



RIDING

into

FIRE

J.P. COMEAU

Riding into Fire

A Second Chance Romance

J.P. Comeau

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Chapter One

The Unexpected Call Jack

I sat back in my squeaky chair, feet propped on the desk, eyeing the dusty bull-riding trophy next to a stack of unfinished paperwork. The trophy was from a rodeo back in Cody, a small token from a past life I sometimes missed and sometimes wished to forget. It stuck out like a sore thumb in the no-nonsense vibe of the U.S. Forest Service Bureau of Land Management office, but then again, so did I.

"Johnson, you ever gonna file those reports?" Dave, a.k.a Big Red, poked his head through the door, his red beard looking like it had caught fire.

I grinned. "Paperwork's just kindling, Dave. You, of all people, should appreciate that."

Big Red strolled up to my desk, a wad of chewing tobacco stuffed in his cheek. He spat into a nearby soda can, making a face. "Well, can't argue with that logic."

He was a tall, imposing man, broad-shouldered and muscled like an ox. His bright red hair and matching beard were so thick that I sometimes suspected they were part of some genetic experiment by a mad scientist bent on creating the ultimate firefighting machine.

He tossed a fresh can of dip onto my desk, plopping down on the spare chair like he owned the place. To be fair, he did - whenever our team got into a tight spot, Big Red's know-how usually got us out. The guy was a wizard with a backhoe and could bulldoze fire lines in his sleep.

"So, you hear the news?" he asked, leaning back and rocking his chair on

its hind legs. "Looks like we might get relocated. Bets are on Montana or Wyoming."

I felt a jolt of excitement or dread. I couldn't tell. Wyoming was home, but it was also a book I thought I'd closed except for family visits. "Oh really? Well, you know what they say: wherever there's smoke, there's us."

Right as Big Red headed back to his station, the door burst open, and Chloe "Spark" O'Connor walked in with a clipboard in one hand and a smirk on her face. She wasn't afraid to make her presence known. Spark caught sight of my rodeo picture and paused.

"Wow, Johnson, a rodeo champ? Was 'Firefighter' not enough of a macho title for you?" She raised an eyebrow, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Hey, Spark," I shot back, "It's never too late to add 'bull rider' to your resume, too, you know?"

She chuckled. "I'll stick to manipulating weather data, thanks. Less bull, more science."

I grinned. "Well, if you ever decide to switch, you've got the perfect nickname for it."

"Touché," she said, eyeing the trophy on my desk before heading to her workstation.

Then TJ burst into my office, his eyes immediately darting to the newly placed rodeo photo and trophy. "Whoa, Jack! You redecorating or something?"

I looked up from my desk, chuckling. "Just found some old memorabilia and thought, why not? Adds a personal touch, you know? You guys should bring in some stuff, too."

TJ looked around with admiration. "Looks great," he said. "And I'm sure it gives you a sense of pride. Man, you're braver than I thought!" TJ exclaimed, genuinely impressed.

"Brave or just young and foolish," I grinned. "Ever thought about rodeoing, TJ?"

He chuckled. "Man, if I ever tried, it'd be barrel racing. Less risk of getting gored."

"I don't know. Barrel racing has its own challenges," I said, leaning back in my chair.

"Yeah, but with your coaching, I bet I could take 'em on," he flashed a confident smile.

"Keep dreaming, kid," I laughed. Our Denver office felt a little more like

home suddenly.

My phone buzzed on the desk, the caller ID flashing "Dispatch." I picked up, already guessing it'd be something serious. We didn't get calls. We got missions.

"Johnson here," I answered crisply, straightening up in my chair.

"Jack, we've got a situation. Wildfire risks near Yellowstone. You and your team are being deployed." My eyes flicked to the map hanging on the wall of the Yellowstone National Park area. Close to home. Real close. "Copy that, Dispatch. When do we move?"

"ASAP. We're coordinating with local authorities. I'll send you the details."

"Understood," I said, hanging up. I swiveled to face my team. "Pack your bags, folks. We're heading to Yellowstone."

"Yellowstone? That's like the holy grail of firefighting," TJ piped up, eyes wide.

Spark smirked, "Let's hope it's not a one-way ticket to Hell instead."

Big Red chuckled, "Well, if it is, I'll be driving the bus."

I grinned, shaking my head at their banter. "All right, let's move. This is the real deal, and you know what they say: Only we can prevent forest fires."

And just like that, the room filled with a rush of energy, a mix of anticipation and readiness. We were about to ride into the fire, but if anyone could handle it, it was us.

As the room buzzed with preparations, my gaze slid back to that damn rodeo photo. For a moment, the sounds of laughter and chatter faded. There I was, a cocky kid in chaps and a cowboy hat, clinging to a bucking bull like my life depended on it. A lifetime ago, or so it felt.

My thoughts drifted back to Cody. The Flying J Ranch. Home. A place that hadn't felt like home for a long time. I ran my thumb along the picture frame, its texture pulling me back to a past I'd left behind but never really escaped.

The rodeo life had given me purpose and a sense of freedom, but it had cost me something, too. Someone. And now we were headed to Yellowstone, right into my old stomping grounds.

"Jack, you good?" Spark's voice cut through my daydream.

I shook off the nostalgia, looking up. "Yeah, just thinking..."

"Thinking about what, Jack?" Chloe squinted, trying to read my mind.

"Thinking' we've got a fire to fight!"

"Last time I checked, that's what we got paid for," she smirked.

But as I turned away, my mind wouldn't let go of the photo or the memories it conjured up. We had a fire to put out, but I had personal fires smoldering, too. Ones that might flare up if I got too close to home.

I glanced at my monitor as a new email notification pinged. The subject line read, "Urgent: Fire Coordination at Yellowstone Northeastern Coordinate." My stomach tightened as I clicked it open. The email was from forestry inside the park. It laid out the situation—fire on the northeastern side, near the Montana border. They had all the heavy machinery in place, but we were being called in to assist with their efforts.

"Alright, listen up," I said, capturing the room's attention. The chatter died down as all eyes turned to me. "Like I said, we're headed to the park. The wildfire is up near the Montana border. We've been called to coordinate air cover for the retardant drops and wait for additional orders."

Big Red chewed on his tobacco thoughtfully, a nod of acceptance. "Finally, some action."

Spark looked up, her eyes serious for once. "Yellowstone, huh? You ever thought you'd go back to Wyoming?"

TJ grinned, oblivious to the tension. "Yellowstone? That's awesome! Always wanted to see the place."

I ignored Spark's question, though it hung in the air like smoke. "Pack your bags. We leave in two hours."

As the room erupted into a flurry of movement and conversation, I felt a tinge of something I couldn't quite place. Apprehension? Dread? I was going home. And as much as the firefighter in me was ready for this, the man who once rode bulls in rodeos wasn't so sure.

I stared at the email again, the cursor blinking like a ticking time bomb. Duty called, and I was going to answer. But deep down, I couldn't shake the feeling that this fire would demand more from me than I was prepared to give.

The atmosphere in the room was a mix of adrenaline and unspoken tension as I handed out assignments.

Spark pushed back from her desk, arms crossed. "You sure you're not just trying to cowboy your way out of paperwork, Jack? I've still got reports to run. Can't we fill out these forms later?"

Before I could retort, my phone buzzed with a call from an unknown number. I answered quickly, stepping away from the chatter.

"Johnson," I said, almost mechanically.

