I think back to all the times I stood outside the shop, or walked by just to

catch a glimpse of her. I still do it sometimes before I take her lunch, just watching her float around her shop with a smile on her face. I like to think it's not creepy anymore, more adoring. Luckily, Star thinks it's cute.

"Star," I say as she looks my way and the whole hall falls quiet. "When I talked to Tobes about what I should say to you, he told me to go in hard and strong."

"Too right!" the man in question loudly confirms, making me grin.

"When I asked Austin, he told me to quote poetry and let someone else's words tell you how I feel about you." I shake my head and Star's hazel eyes melt. I bring our still joined hands up and place her palm on my heart.

"When I asked Rhett and Red, they told me to be honest, to pour my heart out, and trust that you'll soak up my words and understand the truth that bleeds in them."

Her lips part in a barely audible gasp as she realizes what's happening—or about to, anyway. The entire room is so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

"Then I asked Nelly Nosey Parker." Everyone laughs at that. Our goat's antics are now comedy fodder for anyone who frequents the Secret Cow or the Diner.

"But all I got from her was *baaa*." More laughter follows but the sweetest sound is Starchild's giggle and her happy expression.

"Therefore, I've decided to take everyone's advice and put it in the 'I'll think about it' pile, and tell you straight from my heart." I cover her hand with mine. "Starchild, you are the light in the dark, my port in any storm, my strength, my happiness, my courage, and my dreams. You are my One, the woman who I knew was made for me the moment I first saw you and could only hope the mountain would make mine when my turn came around. You're the only one I'd stand outside on the sidewalk to stalk—I mean, *watch*—and be close to." She snickers at that one, and her fingers flex over my shirt as if urging me to continue.

"The one who created the soulmate showdown, the woman who reads with me, gets me, never fails to let me know that she's thinkin' of me, and who always tells *and* shows me that she loves me. The woman who doesn't run away whenever a certain duck makes an appearance, and who fell for a kid goat with vampire tendencies who thinks she's more human than animal." A gentle hum of laughter fills the air.

"The woman I want to grow old with. The woman I want to give the world to. The woman I want to help make every single one of her dreams

come true, even ones you haven't thought of yet. The woman who will still hold my hand and kiss me sweetly when I'm old and gray and tellin' our great-grandchildren about the pretty lady with the pretty dresses and sweet-smelling incense who caught my eye fifty years earlier." I take a deep breath and swallow down the growing lump in my throat. "Star, I love you, I'll always love you, but what I'd love most of all is for you to answer my next question."

She gasps as I drop down to one knee, reaching into my pocket and pulling out the silver Bohemian-style engagement ring with a large oval moonstone in the middle that Mags helped me choose a few weeks ago. She also bought the matching earrings to give to Star as a going away present.

My heart rams against my chest as I take her hand and look up to meet her soft tear-filled gaze.

"Starchild, be my partner, my lover, my best friend, and my soulmate. Will you do me the biggest honor and also be my wife?"

"Yes!" she says before she tackle hugs me, almost taking me down to the ground as she grabs hold of my jaw and crushes her lips to mine, kissing me long and hard, then soft and deep, all of it becoming the best damn kiss of my life.

"What did she say?" I hear Miss Agnes ask loudly.

"She said yes, Aggie. Don't you have your hearin' aids on?" Miss Dorothy says loudly.

"Of course I do. I just couldn't hear," Miss Agnes snaps back.

"She was always gonna say yes," another voice replies, I suspect it's Miss Frances.

"She's my granddaughter. She'd be *mad* not to say yes." That one was definitely Gramma.

Star pulls back. Her cheeks are wet, mine are too, but the smiles we give each other are so wide, I doubt they'll be goin' anywhere anytime soon. Which is absolutely fine by me.

She looks down at the velvet box in my hand as I pluck out the ring and with shaking fingers, I glide it down to the base of her hand before leaning down and pressing a soft, reverent kiss over the stone.

"I love you."

"I love you, too," she replies, giving me one last brush of her lips against mine before her eyes go back to her splayed fingers as if she's unable to look away.

Then the masses descend on us—well my family, Mags, and the Sallys—and we're kept apart by hug after hug, handshakes, and pats on the back. That's until I claim my fiancée again and whisper in her ear a promise not to let her get away from me ever again.

My fiancée... that's gonna take a bit of getting used to, but it's a title I'm proud of. In fact, there's only one other that would be better, and the sooner she has that one, the better.

STARCHILD

It's the last day of the Kinleyville Rodeo and as much as I imagined life on the road with Landry being amazing, it has surpassed everything I could've dreamed of.

We left Spring Haven two weeks ago, taking a long scenic route to get here and we're staying with Landry's sister Tess and her family at Eagle Mountain Ranch for the duration of our visit.

Today I'm playing the role of proud fiancée and fangirl as Landry stands in the middle of the arena, the star attraction and the main entertainment before the bull ridin' finals start.

Watching him from the stands, his rugged cowboy charm radiates off him like an addictive aura. He's wearing his signature black Stetson and a form-fitting shirt that leaves little to the imagination. When he looks up and our eyes meet, a crooked smile gracing his lips, my heart races knowing that this gorgeous man is mine.

The crowd goes wild as he finishes and moves to the edge of the arena, hordes of kids hanging over the railings to try to catch his attention. He takes his time to make sure every boy and girl, and even some adults too, get the chance to chat with him. I love getting to experience this part of his life with him. It's not just seeing how good he is at working the crowd and getting them excited for the event, but how much he truly enjoys it. His grins are wide, his laughter is genuine, and the joy is written all over his face.