"Jack, it's Diaz," the voice came through, all business as usual. In my mind's eye, I saw our commander—always crisp, with a no-nonsense demeanor framed by a silvering buzz cut. "The situation's escalating. A chopper will pick you and your team up in an hour. You'll be taken to the air transport, and it's pre-loaded with your heavy equipment."

The gravity of the call weighed heavy on me. "Copy that." I hung up and turned back to my team. "Change of plans. Our ride's coming in an hour. Sounds like the fire is getting out of control."

Big Red let out a low whistle. "An hour, huh? Guess I'll hold off on that second cup of coffee."

Spark chuckled, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "Oh, so you're all Mr. Serious now, huh?"

TJ's eyes were almost gleaming. "This is big. Like, really big."

"Yeah," I replied, the word almost sticking in my throat. "It's big. And yes, Spark! I'm definitely serious."

They scattered to finish gathering their personal stuff, and as I looked at each of them, I was struck by a potent mix of pride and dread. We were a team, and a damn good one. Yet an out-of-control wildfire in Yellowstone Park could have epic consequences.

But as I sat back down, staring at the empty chair Spark had vacated, her words bounced around the corners of my mind. "You ever thought you'd go back to Wyoming?"

"No, Spark, I hadn't," I muttered to myself. And as I pondered that question, a knot tightened in my stomach. Because going back meant more than just battling wildfires. It meant facing a past and a person I figured I'd never have to deal with again.

I did a mental shrug. Whether I was ready or not, it was happening!

As I emptied out my locker and stuffed some underwear into my duffel, my mind focused on only one image. Emily. Emily Brooks, the heiress of Yellowstone Creek Ranch—the largest ranch in the area. Our families were both leaders in the community but stood on opposite ends of local politics — with one exception — land use.

Emily and I had found secret moments to escape the watchful eyes of the town. We'd meet up at a secluded spot near Shoshone River, away from the prying eyes of our families and neighbors. Those stolen moments, filled with innocent laughter and tentative kisses, seemed so far away now. But they had

been our little paradise, where we weren't Jack Johnson and Emily Brooks but just Jack and Emily—two kids too caught up in each other to care about land disputes and family expectations.

I glanced at the rodeo photo again, my eyes locking on the younger version of myself gripping the reins of a bull that looked more devil than animal. Cody, Wyoming. It's a hell of a place to grow up. As much as I'd wanted out of that small town, a part of me missed it—the open skies, the familiar faces, and the way news traveled faster than a prairie fire.

I missed the rodeos, too. Not just for the thrill but for the glances Emily Brooks shot my way whenever I'd manage to stay on a bull for those miraculous eight seconds. Part of me hoped my cowboy antics would be enough to make her look past Casey McAllister, the guy I figured she would end up with.

You couldn't escape history in a small town—God knows I tried. But history's got a way of digging its spurs into you, especially when you're gearing up to head back to where it all began. Suddenly, the upcoming firefight felt like a secondary concern.

Chapter Two

The Weight of the Morning Sun **Emily**

As I entered the spacious kitchen, the aroma of coffee wafted in the air, contrasting the smell of hay and livestock that clung to me. At Yellowstone Creek Ranch, mornings began well before sunrise.

Maggie, our cook, was already bustling about, prepping for the day's meals. "Morning, Emily," she greeted without looking up as I wandered into the kitchen.

"Morning," I mumbled, pouring myself a cup of coffee. It wasn't just any morning; it was another day packed with endless to-do's, and my father's health wasn't making things any easier.

After a quick breakfast—a luxury I often skipped—I headed out to meet Carl, our ranch foreman. We walked the barn's perimeter, checked the horses, and updated each other on the staff's schedules. "Let me know if we need more hands, Carl," I told him, my eyes scanning the horizon as if looking for answers to my never-ending concerns.

"Will do, Emily," he assured me. But his assurance did nothing to lighten the load I felt on my shoulders.

The ranch had its rhythms, and I had mine, blending into a relentless cycle that left little room for rest or retreat. I mentally calculated the upcoming quarter's budget when I returned to the main house.

Straightening my plaid blouse, I paused at my dad's door with my hand on the knob. As much as these visits pulled at my heartstrings, seeing Dad was always comforting, a touch of normalcy in an ever-changing world. With

a soft exhale, I stepped inside.

"Morning, Dad," I said softly, my voice imbued with a tenderness that I rarely showed to anyone else. Dad looked frail in his wheelchair. The man who had once been my invincible hero is now confined by age and illness. "How are you feeling today?" I asked, although I knew the answer would be a variation of yesterday's 'Fine, Sis, just fine.'

But today, he winked instead, "I'm feeling about the same, Em."

I sat on the edge of his bed and followed his gaze out the window. While there, I fluffed up his pillows and checked the meds on his nightstand. "We rotated the cattle to the north pasture today," I told him, my voice steadier than I felt. "And good news—the irrigation system's back on schedule. I'll catch up with Lucky about the new prescription the doctor wants you to start tomorrow." I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding and kissed Daddy's cheek. The ranch's operations were on track, and, at least for today, Dad was, too.

Lucky was Dad's nurse's nickname. She had a knack for being in the right place at the right time, like the day she managed to catch my father just as he was about to take a spill. A lifesaver, for sure. Yet, I heard the real reason was Lisa was like a rabbit's foot at the casinos. Dad never went to Vegas or the local casino without his nurse, Lisa O'Connor.

As I walked downstairs, my steps were a little heavier than when I walked up to Dad's room. For some reason, today, the ranch house walls seemed claustrophobic—a fortress that protected and imprisoned me.

I leaned against the kitchen door and sighed. It wasn't just another day—it was another day of clinging to a life handed to me. I was the youngest daughter and had filled my mother's shoes since her passing. At first, I didn't mind, but the years rolled by. At age 26, I had absolutely no social life other than what revolved around the ranch.

And so, I pushed on, thankful for the legacy I enjoyed as Emily Brooks, heir with my siblings to the Yellowstone Creek Ranch. I poured myself another cup of coffee as my phone buzzed. A smile spread across my face as I saw Sandy's brown eyes appear on my phone screen. We made eye contact, and I grinned.

"Hey, Sandy! How's Cheyenne treating you?" I beamed, picking up the phone.

"Emily! Oh my god, girl, you won't believe the drama here! Mark's senator stuff, you know?" Sandy's eyes widened for emphasis, and I laughed.

"I can only imagine. Dad's enough politics for me."

"Your brother and I miss you, Em. So, guess what? We're having a fundraiser. And get this—Marshal Johnson is coming!"

"Is he in on the fundraiser, too?"

"No, Mark's killing two birds with one stone. You know how Mark and Marshall are all into his land management projects together, a hot-button issue he shares with the Johnson family. But it's really about raising funds for Mark's reelection next year."

I sighed. "Yeah, Mark's going to need all that he can get. I hear he'll have some stiff competition."

Sandy tilted her head sympathetically. "I heard about the divorce. Tough break."

"Mark will be fine. Always is," I shrugged. "So, Marshal Johnson is involved too?"

"Yeah. He's a big donor. Plus, he has some contacts your brother doesn't have."

"Should be interesting."

"Well, then you'll want to come, won't you? Get out of that ranch for a night?" Sandy's voice was hopeful.

It was tempting. "I'll think about it."

"C'mon, it'll be fun! Get dolled up, let your hair down. God knows you need a break."

She was right. I did need some fun in my life. "All right, count me in. Send me the details, will you?"

"Will do! Love ya, girl!"

"Love you too!"

I ended the call and looked at my now-cold coffee. A fundraiser. Mark's reelection. Something different stirred inside me for the first time in a long time. I smiled—a spark of excitement!

My eyes moved from my coffee cup to the window, where the vast expanse of Yellowstone Creek Ranch, affectionately known as Circle Y, seemed to go on forever. This land had been in our family for generations. The Brooks and the Johnsons were some of the few families who survived and thrived during the westward expansion. Our forbearers had shared meals, celebrated harvests, and endured brutal winters alongside the Shoshone, building a tight-knit community that persisted to this day. The Johnsons were still very much a part of my life, but there was one exception—my high

school crush, Jack Johnson!

I strolled into Dad's room, gripping a stack of mail in one hand and a tall glass of iced tea in the other. The room smelled of well-worn leather and aftershave, a nostalgic mix that had become oddly comforting. "Hey, Dad," I greeted him, smiling.

His eyes flickered open from his afternoon nap, and the corners of his mouth lifted into a wry smile. "Em," he rasped, his voice colored with that signature gruff warmth. I set the tea down on his nightstand and tossed him a stack of letters. "Look, got some fan mail."

Dad took his time, his eyes squinting to make out the text, then finally said, "Huh, looks like someone wants to put Zeus to work breeding their mare." Ah, Zeus—our powerhouse quarter horse stallion that had raked in more awards and cash prizes than we ever dreamed. Dad's eyes lit up like a kid pulling off a prank. "Never too old to sire champions, just like me," he chuckled.

"Seems like a solid deal," I replied, laughing. I couldn't match his enthusiasm, but I appreciated it. Thankfully, Zeus's breeding calendar was not my responsibility. "Worth thinking over."

"Damn right," Dad said, his eyes clouding over with a bit of nostalgia. His gaze shifted to the window momentarily, perhaps catching glimpses of his youthful adventures—days when he'd saddle up a horse and ride to feel the prairie wind mess up his hair. I like to remember my father — the young Roy Brooks — as the shrewd risk-taker who had turned our family ranch into what it is today. His poker pals used to call him "Roll 'em Roy" for his unmatched skills at rolling dice. Those were the days before Parkinson's began to clip his wings.

The room lapsed into silence. The only sounds were the steady ticking of a rustic wall clock and, in the distance, the everyday hustle of our ranch—tractors and ranching equipment. I reached for his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze, sealing the silent pact that had always existed between us. "I got this, Dad. You can count on it."

His eyes met mine, a serene kind of assurance washing over him. "Never doubted you, Em. Not for a second."

As I stepped out of Dad's room, that familiar sense of commitment sank deeper into my bones, heavy but grounding. My phone buzzed just as I was reaching the kitchen. Glancing at the screen, I saw a new text notification light up.

Mark: Hey, sis, got a min?

Me: Sure, what's up?

Mark: Can we talk? Land management bill is coming up, need your thoughts.

I sighed. Land management was not my strong suit, unlike my older sibling, Mark, who always consulted me before making decisions about the ranch. However, his grumpiness was not what I needed today.

Me: Mark, if this is another heated discussion about ranch politics, can it wait? I'm swamped.

Mark: Just went through the divorce papers. Need a distraction.

I waited before texting him back, working to craft an encouraging note. I felt sorry for my brother; I really did. But my emotional reserves were already running on empty.

Me: I get it. It's tough. But I've got a lot on my plate too. Let's catch up later.

Mark: Fine. Later.

Pausing before pressing the 'Send' button, I considered throwing in an "I love you." But I didn't. Not today. I slid the phone into my pocket, my thoughts already drifting back to the ranch, to Dad. Mark's woes would have to wait. Like everything else around here, they would get filed under "To Be Dealt With" until I found the energy to open the file and deal the contents.

Settling in for a late lunch, I speared a piece of grilled chicken with my fork and popped it into my mouth. As I chewed, my eyes flicked up and caught sight of a faint plume of smoke in the distance, framed by the window. "Controlled burn in Yellowstone, I guess," I muttered, but my gut churned a bit.

Just then, Maggie, our cook, waltzed into the kitchen with the grace only she could muster, her eyes landing almost immediately on the smoke as she settled a loaf of freshly baked bread onto the counter. She was a woman of few words, but her eyes? Those told a novel's worth of tales. Dark, discerning eyes that held ancient stories from her Shoshone lineage.

"You see that?" I pointed my fork toward the window as if she didn't already know. My voice was casual, but I eyed her carefully for a reaction.

"Yeah," she said, taking a measured pause. "You might wanna give your

dad and Carl a heads-up, even if it looks miles away."

Her words hung in the air, momentarily nesting into my thoughts. Maggie's intuition had an eerie knack for being right. A pearl of learned wisdom, or something deeper, a sort of ancestral gut instinct that rarely led her astray.

"Yellowstone usually tips us off if they're doing a controlled burn," I mumbled, reassuring myself more than informing her.

"Usually, yeah." Her response was simple, a nod accompanying it. But the way she said it felt like an ellipsis rather than a full stop, as if a silent 'but what if...' lingered in the room.

I tried to shift my focus back to the salad in front of me, but the word 'usually' kept reverberating in my head. It mixed with the lingering taste of the greens, becoming more bitter with each passing second.

Could "usually" account for every time? It was like a splinter in my thoughts, fueled further by the subtle flicker of concern I had seen in Maggie's eyes. Her expression was a window into a much larger room where "usually" didn't carry much weight.

With a sigh, I put down my fork and grabbed my phone. Whether it was Maggie's ancestral wisdom or my newfound unease, I couldn't ignore the need to alert my father and Carl.

"Just being cautious," I justified out loud.

Maggie looked at me, her eyes softer now, "Caution is good, Emily. In these times, it's better than the alternative."

As I sent the text, I realized how much I'd come to rely on Maggie's unspoken wisdom—like an invisible handrail, always there to avoid a fall.

Chapter Three

Playing with Fire Jack

As the chopper's blades dialed back their roar to a menacing purr, I swiped a hand across my sweat-soaked forehead. We'd kicked up a mini sandstorm on landing, and now that gritty cloud was settling over the hot tarmac. Man, the Wyoming sun was relentlessly beating down like it had a score to settle, turning the air into a tinderbox.

"Alright, saddle up, crew!" My voice cut through the rotor's final grumbles. Big Red, Chloe, and TJ unbuckled and sprang into action—no clowning around, not when the clock was ticking down to disaster. Here we were, Cody, Wyoming — ground zero. This fire didn't stand a damn chance.

Captain Diaz was right there to meet us, his face stern and his eyes like laser beams. "Listen up, this is as bad as it gets. Winds are unpredictable, and the fire's moving fast."

I nodded, already assessing what needed to be done. "Immediate action?"

Diaz pointed to a map on the hood of a Jeep. "Your crew will set up an outpost right here. Water's scarce, and air support is overworked. We need you operational within the hour."

I turned to my team, the familiar surge of adrenaline flooding my brain. "You heard the Captain. Let's get going."

"Big Red, I need you on heavy machinery when we get started," I barked, "Find us a solid spot and start clearing."

Chloe, engrossed in her data pad, glanced up. "I'm on wind patterns. Give me a few."

"Perfect," I nodded. "TJ, you're with me. Check our gear! I want no surprises when we dig in."

TJ grinned like he'd won the lottery. "You got it, boss."

"Anything else we should know?" I asked Diaz.