"Let's give one last round of applause for Landry Graham," the announcer says, the crowd giving another cheer of raucous appreciation before the arena is cleared in preparation for the rodeo's final and flagship event.

I make my way down from the grandstand, leaving Tess, Remy, and the rest of the Barnes family from Eagle Mountain Ranch behind so I can go find Landry and bring him back to our seats.

As always, he doesn't make me wait long, and as soon as he steps out of the competitor tent, I'm running and jumping up into his arms, wrapping my legs around his hips before planting a hot and heavy kiss on his lips.

"Hey babe," he says with a chuckle when we pull apart. "That's one hell of a hello."

I grin at him as he eases me back down to my feet. "Hey yourself. Do you *know* how amazin' you were out there?"

"No. But feel free to tell me."

I roll my eyes, earning a chuckle. "Seriously, Lan. You were *born* to do this. The crowd loves you, and you love entertainin' them."

"You know what else I love?"

I scrunch my nose up and shoot him a fake confused expression. "No? Oooh, I know. Nelly!"

"Yes, I do love that little vamp of ours," he says, pulling me close again. "Was thinkin' of someone more human..."

"Your future niece in Tess's belly?" I suggest.

"Hmm. Yes, her too. But nope, try again."

"Oh, I dunno. Maybe it's--" I squeak as he grabs me and kisses me again. This time it's slow and long, deep and toe-curling and far more carnal than we'd ever do in public.

When he pulls away this time, I'm panting and wondering how long is left till the end of the rodeo. Lan must read all of my thoughts on my face because he chuckles as he touches his forehead to mine, his hands holding my hips and anchoring me.

"I love you so damn much, babe. And doin' this with you means so much. I hope you know that."

"I do. I love sharin' this part of your life with you." His stomach lets out a loud grumble. "Right now though, we're gettin' you some good ol' rodeo food and going to join everyone else to watch the bull ridin'," I reply, looking around for the food trucks. "And if you're still hungry after *that*, then I'm sure you'll come up with somethin'."

"Oh yeah, I will," he says, tilting his head to kiss and nuzzle my neck.

"C'mon, cowboy. Behave for a little bit longer and I'll reward ya later."

He shoots me a wicked grin. "Yes, ma'am."

I pin him with a glare. "Same rule applies, Landry Graham. You call me ma'am, and we're gonna have problems, you and I."

"Oh *yeah?*" His tone and amused gaze tells me he doesn't sound at all worried.

"Yes, sir." A snort escapes me as I realize what I just said.

His eyes dance with heated amusement. "You can call me *sir* whenever you want. Maybe I like it."

"I'll take that under advisement. C'mon. Food then grandstand. There's a surprise waitin' for you."

His step stutters and he quirks a brow my way. "What is it?"

"It wouldn't be a surprise if I told you now would it?"

"Is it a *good* surprise?"

"Definitely."

"OK. Then no food, let's go."

"*Landry,*" I say in my best scolding voice. "Food first. Your stomach is grumblin' so loud the bulls are gonna get distracted if we don't feed you."

"They'll live. I wanna know the surprise," he presses and I discover another piece of Landry's personality, a lack of patience.

"Now you're just makin' it out to be bigger than it is."

We get to a food truck and Landry quickly orders us some corn dogs, fries, and a funnel cake to share. While we're waiting, I spot Landry's surprise walking toward us behind his back. I bite back a smile as Toby launches into a run, tackling Landry from behind and making him jump.

"What are *you* two doin' here?"

"Hello to you too, brother. Figured you'd be missin' me so much that I'd beg Red to bring me along with him for his meetin's."

We all laugh as Landry turns to Red, shaking his hand. "You meetin' Rod?"

"Yeah. And a few ranch hands who are here. Randy gave me a call earlier in the week tellin' me about one who said she can start straight away if we wanted her to and she's got a bunch of experience with cattle and breedin' cows."

My spidey senses start tingling. "*Her?*"

"Yep. She's been working on farms since she was a kid. A born and bred rancher, she tells me."

Our order is called and Landry leaves us momentarily to grab the food, barely having time to put it down on the picnic table next to us before Toby

helps himself to it.

"You might wanna go order some more food, Lan. You know this one's got a bottomless pit for a stomach," Red chuckles as we all stare wide-eyed at Toby who has already moved on from the fries to one of the corn dogs.

Landry shakes his head, giving me a quick hug before he heads back to the food truck to order more.

"So, are you goin' to hire this ranch hand?" I ask Red. "I've always thought Bull Mountain Ranch could do with a few more women around."

Red helps himself to some of the fries before nodding. "That's the plan. She seems like a good fit. So as long as I get a good feelin' about her when I shake her hand, then we'd be fools not to bring her on board."

"And how are you feelin' about sharin' the bunkhouse with a *girl*, Tobes?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Ain't no different to when you stay over, or when Lee's home with Colt. Respect each other and their privacy, and there'll be no problems. Easy, breezy, baby."

"Hey now, don't let Lan hear you call his girl, baby," Red muses, making me giggle.

"You're fine, Landry knows I'm his and he's mine."

Toby grins at Red. "See! Star gets me. That's why she's gonna be my new favorite sister-in-law."

Shaking my head, I can't help but smile. "Just wait till I tell Cora you said that."