"That's it for now," he answered, "Just get it done."

I clapped my hands, the sound sharp in the afternoon heat. "Alright, team, let's save us a national park."

I unrolled a set of aerial photographs next to the topographical map on the Jeep's hood. My eyes darted from the contour lines to the real-world images of fire lanes. Chloe and TJ leaned in, their eyes tracing my gaze. Big Red, however, was busy gnawing on a wad, gazing up at the clouds.

"Check this out," I said, tapping on the photo. "These firebreaks might as well be tinder. They're overgrown—useless. We've been handed a royal mess. Whoever's job it was to keep these cleared needs a lesson in Wilderness Management 101."

Chloe's eyes narrowed at the images. "With the wind patterns I'm seeing, embers will soar over these sorry excuses for firebreaks."

"Exactly," I said. "TJ, get me the aerial team on the radio. We're gonna need retardant drops ASAP. But not just anywhere; we need to be smart about this."

TJ handed me the radio, his eyes wide. "You got it, boss."

I clicked the radio to life. "Eagle One, this is Jack. Need a drop on coordinates 34 by 19 and 28 by 13. We're giving Mother Nature a cold shower."

The voice crackled back, "Roger that, Jack. Aerial support en route."

I smirked, handing the radio back to TJ. "Alright, team, that'll buy us some time, but let's not waste it."

I rolled up the map, looking each crew member in the eye. "We're not only fighting a fire here, folks. We're playing 4D chess with an inferno. And I don't know about you, but I've never lost a game of chess."

I zeroed in on a specific patch on the aerial photo—the northwestern border of Yellowstone Creek Ranch. Ah, now there was a piece of land begging for some attention.

"See this? Right here," I declared, jabbing my finger on the spot. "This is our Achilles' heel, folks. If we don't get a firebreak up around this ranch, we might as well hand-deliver an invitation to this wildfire. 'Dear Fire, please enjoy our scenic ranch. Best, Idiots Who Didn't Listen to Jack.'"

Big Red chuckled and spat some tobacco to the side. "You thinking of setting up a line there, boss?"

"Do bears shit in the woods? Hell, yes, that's what I'm thinking. And not any line, but the mother of all firebreaks. I want this thing visible from space," I said, feeling the adrenaline surge again. "Chloe, what's the ETA on those wind shifts? We need to act before Mother Nature decides to do the cha-cha."

Chloe flipped through her data. "I'd say you've got a four-hour window, tops."

"Alright, that's what I like to hear. Now, here's the catch," I added, pausing as I looked at the name of the ranch. Yellowstone Creek Ranch. Emily's place. A split-second shiver raced down my spine, but I shoved it aside. "We need to carve that firebreak using the ranch's dirt roads. That means we're gonna have to introduce ourselves to the good ol' ranch owners. Get their blessing, and promise not to scare their cattle."

Big Red scratched his beard. "A little diplomacy mission, huh?"

"Yeah, something like that," I muttered, tucking the maps under my arm, doing my best to keep my voice steady. "We need their cooperation, and we need it stat."

Sensing a slight tremor in my voice, Chloe narrowed her eyes but pocketed her data pad. "Want me to come along, boss?"

I shook my head a little too quickly. "Nah, I got this. I can turn on the charm when I need to. Besides, someone's got to track the wind patterns around our drop zones."

TJ grinned, "You sure you can handle ranchers, hotshot?"

"Son, I can handle a wildfire, so I think I can handle a couple of cowboys," I quipped, hoping my sunglasses hid the quick flicker of hesitation that crossed my eyes.

"Alright, you wranglers, hold down the fort. I'm off to go schmooze the folks at the ranch," I said, pausing as I glanced at Big Red. "Actually, scratch that. Big Red, before starting, you need to reload that dozer onto the trailer. Whoever strapped it down last was daydreaming. We try to pull that thing over the ranch roads, and it's gonna slip off."

Big Red squinted at the trailer and nodded. "Good catch, boss. We don't want to lose our best player before the game starts."

"Exactly. Safety first, but make it quick. I want to see that dozer ready to ride when I return," I shot back. "Chloe, keep an eye on those wind patterns,

and TJ, if I hear one hiccup on that radio, you're on latrine duty for a week. You hear me?"

Everyone chuckled, and I felt the familiar crackle of team energy. "Alright, keep the home fires—no pun intended—burning. I'm off to Yellowstone Creek Ranch. We've got work to do, people, and we don't have a minute to lose."

My grip tightened around the wheel as I hopped into one of the Jeeps. Then I kicked up a cloud of dust as I sped off toward the Brook's spread. I wasn't going there to negotiate access through some dirt roads. No, I would make them an offer they couldn't refuse—either cooperate with us or watch your ranch go up in smoke. But as the ranch came into view, the weight of my past and the stakes of the present collided, making the task ahead more complicated than any fire I've ever fought.

I double-clutched the Jeep's engine as I turned off the highway, kicking up another dusty plume behind me that would make any cowboy proud. The wooden sign swayed in the wind as I passed under it: "Welcome to Yellowstone Creek Ranch." The irony wasn't lost on me—here was a place I never thought I'd see again, especially not like this.

The moment I rolled up to the ranch, it was as if someone had tossed a lit match into a box of fireworks. Emily Brooks was at the epicenter, standing out front, directing ranch hands like a seasoned conductor leading an orchestra in crisis. Her shoulder-length red hair framed a face that was still as beautiful and intense as I remembered.

She was wearing worn jeans that fit her like a second skin and a flannel shirt unbuttoned just enough to reveal the promise beneath the fabric. It wasn't a fashion statement but spoke to the days of hard work under the blistering sun. Time had seasoned her, turning youthful exuberance into a smoldering intensity that I couldn't ignore. Her eyes were a force of nature, still striking but with an edge—the kind that whispered tales of struggle and triumph and dared a man to step closer.

Damn, if she didn't look hotter than the wildfire we were racing to put out.

Carl, her foreman and the guy who'd taught me more than a few tricks of the ranching trade was in the middle of things, too. Unlike Emily, he had aged. His hair was more salt than pepper than I'd remembered, but his back was still as rigid as the timbers supporting the ranch's barn.

The air was a living thing, thick and gravid, heavy with dust, sweat, and

the musky undertones of impending catastrophe. But the tension was the real beast—palpable, electric as if the air itself could ignite.

Seeing Emily after all these years did something to me. My heart didn't skip a beat—my heart didn't do clichés—but for a fleeting second, the wildfire, the mission, and the looming destruction all took a back seat. Emily was the eye in this hurricane of chaos, as stubborn as ever but visibly burdened. A pang of... well, let's call it concern hit me harder than I cared to admit.

But nostalgia and complex emotions had to wait. There was a raging fire with no respect for human sentiment. I shook off the feelings, but not before locking them in a mental box for later inspection. Right now, I had a ranch to save and, by extension, a past to confront.

I hopped out of the Jeep, boots thudding against the pavement. This was the place Emily grew up, where we'd shared more than a few stolen moments in my pickup back in the day. I felt a twinge of something—I won't call it nerves—but it was something. I shoved it down. I had to focus — people and property were at stake.

"Jack, what the hell are you doing here?" Emily's voice cut through the chaos as she caught sight of me. For a split second, her icy demeanor melted, but then it solidified faster than water in a Wyoming winter.

"Nice to see you too, Em," I grinned, ignoring the jab. Do you mind if my crew cuts through your little slice of heaven here? We've got to cut fire brakes on the other side of your property line, but the only way to get there is over the back roads of your spread."