"Shhh, I won't tell her if you don't." God help the woman who is chosen for Toby. He's a handful and then some. Although Landry and I have talked about what kind of woman the mountain might match him with and we both agree that she'll need to be strong-willed and independent and will need to either match Toby's enthusiasm and energy or even it out somehow. If she has all of that going for her, it'll be a good match—and also *highly* entertaining to watch play out. Part of me also thinks that when Toby meets his One, he's gonna fall fast and fall hard.

"Here's hopin' she can keep y'all in line when we're away," I say to Red as I spot Landry coming back toward us.

Red chuckles and Toby smirks. "Ain't nobody gonna keep *me* in line. I'm the man."

"Yes. Yes, you are, Tobes. But just you wait, brother," Landry says, putting more food on the table for us and cupping his brother's shoulder.

"One day you'll meet your One and then we'll all get to watch you melt like a popsicle on the fourth of July."

Toby snickers, nodding my way before looking at Lan. "Like you did?"

"Oh yeah. I'm the first to admit that I fell head over heels for this one." Landry claims me again, curling me into his side just as the speakers signal the start of the last event.

"Guess we should get back to our seats. The ridin' is about to start," Red says, nodding toward the grandstand.

After packing up the food, we begin walking back to our seats. That's when I spot a woman walking toward us with a huge grin on her face. Figuring she could be a fan, I smile back. That's until I spot a kangaroo pin on the green band of her hat and a small gasp escapes me, stopping me in my tracks.

Landry's hands rest on my hips as he stops behind me. "Babe?"

"It's her," I whisper and I feel both Red and Landry's attention on me.

"Her *who*?" Red asks.

"The kangaroo," I reply.

Toby's steps falter as his boots skid against the dirt. When I look back over my shoulder, I find him staring at the cowgirl too.

"Don't ask me how I know, but are you Red?" she asks. Her unmistakable Australian accent has me mesmerized and intrigued all at once.

"Sure am, and I'm guessin' since you're a long way from home with that accent, you're Delilah?" Red replies, shaking her offered hand.

"That's me. Delilah Donovan."

Landry steps forward, shaking her hand too. "Name's Landry. Red was just tellin' me about you. Nice hat you got there, Delilah."

She palms her hat off and holds it out to look at the Kangaroo pin. "This old thing? I keep it close so that I don't forget my roots."

"Your family's back home?" I ask curiously.

"Home as in Montana? Yep. Left Aussie when I was fifteen and have been in America ever since. But I'm an Aussie through and through. There ain't no changin' that no matter how long I'm here." She chuckles and something about that spurs Toby into action.

He steps forward, his eyes locked on Delilah. "And this suddenly silent man is Toby, one of my older brothers and another one of the owners," Landry says, shooting me a confused frown. "Tobes?" he says, bumping his brother with his elbow.

But still, Toby doesn't move. He just stares at Delilah and in return, she just stands there staring right on back. It's like some sort of strange silent standoff.

It's Delilah that gets him to break first though by tilting her head and looking him up and down. "You OK there? Do I have dirt on my face or somethin'?"

"You want the ranch hand job?" he spits out, like the words are bursting out of him.

"Sure do, mate."

"You're hired." Red and Landry's heads jerk in surprise and my mouth drops open so fast when I finally connect the dots. Because if the look on Toby's face is anything to go by, I'm not the only one who has realized that Delilah's appearance in our lives may not be all that random.

"I am? Just like that?" Delilah replies, a slow-growing grin tugging at her lips.

Toby returns the smile and it's the most relaxed, happy, and carefree I've ever seen the man. It's also the most earnest. And for a man who's all about having fun and wringing the most out of life, that's saying something.

"Yep. You're the One."

But what I hear is that she's *his* One.

I guess our trips back home to the ranch are gonna be a lot of fun now. And I can't wait.

LANDRY

August

I never thought I'd say this, but for once I am thankful for the Sunday Sallys and their organizational skills. Without them, what is about to happen would *not* have been possible. Because today, I'm fulfilling my promise to Gramma Ruth by making an honest woman out of Starchild—her words, not mine—and giving her my name, and vowing to love her forever.

A lot of today has been kept as a surprise to my fiancée, with the Sallys promising her to give her a day she'll never forget. There have even been a few secrets kept from me--the biggest of which was the attendance of the tall, gray-bearded man standing in front of me ready to officiate our wedding.

Apparently Tim aka Gandalf insisted on being our celebrant, especially since--in his words--he started this whole journey for the two of us when he drunkenly slipped that Star was going to be my one. That led to the soulmate showdown that we all laugh about now, although at the time it was painful, confusing, and left me thinking I'd missed my chance.

Thankfully, that wasn't the case. All it took was a little courage from me, and an open mind from Star, and we had the chance to get to know each other and fall in love, trusting that the mountain spirit *has* never been wrong. But even before we heard the call, I must've subconsciously known she was meant to be mine because there is no denying that I've always been drawn to her.

On top of all of that, the most beautiful thing to come out of all of this has been understanding that deep down, Star and I are kindred spirits, both of us happy to follow our dreams and each other's too.

Together with Nelly--who is *still* a vampire goat no matter how big she grows--we've been to two rodeo events since Kinleyville and returned home ten days ago ahead of our wedding. After today, we'll be home for a few more weeks before hitting the road again, this time incorporating a honeymoon trip through the Canadian Rockies before circling back for another rodeo in Fairbanks in late September.

Our new ranch hand, Delilah, has settled in like she was always meant to call Bull Mountain Ranch home. She and Toby have an...*interesting* working relationship, with only one of them wanting that pairing to be *just* professional. Then again, Star and I are proof that the Call works in mysterious ways, so when we're back on the road, I have no doubt that Cora, Mags, Red, and the rest of my family will be calling us with updates on whatever the mountain spirit decides to do with those two. Needless to say, Toby's previous advice about 'not wasting time' is now his ethos and he's often heard complaining about how the mountain isn't moving quickly enough. Little does he know that fate has her own timeline, she writes her own story. We're all just along for the ride.

But today is not about my brother and his hopeful One, it's about me and mine.

"You ready, Lan?" Toby asks from where he stands next to me, Rhett, Austin, Red, and Wyatt all lined up alongside him.

"I was born ready," I say, shooting him a side glance but unwilling to look away from the closed doors to the church. Star is due to arrive at any moment, and despite knowing that brides are notoriously late for weddings, the Sallys promised me that they'd get all the women here on time.

"I still think the weddin' should come first then the courtin'," Toby grumbles. "Would sure make life a hell--" he winces, looking around the room as if realizing where he is before correcting himself. "I mean, a *heck* of a lot easier."

Gandalf chuckles, clapping Toby on his shoulder. "Toby Graham, if there's one thing to know about the Call, it's that it cannot be rushed. Sometimes it can take years, sometimes a few weeks, no one except the mountain knows."

"See," Rhett says, elbowing Toby. "We're all sayin' the same thing. You're just not listenin'."

"That's 'cause I don't get *why* it has to take so long. If you know you're next in line, then why wait? There's far too much fun to be had."

We all chuckle at that. "Well maybe the mountain thinks *she* wants to have some fun with your journey before lettin' you settle down and have all the types of *fun* you're probably thinkin' of," Red replies.

"Time's a wastin', that's all I'm sayin'," Toby grumbles. "Dell doesn't even act like she *likes* me half the time."

"To be fair, you're tryin' to force a Call when it hasn't been heard yet," Rhett adds.

Toby sighs. "Maybe Dell's just not listenin'."

"Or *maybe*, you're just being stubborn and impatient?" Gandalf says, arching a brow.

A loud honk of a car horn outside signals my One's arrival, and it takes everything in me not to run down the aisle to get her. I've never been a possessive man, but when it comes to Starchild, I want my silver band on her finger and hers on mine.

The doors to the church swing open and one by one the Sallys walk in, joined by Star's mom, Julie. Red, Rhett, Austin, and Wyatt all step down from the altar and meet the women down the aisle, escorting them toward me. I greet them all, giving them a hug and a kiss on the cheek before they take their seats in the front row on the bride's side of the room.

Then Greg moves to the church's old piano as the sweet sound of the keys fills the air, signaling my bride's entrance.

Cora and Mags enter first with Nelly walking between them held firmly on her lead.

"Baaa" she bleats as she trots toward us wearing her pink collar and what looks like a tie-dyed tulle skirt around her flank.

I hold my breath and then just as fast lose all of the air in my lungs when Gramma, Star, and Star's father, Graham, appear in the doorway. In that moment, it's as if everything else fades away, leaving just me and my future wife.

There's no missing the look of surprise and delight on her face as she takes in the beautifully decorated church and all of our friends and family who have gathered to witness our union. All of the small details being planned by Gramma and the Sallys.

I count every single step she takes, unable to tear my now wet eyes away. And when she comes to a stop in front of me, I barely stop myself from grabbing for her.

"Hi," I mouth.

"Hey," Star mouths back.

"Guess it's time we get this party started. What do y'all think?" Gandalf asks, earning snickers, laughs, and a loud cheer from Toby.

"*That's* what I'm talkin' about. Time's a wastin', I tell ya." The sound of Star's giggle and her crinkled smile has me committing yet another moment to memory.

"OK, Toby. I'll begin, just for you."

"Much appreciated, Gandy," my brother replies.

"We are gathered here today to witness the union of Lan and Star, two souls brought together by the Call of the mountain spirit and a bit of spilled drunken secrets from yours truly." Another wave of murmured laughter fills the air. "Before we begin, who gives this woman to this man?"

"I do," Gramma says, loud and proud, albeit a little rough with emotion. She sneaks a glance at Star's dad who looks amused rather than put out. "I mean, *we* do," she adds before turning to Star. She cups her jaw in her hands and stares deep into her eyes. "I love you, child. You are the best thing to happen to me, to him, to everyone. Never forget that." Then with a kiss on the cheek, she steps back.

I step forward and place a kiss on Gramma's cheek.

"Thank you for everything, Gramma."

I pull back and meet her soft gaze. "You're welcome, Landry Graham. I'm glad you were everything I always knew you'd be and more."

Gramma then places Star's hand in mine, squeezing them together with her fingers before moving with Graham to join the Sallys and Julie.

We both turn to face Gandalf and I realize that more than ever before, I feel complete—like everything that's ever been missing is now here with her.

"Landry, do you take Starchild to be your lawfully wedded wife, to love, honor, and cherish her, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, till death do you part?"

"I do," I say, my voice ringing loud and clear through the church.

"And Starchild, do you take Landry to be your lawfully wedded husband, to love, honor, and cherish him, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, till death do you part?"