Her eyes narrowed, but I could see the gears turning. This was bigger than any awkwardness or history between us. It was about the land, her legacy.

"Fine," she finally said, "but if you or your crew mess up even an inch of this ranch, you'll answer to me."

"Darlin', when have I ever messed up?" I shot back, my grin widening.

"Don't get cocky," Emily warned, but I caught that telltale twitch at the corner of her mouth.

Nodding, I tipped my Stetson and sauntered back to the Jeep, where I barked into my radio, "Big Red, saddle up. We've got the all-clear, but you better make sure that the dozer is properly secured on the trailer. We don't need any more troubles today, literal or otherwise."

As I gunned the engine, steering back onto the highway to rejoin my

crew, a pulse of something—nostalgia? Longing? —pulsed through me. Yeah, Emily was back in the picture, a drama in the middle of a wildfire. Two storms swirling around me, and I was in the eye of both. Depending on the fire's mood swings, I'd have to navigate those dirt roads—and maybe old feelings—for days, perhaps weeks.

Glancing at myself in the rearview mirror, I reminded myself of a promise I had made, "Let's get one thing straight, cowboy. Emily was, and still is, a heartbreaker. Best not to forget that unless you want another dose of pain."

But right now, there was a fire to tame. And I was just the guy who could tame the untamable.

Chapter Four

The Fire Within Emily

As I sat in the office around the oak conference table with Dad and Carl, the weight of our decisions pressed on me like the summer heatwave.

My father, who, despite his wheelchair, had never surrendered an inch of his authority, adjusted his glasses and examined the ranch's fire contingency plan laid out in front of us.

"Emily, you're our best negotiator. Call your brother, Dusty, and get him to move Zeus, Storm, and the rest of the horses to the Yellowstone Creek Ranch South in Dallas. Moving them is part of our contingency plan—a precaution, but it's necessary in case the fire turns our way. He needs to be heading for Wyoming, like yesterday!" Dad said, his voice gravelly but determined.

"Consider it done, Dad," I assured him. My eyes moved to Carl, who was already updating a list of emergency contacts. "Carl, how's the cattle situation?"

"We're ready to move them to the north pasture first thing tomorrow," Carl replied. "Forestry firefighters are keeping the situation under control so far. They don't think it'll reach our grazing areas, but you never know."

Dad nodded, his gaze flicking to the wall clock. "Let's move the stock today. You still have time. These wildfires can move at lightning speed under the right conditions."

As they discussed the logistics of manpower and equipment, my mind drifted to Jack. His reappearance in my life was like a tiny flame flickering in

the wind—unpredictable and potentially dangerous to my emotional balance. But at the moment, I had important things to do. My ranch and family needed me.

With a sigh, I snapped back to the moment. "I'll call Dusty right away. We can't afford to lose our prize horses, especially not from a fire."

Dad gave me a nod, a look of quiet pride in his eyes. "Good, Emily. Dusty hasn't come home for a visit in a while. He's too in love with Dallas and being the foreman of the Yellowstone Creek Ranch South. I'll be glad to see my youngest son."

"A visit with my baby brother would be awesome," I added, my attention landing on my family and the ranch, though the anxiety over facing Jack still lingered. I balanced a stack of folders and my phone as I sat down, grateful for a moment to clear my mind.

Then, the ringtone from the ranch's landline buzzed, signaling another incoming call. Dad gave me a nod, reaching for the phone. "I'll take it," he said, hitting the speaker. "Yeah, Mark, what's going on?"

I could hear my brother's voice, tinged with urgency. "Dad, I just saw the news about the fires. How bad is it?"

Dad eyed me and Carl for a moment. "We're still figuring it out, but you better talk to Sis. Emily's the one who spoke to the hotshots from forestry working in the area."

He put Mark on hold and slid the phone over to me.

"Hey, Em. It's bad, isn't it?"

"It's not great, but we're taking precautions," I assured him. "Why, you planning to be the cavalry?"

Mark chuckled. "Actually, yeah. I'm already on the road from Cheyenne. I've got Sandy with me. She's hell on wheels with logistics. We should be there in a few hours."

A knot in my stomach loosened ever so slightly. "I can't tell you how good it is to hear that, Mark. It'll be nice to have you home."

Dad looked up at me with relief and concern in his eyes. The depth of our situation was becoming very real, but so were the family bonds rallying together in this crisis.

"Just get here safe," I told Mark, my voice steadier than I felt. "We'll figure the rest out when you do."

With Mark on his way and logistics being sorted, the atmosphere in the office grew a tad less tense. I moved toward the window that framed a

panoramic view of our sweeping acreage, seeking a moment to think. Carl and Dad continued to murmur, hashing out details, their conversation turning into ambient noise.

Fire trucks and ambulances were assembling near the woods, causing a slight flutter in my chest. While concern for the ranch was certainly there, I couldn't deny that my nerves were more heightened knowing Jack was on the scene. Not that I'd ever admit it, but my faith in him handling the situation—like the hotshot he is—had me more anxious than the fire itself.

Then, out of nowhere, one of the truck's horns blared, jolting my thoughts. For a moment, I was whisked back in time. It was Jack's way of telling me he'd arrived—honking his horn as he pulled up to our ranch. He never stepped out of the truck immediately, always looking to avoid a confrontation with Dad. Being Daddy's baby girl meant he loved scrutinizing my friends and actions.

"Em, everything alright?" Dad's voice jerked me back into the here and now.

"Yeah," I replied a little too quickly, pulling myself from the maze of my memories. "Just taking it all in, making sure we're on track."

As I tuned back into the conversation, I couldn't shake the feeling that nothing's ever a done deal, especially regarding love. With Jack back, who knew what could happen? I was alone in the office when Carl and Dad shut the door behind them. I paced the room, my boots making soft thuds on the wooden floor. 'Should I call him?' kept circling in my head like an ear worm I couldn't get rid of.

I was at war with myself. One side insisted that I had a ranch to save—responsibilities that couldn't afford the distraction of old flames. The other side, the side that made my heart race just a bit faster, wondered what Jack was doing right then.

I took out my phone and stared at the screen. A call was too direct, but a text hit the sweet spot—business-like with a tiny dash of personal. It was the ideal balance, like walking a fine line between obligation and yearning.

Me: "Hey Jack, how's it going out there? Everything under control?"

I sent the text and slipped the phone back into my pocket. Focus, Emily, focus. But my mind had its agenda, flipping through a mental photo album of Jack's smirks and sidelong glances.

My phone buzzed, jolting me out of my daydream. And my heart did a somersault as I pulled it out to read the new message. Despite how high I'd built my emotional walls over the years, Jack still knew how to scale them.

I was fully expecting a return text from Jack. Instead, the screen lit up with Sandy's name. She was the last person I expected to hear from, especially with all the chaos.

"Hey Sandy, what's up?" I tried to keep my voice steady.

"Not much, just riding shotgun with Mark. He's so focused on the road that I'm bored outta my mind." Her voice was tinged with her usual sarcasm.

"Ah, the thrilling life of an assistant to my boring brother," I chuckled.

"Yeah, right? Marshal Johnson called Mark and told him Jack's team had come in to fight the fire. I guess you already know that, though."

Another layer in the web of my past, and of course, she'd bring up Jack. Sandy knew, oh she knew all right. She was like a walking, talking reminder of the tangled mess my life could become if I let it.