When Star says her "I do," her voice is just as clear and strong as mine.

After that, we exchange simple and heartfelt vows, words that speak to the love that we share. When we give each other our wedding rings, I know that this is the beginning of a beautiful life together.

Then it's party time, and just like our engagement party months earlier, the night is long and loud, but also fun and memorable.

And as we're pelted with daisies while running out of the hall at the end of the night, I pull my new wife to a stop next to my waiting truck.

She eyes me curiously. "Lan, what are you—?"

Before she can finish her sentence, I grab her by the waist, pull her in tight and dip her back before laying a hot, deep, and *very* long kiss on her lips in front of all of the town.

And when we finally return to the ranch for good after a few more rodeo seasons on the road, *that* is the photograph we hang above the fireplace in our new forever home right next to the mountain.

But wait... there's more...

EPILOGUE 1 - STARCHILD

3 years later

Another rolling wave of muscle contractions contort my rounded belly and I can't hide my wince of pain as I try to settle my breathing as much as possible while also counting the seconds in my head.

We're still three hours from home, our plan—well, what *was* our plan—was to be home for a few weeks before the birth of our first child. I had visions of having time to nest and relax as well as getting our new cabin ready for the arrival of our son. My gut is now telling me that *won't* be happening this time around.

As soon as we hit the road after leaving Beaver Creek this morning and crossing the border from Canada back into Alaska, I knew today was not going to be just another day. Especially after the restless night I had with a lot of what I *thought* were false contractions.

The pain finally subsides and I let out a deep breath, trying to ignore the sweat that's beading on my forehead and the low-burning ache that's getting super hard to ignore down below. I glance over at Landry whose sole focus right now is driving our truck and trailer safely through the winding mountain roads. He sneaks a look my way, concern etched in his features.

"You okay?" he asks, his voice thick with worry.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. I don't want to worry him any more than he already is. I know he's been anxious about the birth, especially since we're so far from home. But we couldn't pass up the opportunity to explore Canada's wilderness before our son arrived.

But now that the contractions continue to get closer and definitely

stronger, all signs are pointing to our baby inheriting my free spirit genes. It seems he wants to be born on the road and not at home on the ranch like we'd planned.

I close my eyes and focus on my breathing, trying to find some semblance of calm in this chaotic moment.

"I think we should find the nearest town with a hospital and sit tight. We're not gonna make it home in time, babe," Landry says, reaching over to squeeze my hand.

"I'm OK, Lan. I promise. Maybe it's just false labor, you know, like the Braxton Hicks contractions I've been havin' for a few weeks." My voice sounds hopeful but I'm pretty sure I'm fooling myself now. Landry's tightly knitted brow tells me he doesn't believe me either.

This is definitely the real thing, and my only comfort is that the contractions are still fifteen minutes apart. They *are* getting stronger though, which means they're going to get closer, and soon we will have to make a decision.

I cradle my stomach with both hands, rubbing my palms over the swell, feeling our son moving inside, comforted by the fact that he's still happy and healthy.

"Tryin' to get comfortable in there, are we?" I say, a small smile curving my lips.

Landry's hand rests over mine. "He kickin' up a storm again? I swear he's gonna be ridin' a horse before the end of his first year with those legs of his."

I laugh, shaking my head. "Not if *I* have anythin' to do with it."

"OK, OK," Landry chuckles. "Maybe when he's two then."

"Maybe," I hum.

"What do you want to do now? Do we keep tryin' to get home?" he asks me and I can *feel* that he's anxious, just like I am.

In the three and a half years we've been together, our connection has only grown stronger. We can feel each other's emotions--Landry's nerves and excitement before a big event, my pride at seeing my husband charm and dazzle the big rodeo crowds and even my homesickness when I talk to Gramma and the Sallys on our weekly group chats.

And right now, he's worried and unsure what to do. We both wanted our son to be born in Spring Haven, just like we were, but deep in my gut I know that fate had one last card up her sleeve and she wants our boy to be born on the road. Something I sensed last night when I dreamed of tall trees and a

sunny lookout, overlooking the mountains and a lake. I didn't recognize the place but it felt meaningful, like it was somewhere we were *meant* to go.

That memory sparks an idea. "Do we have that map in here?"

Landry's brows lift. "Yeah, I think it's in the glove compartment, but I'm not sure there's a quicker way to get over the range to Bull."

I flick open the cover and pull out the large folded piece of paper. I find where we are now, before looking all over the area for a combination of a lake and the mountains, hitting pay dirt moments later.

I look ahead and see the highway sign we need. "Turn right in a mile."

"What?"

"Remember that dream I had last night? With the mountains and the lake and the tall trees?"

Landry's frown deepens. "Yeah?"

"I think that we're meant to go there."

"You sure, babe? I love and trust you, but I think today is gonna be our son's birthday so I'm not sure we have time for any detours."

I feel the tell-tale tightening of my stomach again and grit my teeth. "Please, Lan. We're not gonna make it home in time for this little one. The universe, my readings, my gut instinct, and even the mountain spirit haven't let us down yet. I think we need to go to *this* place." I hold up the map and point to the lake. "*This* is where our son is meant to be born."

He slows down as the turn approaches, locking eyes with me before nodding and moving the truck down a long winding road, the canopy of tall trees above us forming a long tunnel with a bright light at the end, just like in my dream.

At the end, the trees open up and we come upon a clearing overlooking the lake with the mountain range stretched out behind it in the distance.