"Yeah, I heard. They're here, working west of the ranch."

"And by 'they,' you mean...?"

I sighed. Sandy never missed a beat. "Yes, Jack is here."

"Em, you okay with that?"

Was I? I looked out the window again at the distant flicker of emergency lights. "I'm not sure, Sandy. He's part of my past, a chapter I closed long ago. But now, seeing his name, hearing his voice—it's like the universe is forcing me to read through that chapter again."

"Yeah, you closed Jack's chapter, and some thought you and Casey McAllister were an item."

"Oh, don't bring up Casey again." I rolled my eyes. "He was just a friend to talk to before leaving for college."

"Well then, maybe Jack's chapter is worth revisiting," she offered.

I took a deep breath, "Maybe."

Deciding to give Maggie the night off, I tied on my apron and stepped out onto the patio. The grill sat there, a relic of so many family gatherings. I tossed a couple of steaks on it and let the sizzle fill the air. My thoughts drifted back to a summer that felt like a lifetime ago—the 4th of July at the Rodeo Extravaganza Picnic held here on the ranch. That day had started at the rodeo arena in Cody with barrel racing and bull riding but had ended with an entirely different kind of thrill in the hay loft of our barn.

When it seemed our make-out session was about to cross that line, Dad's

voice rang out from the yard. "Emily! Where are you?" We'd scrambled down from the hay loft, hastily rejoining the picnic as if nothing happened, but something had. Something neither of us could easily forget.

Snapping back to the present, I checked the steaks and moved on to prepare some baked beans. The pot bubbled away as if laughing at my little trip down memory lane. I took a deep breath and refocused. Perhaps revisiting that old chapter wasn't such a bad idea, but for tonight, my place was here, keeping the home fires burning in more ways than one.

As I sliced through a juicy tomato, my phone buzzed on the kitchen counter. I wiped my hands on a dishtowel and picked it up—a text from Jack.

Jack: Hey, Em. Long day, but the fire's under control. How's everything at the ranch?"

That simple message sent a tidal wave of relief washing over me, and not just for one reason. Every word felt heavy, each syllable like a tiny hook reeling me back into our shared past. I sat in a chair, pondering how to respond.

Me: All good here, just preparing dinner. Thanks for the update.

I hesitated for a moment before sending the text. It was a straightforward reply, but a whirlpool of what-if's and if-only's swirled beneath its surface.

I put the phone down and returned to my vegetable chopping. Yet, before I resumed, my hand veered back to the phone. Opening the text thread, I long-pressed Jack's message and pinned it to the top of our conversation. It was a small action, but significant, like marking a page in a book that I wanted to return to, even if I was terrified of how the story would end.

Soon, the deep growl of an engine rumbled through the air, gradually growing louder until I could no longer ignore it. I peeked out the window and saw Mark's black Ford F-150 King Ranch edition pulling up. A vehicle that managed to balance luxury and rugged utility—perfect for a senator who never forgot he was a rancher's son. Sandy sat in the passenger seat, completely absorbed in her phone.

I opened the door just as they climbed out, and their faces lit up.

"Hey, sis," Mark greeted me, pulling me into a warm hug.

"Emily, so good to see you," Sandy chimed in, following Mark's lead with a heartfelt hug.

"Both of you, come on in. Sandy, you remember where the guest room is,

right?" I asked as we walked into the house.

"Of course. How could I forget?" She grinned, an apparent reference to the many times she'd stayed here before.

Mark chuckled. "Still can't believe you got rid of the cowboy sheets in my old room."

"Ah, come on, Mom did that years ago. God rest her soul," I said. "Follow me, I've got dinner ready."

Dad joined us as we sat around the dining table. The savory aroma of grilled steak, baked beans, and sautéed vegetables wafted around us. But even as we laughed and caught up, part of my mind was miles away—wandering through memories, current worries, and the fire that had brought them all back to the surface.

After dinner, Sandy helped clear the table while Mark and Dad talked politics. Eventually, I excused myself, saying I wanted to check on the ranch one last time before bed.

I stepped out onto the porch and felt the evening air hit me like a cold splash of water. The sky was decked out in stars, each one a far-off world of their own. These quiet moments, man, that's when the heavy stuff weighed on me—the ranch, my family, and the jumbled mess of my feelings.

Standing there under all those stars, I got a gut feeling the real curveballs were still ahead of me. So, I took a big breath, sucking in that fresh air like it had answers.

"Tomorrow's another day," I mumbled, letting the words hang.

When I was about to head back inside, my phone buzzed, breaking the quiet. The screen lit up: "Security Breach - Western Perimeter."

My stomach dropped. That's one of our most remote fence lines, and it's close to where the firefighters, including Jack's team, were dealing with the blaze—a weak point, for sure.

"Ah, crap," I said, the moment's peace shattered. It could be a false alarm, but it was something we didn't need right now. Either way, it was like a slap in the face, reminding me that life on the ranch was full of surprises.

Chapter Five

Fanning the Smoldering Embers

Jack

The sun was setting, painting the Rocky Mountain range in the colors of oranges, gold, and yellows. Shadows crept across the ground as if they were reaching out to grab something. The alpine vista was breathtaking. Majestic mountains rose before me while pines and aspens framed the scenery like a picture-perfect postcard. Even in this relentless summer heat, the prairie grass thrust through the parched earth, swaying in the breeze.

I leaned back against my truck's hood, aviators perched atop my nose, and watched my team work their asses off. We'd been here for a few days now—expending our energy under the unforgiving sun—but that goes with the job when you're among the best in the business.

As the last rays of sunshine illuminated my aviators, my thoughts veered off to Emily. Ah, Emily, such a fiery spirit who was just as wild and unpredictable as these Wyoming lands we've been trying to save. There was so much history between us, a mess of tangled question marks. And even though it hurt my pride to admit it, I missed her like crazy. Could we patch things up? Maybe get back on friendship terms? That prospect stayed with me like a burr on a cowboy boot.

Senator Mark Brooks interrupted my thoughts, roaring up in his gleaming black F-150. He adjusted his hat as he strode toward me. This was the man Hollywood had built a career on—tall, lanky, and decked out in an oversized Stetson and western-cut suit that screamed 'billionaire politician.' He swaggered up to me, but there was nothing casual about his demeanor; it was

as if he had come for a feast, and I was the main course.

"Jack, we've got a situation," he began, puffing out his chest like he was about to present a State of the Union address.

I slid my aviators up onto my forehead. "Do tell."

"Someone's breached the perimeter of my ranch," he spat out. "And I've got a hunch it's arson."

I raised an eyebrow, skeptical. Arson? We were dealing with a fire that could ignite into an inferno at any second, and now he was trying to spin it into a criminal investigation.

"As much as I'd love to entertain your hunch," I began, choosing my words carefully, "we've got bigger fish to fry right now. The fire's almost contained, but one wrong move, and we could have a full-blown disaster on our hands."

The senator wasn't having it. "I insist on an investigation. I've got valuable assets on the ranch."

Of course, he did. And heaven forbid anything should happen to the senator's 'assets.'

"Fine," I conceded, internally rolling my eyes. "I'll talk to Captain Diaz about setting up an investigation. But I wouldn't get your hopes up. The fire's driven wild animals down from the mountains. It's more likely one of them tripped your alarm."

That appeased him, at least for the moment. "Alright, but make it fast. I want answers."

As the senator was about to head away, he stopped and locked eyes with me. His voice dropped to a warning growl. "One more thing, Jack," he seethed. "My sister Emily has enough going on in her life without any useless complications from a showboat cowboy strutting around like he's some kind of Superman." He paused for a second before snarling, "Do you understand me?"

The words hit harder than I'd like to admit. The senator might be many things, but he protected Emily—and I respected that.

"Don't worry, Senator," I replied, forcing a casual grin. "I'm just here to put out fires—literal and metaphorical."

He squinted as if trying to figure out whether he could trust me. Finally, he nodded. "See that you do. And remember, this damn arson investigation is not optional."

He turned and left, leaving me to chew on his words. The senator had just

laid down a challenge—mess this up, and you're toast, cowboy.

"TJ, get Captain Diaz on the radio, will ya?" I hollered to my go-to man, taking off my aviators and tucking them in my shirt pocket. "Tell him Senator Movie Star wants an investigation. Thinks it's arson. I think it's a load of bull, but he's a senator, so let's humor the man."

TJ gave a nod, hustling off to relay the message.

I took a deep breath and hopped into my jeep. My crew had the situation handled; now it was time for me to tend to a different kind of blaze—one that had been smoldering within me for way too long.

As my jeep rolled toward the ranch house, my gut twisted in a cocktail of anticipation and dread. What if Emily looked through my ruse? What if she didn't want to talk? This was like walking a tightrope—equally captivating and potentially lethal. I pulled into the ranch's asphalt drive, parking far from the house—no sign of the senator's shiny black truck. Perfect, there was no audience for the high-wire act I was about to perform.

When I spotted Emily, she stood out on the patio, surveying the ranch in the last few rays of the sun. She looked damn good in cutoff jeans and a tank top, her long red hair pulled back from her tanned face.

I slowly strolled toward the patio, that familiar mix of butterflies and heat flooding my veins. Emily looked up as I reached the steps, surprise clouding her face before settling into an unreadable mask.

When our eyes met, I caught her looking shocked for a sec. But hold on, was that relief I saw, too? Like we just had this unspoken 'gotcha' moment, and man, did that light up a spark of something—curiosity, desire, call it what you will.

"Jack, what brings you here?" Emily's voice was cautious, layered with a dash of curiosity that I couldn't quite read.

I offered my trademark smirk, hiding my nervousness. "Thought I'd catch up with the senator. Tell him the fire is completely under control. But since he's out playing senator somewhere, do you mind if I hang with you for a little while?"

"Mind? Not at all," Emily said, her eyes twinkling. She gestured to the outdoor kitchen just a few steps away. "You want a beer? Fridge is right there. Help yourself."

I caught her drift and walked over to the fridge, picking out a Heineken for her and a Coors for myself. As I returned, I handed her the familiar green bottle and set my hard hat on the table.

Her eyes met mine as she accepted it, visibly touched. "You remembered."

The simple gesture amped up the electricity in the air. It was small, but it felt like so much more. "So, you really came here to see my brother?" Emily murmured, her voice laced with doubt.

I hesitated before answering, looking over her delicate features. "Maybe," I finally replied, watching the sunset bathe her hair in a warm hue. "Or maybe not."

Emily smiled faintly and looked away, sipping her beer. "That's what it felt like to me. I mean, 'the maybe not,'" she said in a low voice. I wanted to reach out and take her hand, but the moment was too fragile for that. Instead, I stepped closer, close enough to feel the heat radiating from her curves.

We stood silently for a beat, both of us wading through a sea of memories and question marks. I finally broke the silence. "I've missed this, Em—missed us." I wasn't sure how she'd take it, but I needed her to know.

"In case you're wondering, being with a guy who's always on the road can get exhausting," she began quietly, locking eyes with me again. "You were always chasing another win, and I felt like I was nothing more than just another notch on your belt... or like 'Roy Brooks' trophy daughter."

My heart plummeted at her words. That wasn't how it seemed to me—but I could see how Emily interpreted things that way. Now was my chance to let her know how important our relationship had been for me. That there was more behind my actions than simple ambition or ego.

"Emily," I began softly, stepping closer so our bodies almost touched. My voice caught as emotion surged through me — this moment was too important for anything less than total honesty. And I doubted I'd have another chance to set things straight.

"All those times you thought I didn't give a damn—" The words tightened in my throat, coming out in fits and starts, yet filled with raw sincerity. "I did. More than you'll ever understand."

The last remnants of daylight slipped away, but Emily's eyes remained a source of warmth. She nodded as if to say she got it, no explanations were needed.

Suddenly, I was back in time, in those days when nothing but her mattered, and everything else blurred into the background. Feeling a rush of emotion, I grinned, and it was like she thought it, too. She leaned in, wrapping her arms around me tightly.

"You ever consider that maybe all that tough-guy act was just a cover? That maybe you meant more to me than I let on?" My words broke through my defenses, smashing walls I'd spent years constructing.

Emily's eyes widened, a touch of curiosity lighting them up. "So, all those times you had me just sitting in the stands, watching you but never really letting me into what was going on between those ears — that was 'cause you were scared?"

"Look, when you headed off to Texas for school, the thought of juggling that with 'us' seemed like a long shot," I admitted, eyes locked on our hands tangled together. "Guess I screwed up, thinking you'd always be there in the stands, cheering for me."

A gentle chuckle escaped her luscious lips as she spoke. "You know something funny? Believe it or not, my dad was always quite fond of you. But my brothers thought you always seemed to have something to prove—especially Mark."

I rubbed the back of my neck as I recognized my mistake. "Man, Emily, back then, I was dumb."

Her eyes went from lit up to deadly serious like she was feeling something words couldn't capture. "Do you remember our senior year when we were chosen as 'Most Likely to Succeed'? At the time, I thought anything was possible—ruling the world, ruling my world, and ruling the ranch."

"Yeah," I sighed, feeling all the old memories flooding back. "It seems like forever ago."

Emily took a deep breath, her voice growing softer. "So, what did Mark say to you about me?"

"He warned me that you had a lot going on," I admitted, squeezing her hand in mine. "What's happening?"

"My dad isn't doing so well right now," she said quietly. "I'm trying to keep the ranch running, but I'll admit, it's been tough, Jack."

Brushing a lock of hair out of her face, I felt my heart swell, and the air between us sizzle with anticipation. "I've thought about you, you know? Over the years, I mean. What it'd be like if we started fresh."

Her eyes met mine, flickering between hope for what could be and the kind of worry that comes when you're risking it all. "I... I think it's possible. Maybe." she said.

Unable to wait a second longer, I pulled her in, and our lips met. It was like setting off dynamite. That kiss said more than a mouthful of words ever

could—years of pent-up want and a lot of relief all rolled into one.

Heart pounding, my stomach a tight coil, I met Emily's eyes but couldn't fully let my guard down. There was a flicker in her gaze as my hand brushed against hers—a flicker that made me question what I thought I knew about her. Clearing my throat, I said, "You've crossed my mind, you know? I wondered what you were up to and if I could trust that person."

She looked up, eyes wide but layered with a caution I couldn't ignore—like she was skimming the surface but avoiding the deeper currents. Emily nodded slowly as if scrutinizing every inch of my expression for sincerity. "Are you... Jack, are you seeing anyone? I mean, you know..."

"Hell, no! No one serious," I said, clearing my throat. "I'll admit, I've had a fling or two... nothing stuck though."

She giggled and whispered, "Me either. Not in a long time."