As Landry pulls the truck to a stop, I'm filled with an overwhelming sense of calm and rightness. *This* is where we were always meant to be. Then of course I'm hit with another contraction and I'm too busy panting and hissing through the pain to appreciate the beautiful scenery around us.

The moment Landry helps me down from the truck though, my waters break all over the ground and our feet. If I had any doubt before, I don't now. Our son is definitely on his way.

I lean heavily on Landry as we make our way to the trailer, eventually getting inside. Then I spread out on the bed, taking the chance to catch my breath before the next contraction hits.

My ever-protective husband makes quick work of putting towels and blankets underneath me before propping all the pillows we have behind me on the bed to make sure I'm as comfortable as a woman about to give birth in a trailer can be. While I get myself undressed and ready, Landry puts in a call to the fire station in the nearest town to come and find us, if for nothing else but to check everything's OK.

"I'm gonna ring Gramma," he says after helping me through another contraction, the waves coming thick and fast now. It's as if our son has decided there's no more time to waste.

"Gramma? It's Lan. Yeah. We're OK. Seems like your great-grandbaby wants to make his entrance a few weeks early though," he says down the phone. "Mmm hmm.... yeah... nope, we're off the road. Star directed me to a lookout by a lake... yeah?" His eyes lock with mine as a soft but somehow still tight smile curves his lips. "You had a dream too? Seems the women in your family have somethin' in common."

He rubs his spare hand over my shoulder, caressing gentle soothing circles over my skin. "Yeah, she's doin' OK. She's a trooper, our Star... I will. You know I will... Do you wanna speak to her?" he asks before nodding and handing the phone to me.

"Gramma," I breathe, my breaths coming out short and hard as that all-too-familiar tension starts to grow in my belly again.

"Gramma?"

"Child, you're not one to do things the easy way, are you? Of course, your son is gonna be the same. But it's all gonna be OK, child. I believe in you. If anyone can do this, it's you."

"I know," I breathe, gritting my teeth.

"Women have been doin' this for centuries. Just trust your body and let it happen," she says, her voice warm and gentle in my ear.

"Yeah..." I sigh before a rough cry is torn from me.

"You can do this, Star. I know you can," she says as tears gather in my eyes. "You're about to meet your first child, a son, half of you and your soulmate. It's a beautiful moment."

"That was *meant* to be happenin' at home in a few weeks," I grind out.

"Yeah, well. It's not like anythin' else has happened normally with you two, is it? This is just another step in the journey the spirit wanted for you and your One. I love you. Always remember that."

"Love you too, Gramma."

I end the call just as another powerful contraction hits. The pain is more intense now, the waves coming quicker and with more force, but I still feel the calmness that settled over me when we arrived at this spot.

I focus on the task at hand, bringing our baby into the world. Landry's voice is soft and reassuring as he whispers words of love and encouragement from where he's kneeling between my legs. He holds his hands out for mine and with our fingers laced, I draw all the strength he's giving me to push through the pain, knowing that each one is bringing us closer to finally meeting our son.

From there on in, the contractions come hard and fast, every muscle in my body straining with the effort. But Landry is my rock and gives me everything I could ever want and need, holding my hand and reminding me to breathe. I feel his love and support surround me, giving me the strength to keep going.

And then, finally, after what feels like an eternity, I feel a release of pressure and with one final push, our son is born with a startling, glorious cry. Tears of relief and joy stream down my face as he gently places our son on my chest, his tiny body warm and wriggling against my skin.

"I love you so much. You and our son, our life, all of it, everythin' is so much better just for havin' you in it," he says, looking between me and our beautiful boy.

"I love you too," I sob, unable to tear my eyes away from our bundled-up baby as I bring him to my breast.

Landry moves to lie next to me, watching us closely. He leans in, cradling my cheek and locking his eyes with mine as he presses a soft, gentle kiss to my lips.

"Journey," he murmurs when he pulls away.

"Huh?"

He nods down to our son. "His name. Journey."

My heart soars then sighs. "Yeah," I say, resting my head against my husband's as we both stare at our boy. "Journey. It's perfect."

And some would say, so very apt. Especially when I remember where we are—Journey Lake.

EPILOGUE 2 - LANDRY

Five years later

My life has changed a bit over the past five years. Before Starchild and I got together, my life was my family, the ranch, and the rodeo before that. Now, It's Star, the ranch, and now Journey, who's always by my side. If he's awake, and I'm awake, then he's with me.

Whether it's the barn, the stockyard, or fixing things around the ranch, he wants to be helping his daddy. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Today's no different. Come sunrise, he came into our bedroom as quiet as a mouse and gently patted his hand on my arm until I woke up. Then, after getting dressed and armed with my cowboy brew and *his* version of 'bwew' aka warmed-up milk, we left Star and our unborn daughter in her belly to sleep in.

We checked the calves and the pregnant heifers for any new arrivals overnight, and joined my brothers, Red, Wyatt, along with the few ranch hands we have on staff now, and set out to get all the rest of the daily jobs out of the way before noon.

By the time we return to our cabin for lunch, we find a note from Star telling us that her, Nelly, and Cora have gone up the mountain for a picnic and yoga and inviting us to join them.

"What do ya think, son? Should we go find Mama for a picnic?"

"Picpic," he says excitedly, clapping his hands and running off down the hallway to his room. I slowly follow him, leaning my shoulder against the doorway as he packs his little backpack with his favorite stuffed goat toy. *Apparently that's all our son needs for a picpic.*

The two years since Journey's eventful birth have been amazing but also eye-opening. Star and I thought starting our family would be seamless and he'd just slot right into our normal daily lives. Nothing could be further from the truth. That boy of ours has his Mom's spitfire attitude that's thankfully evened out with my laid-back, take-it-as-it-comes approach to life. He loves fiercely, feels everything deeply, and loves to explore just like Star and I do.

But he can also throw a tantrum like an ornery bull and has a wild independent streak that keeps us on our toes. We've even caught him heading off on his own little 'adventures' around the ranch with his partners-in-crime, Nelly and Duck Norris. And if he's not here on the ranch with us, he's either at Rhett and Cora's house playing with his twin cousins, Lincoln and London, or causing havoc with the Sallys in town.

One thing is undeniably true though. Other than my wife, he is and always will be the best thing that ever happened to me.

"Go. Go," he says, stopping in front of me and tugging on my hand. "Nelly waitin'. Daddy."

I chuckle at his eagerness and lead the way out of the cabin, heading straight for the mountain trail not far from the cabin my brothers and I built for our new family.

About twenty minutes into our hike, Journey and I stop for a drink before I heave him up on my shoulders and carry him the rest of the way. That doesn't mean our walk is quiet though, because my son is always talking, and as we scale the mountain he points out every animal and plant he sees, telling me all about the colors and the sky, the wind, the calves, Uncle Tobes, Austin, Red, Mags. You name it.

When we reach the top, I stop suddenly at the sight of my five months along wife bent into a downward dog yoga position, her body framed by the bright blue horizon behind her.

It's not a new view, Star is always seeking new and different ways to clear her mind and achieve zen. It helps her help all of her customers who flock to her at every town market, church fair, and shop. Happy Aura's has never been more popular either. Especially now that the Sunday School Sally's have officially gone into business with what they call their 'side-hustle' private eye business. But that's a *whole* other tale.

But it's not my gorgeous wife and my sister-in-law doing yoga on top of the mountain that has me staring in shock, it's the fact that *Nelly*, our still small but not a baby goat kid anymore--is *standing* on top of Star's butt. And

on top of her back is Duck Norris *and* two of his new ducklings.

"What the he--heck," I stage whisper, catching myself before cursing.

"Nelwy!" Journey calls out, wriggling on my shoulders to be let down.

I carefully lower Journey to the ground, my eyes still fixed on the goat and duck pile on top of Star's yoga mat. My wife looks up, a serene smile on her face, and waves to us.

"Hey. What do you think of my new yoga pose? I'm calling it my downward goat with a duck. Or maybe downward duck with a goat. It's a work in progress," she says, laughing at her own joke.

"Think I'd prefer my pregnant wife *without* animals climbing all over her," I say but I don't even try to fight the grin tugging at my lips.

Journey runs towards his favorite four-legged friend and the duck with only one, and I follow close behind, heading straight for my free-spirited wife.

"Journey, be careful," I call out, but he's already wrapping his arms around Nelly's neck. Duck Norris quacks happily from his perch but still jumps down to the ground, leaving Star room to carefully get out of her pose and roll over to sit down on her mat.

Cora shoots me an amused grin. "Don't look at me like that, Landry Graham. Your wife is a force to be reckoned with. You should know that by now. I couldn't stop her from doin' it."

I chuckle, knowing she's right. Star has always owned who she is and I wouldn't have her any other way. But seeing her on top of a mountain, doing yoga with a goat *and* a duck piled on top of each other is definitely a new achievement, even for her.

With Journey busy playing with Nelly and Duck Norris under Cora's supervision, I join Star on her mat, slotting myself behind her with my legs framing her body on either side. When she leans back against my chest, I wrap my hands around her and slowly rub her belly.

"You look beautiful even when you're givin' me a mini heart attack with all those animals on ya," I muse, brushing my lips over her temple.

She smiles up at me, her hands covering mine just as our daughter kicks against us.

Star giggles, her dancing eyes finding mine. "Guess our little Harmony in there wants to say hello to her Daddy."

"Hmm. Can you imagine what life is gonna be like when she arrives? It's gonna be busy, babe."

"Well as long as this one's arrival is a little less eventful than her brother's one, then busy is fine. Good even."

I lift a hand to her jaw as my gaze roams over her face. "Everything with you is good. Just like I always knew it would be." I slowly lean in and capture her lips in a soft, sweet kiss.

Star's eyes twinkle mischievously when we break apart. "Cora and Rhett have offered to have Journey overnight for a sleepover with his cousins. You know what that means right?" *I sure hope I do...*

"Rooftop date night!" she says. She must read my thoughts on my face because she dissolves into giggles, burying her face in my neck.

I hold her close, grinning out across the view of the best place on earth--the ranch, our home, our everything.

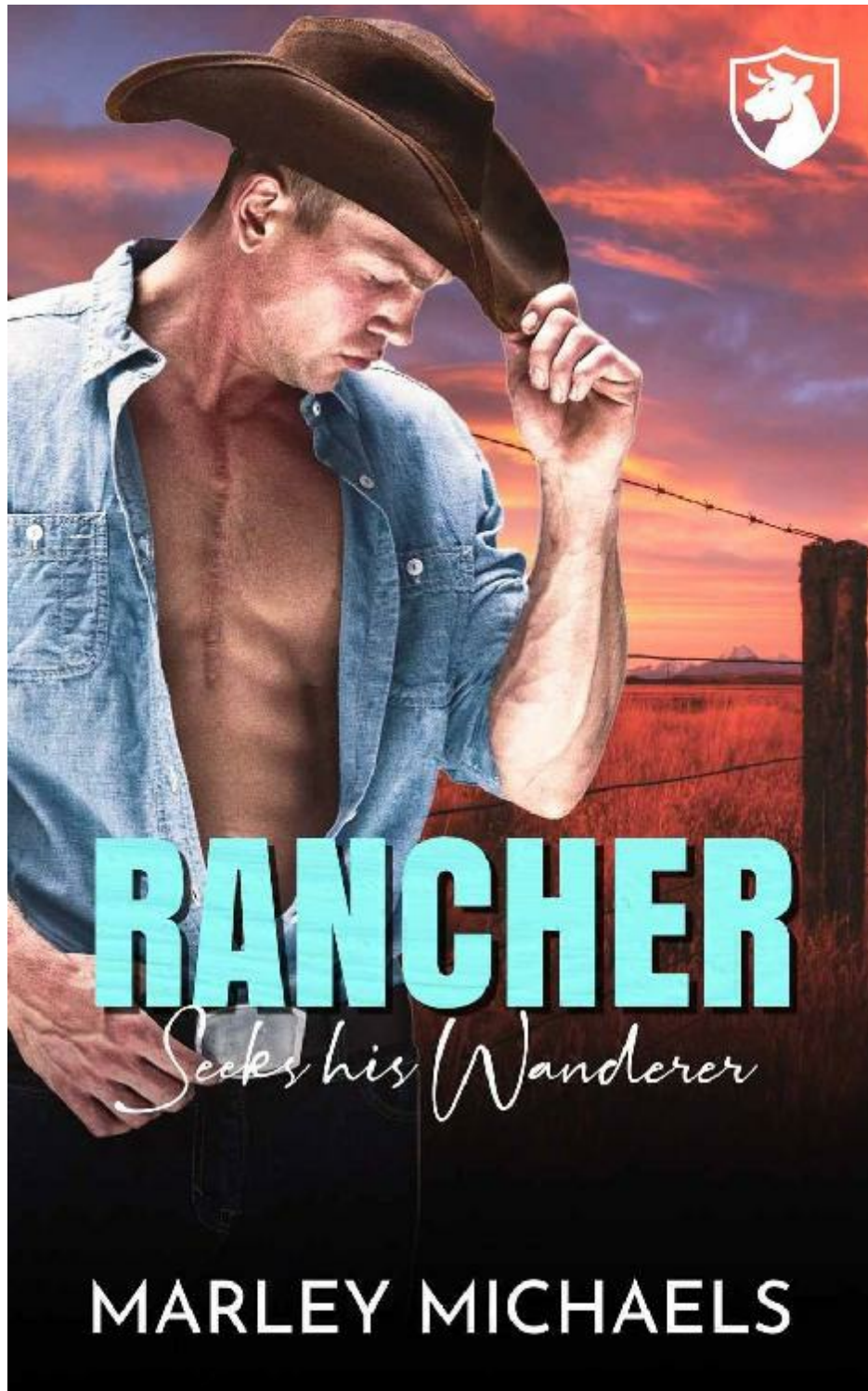
Life is never dull with my Star around but I know to the depths of my soul that it was never meant to be any other way.

Whatever comes our way, wherever our journey leads us from here on in, I'm excited for the new adventures that await us. And at the end of the day, that's all a man like me could ever ask for. Love, happiness, and a fulfilled life.

Lucky for me, I have all of that and then some.



Also keep reading for an exclusive bonus scene featuring the Sunday School Sallys [HERE](#). Next up at Bull Mountain Ranch will be Toby and Delilah in [Rancher Seeks his Wanderer](#).



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I can't wait to have more fun on the Mountains with you!

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If you're anything like me, you can never get enough of your favourite book characters. And when it comes to the men and women of Bull Mountain Ranch, it's no different.

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Moose Mountain Brothers

Author Seeking Mountain Man
Introvert Seeking Mountain Man
Fangirl Seeking Mountain Man
Hiker Seeking Mountain Man

Men of Moose Mountain

Mountain Seeking Doctor
Mountain Seeking Pilot
Mountain Seeking Hero
Mountain Seeking Fire Chief
Mountain Seeking Veterinarian
Mountain Seeking Princess
Mountain Seeking Santa

Bear Mountain Brothers

Wallflower Seeks Mountain Man
Reporter Seeks Mountain Man
Artist Seeks Mountain Man
Baker Seeks Mountain Man
Dancer Seeks Mountain Man
Teacher Seeks Mountain Man
Runaway Seeks Mountain Man
Little Dove Seeks Mountain Man
Cowgirl Seeks Mountain Man

Eagle Mountain Brothers

Cowboy Seeks a Horse Whisperer
Cowboy Seeks a Romantic
Cowboy Seeks a Healer
Cowboy Seeks a Wild Child

Cowboy Seeks a Wife

Cowboy Seeks his Queen

Cowboy Seeks his City Girl

Cowboy Seeks his Redemption

Bull Mountain Ranch

Rancher Seeks his Soulmate

Rancher Seeks his Reward

Rancher Seeks his Free Spirit

Rancher Seeks his Wanderer