Despite her laughter, something told me she wasn't ready to admit why things ended between us. There was still a shadow in those eyes, avoiding the elephant in the room. Trust. But damn it, desire blazed up, clouding reason. Memories of our past—intense, passionate, the kind of stuff that had kept me up at night, reliving the moment—pushed me past any reservations.

I pulled her to me in a heartbeat, our bodies molding together as our lips locked in another kiss that had much to say—years apart seemed to dissolve right then, a rush of feelings filling us up until there wasn't an inch of space between us.

It was like reclaiming borrowed time—time my gut told me would be fleeting.

I peeped at the house when we broke for air and picked up my hard hat. "Looks like your father's bedroom light is still on. Why don't we move this heart-to-heart to a walk?"

Her smile hit me like a smooth pull of well-aged whiskey—comforting and oh-so-familiar. "Sounds perfect to me."

Chapter Six

Moonlight and Memories

Emily

As Jack and I strolled hand in hand on the crisp Wyoming night, a subtle chill snaked down my spine. The sky was an ink-black canvas, occasionally punctuated by distant stars. The moon began to emerge as the night deepened, casting a gentle glow on the landscape. Our fingers remained entwined, mimicking the rhythmic swaying of the nearby trees. Crickets filled the air with their song, and the distant howls of coyotes added an eerie undertone. It was a tranquil scene, an atmosphere that seemed surreal given that a wildfire had torn through the area only hours earlier.

Before we set off, Jack had tossed his hard hat into the open window of his Jeep. We each held a cold beer, its cool surface soothing against my flushed skin. As we wandered farther along familiar spaces, the darkness worked its magic, winding back the clock and bridging the years between us.

A couple of sips and I was already floating, my head deliciously fuzzy. The beer's icy touch was like a secret whispered against my skin, mingling with the night's cool breath. Worries? They melted away, leaving me and Jack in this magnetic moment—caught in the moonlight, where romance didn't just sparkle—it smoldered.

"Wow, this beer hits differently when you're a lightweight," I laughed, a mischievous twinkle in my eyes. I leaned into him, letting my shoulder brush against his.

Jack looked at me with softened eyes, like he had X-ray vision into my lightly tipsy soul. "You hangin' in there?" he asked, a blend of jest and

genuine concern in his voice.

"Never better," I giggled, biting my lip in a way I hoped was as flirty as it felt. "Actually, it's crazy how easy it is to talk to you. Years have passed, yet here we are—like no time has passed at all." I used the buzz as my excuse but enjoyed the closeness as he wrapped his arm around my waist.

Jack chuckled, clearly enjoying my slightly bolder attitude. "Well, you're in luck because I have something bigger and better to show you. Want to go rekindle some memories?"

As we neared the barn, that old, rustic monument to our past, I felt a mix of curiosity and apprehension at what Jack had in mind for this nostalgic detour. His arm around me was a guide and support, steadying me in my inebriated state. Aware but indifferent to his ulterior motives, I couldn't help but wonder what the night had in store for us.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, making me tense up. The last thing I wanted was something to ruin this walk with Jack. I sneaked a peek at the screen and exhaled—a message from Mark, just checking in. Thankfully, no calls or texts from Dad, at least for now.

"You expecting a call?" Jack inquired, sensing the shift in my focus.

"My dad," I explained, shoving the phone back into my pocket. "I'm always on call these days, especially with his health being what it is."

"And how's he holding up?" Jack's tone turned serious as we continued walking, his arm tightening ever so slightly around me.

I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Parkinson's is a bitch, Jack. He's been in a wheelchair for over a year. The falls were getting more frequent."

"That's tough, Em. Really tough."

"Yeah, but get this," I added, the words spilling out in a bubbly stream, partly because of the beer and somewhat to delay what felt like an inevitable revisiting of history. "His nurse, Lucky, insists he's not beyond walking. She's got him doing these exercises that she swears will make a difference."

"And you don't buy it?"

I shook my head. "I think she's just trying to give him some hope, you know? She knows how to lift his spirits and make him feel like he's still got a fighting chance. But it's a double-edged sword. He still can't walk without a lot of help."

Jack sighed, his grip subtly adjusting as if he wanted to pull me in closer but resisted. "Life's complicated, isn't it?"

"You have no idea," I said as we stood at the barn's entrance. The air was heavy, with things left unsaid and feelings not yet sorted. For now, I'd steered us onto the safer ground of everyday issues. But deep down, I figured we were only buying time. Eventually, the past was gonna come knocking, and I had every intention of opening the door.

"So, this barn," Jack broke the silence, "I heard Ol' man Brooks had a couple of horses here that are worth their weight in gold."

Ah, Jack and his masterful deflections. I had to chuckle. "Really, horse breeding?" I drawled, my words a bit more slurred than I'd like to admit. "Since when did you turn into an equine enthusiast? I thought you were more into bulls and bull riding?"

Jack laughed. "I was into rodeoing Em, horses, and cattle come with it, you know," he said, leaning down to kiss my cheek. "Well, my dad always said that Ol' man Brooks is raking in the big bucks with it. Something about a golden touch with stallions and mares."

I bit my lip, holding back a grin. "Funny you should mention it, Jack. Clayton's knee-deep in that world. He's moved back to Cody and all. He runs his own veterinary business, but, truth be told, he's more often at the ranch than his office. He's practically the caretaker of Daddy's prize quarter horses—Storm, the mare, and Zeus. He's always juggling their breeding calendar and vet appointments... It's an entire operation."

The corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile. "That sounds like my brother, Clayton, alright. So focused, so driven."

"Yeah," I sighed, a tinge of warmth filling me. "I tagged along with him to Texas A&M. He was in vet school, and, get this, I was diving headlong into forestry. How weird is that?"

His eyes twinkled. "Forestry, you say? Must be something in the air—or maybe in the trees? My dad was hell-bent on me going to Colorado for college. Wanted me knee-deep in pinecones and deciduous shit."

I burst into giggles, my laughter filling the emptiness around us. "Deciduous shit? My God, you make it sound so poetic."

Jack rolled the barn door open, a grin lighting up his face. The track squeaked in protest as if hesitant to unearth the secrets we'd once buried here. Moonlight poured through the grime-coated windows, painting the hay-strewn floor in a soft glow. The air hung still, tinged with the earthy scent of hay, wood chips, and aged oak as if even it held its breath in this moment of palpable anticipation.

"You've always been a sucker for moonlit scenes," I observed, my voice tinged with wistfulness.

"And you've never forgotten the little things," he replied, smiling.

We approached Zeus's stall, and I could sense Jack's excitement mounting, almost palpable in the space between us. But before anything else, I reached a nearby hay bale, pulling a flake loose.

"I love this horse, Jack, but he can be a pain to deal with." His eyes sparkled with a youthful excitement I hadn't seen in years.

Zeus grabbed the hay through the bars of his stall, locking eyes with mine as if in gratitude.

"He is beautiful, Em. Almost as beautiful as you."

Years seemed to evaporate in that instant as Jack stood behind me, with his arms around my waist, lightly peppering kisses down the sensitive flesh of my neck. I moaned when he touched me, aching for more. His hands moved up my body to cup my breasts, each sending waves of pleasure through me, radiating down my body.

"Oh, God, Jack..." At that point, I was so needy from our flirting that I grabbed his hand and moved it lower. He got my drift and unbuttoned my daisy dukes, lingering there and caressing my skin before continuing lower into my panties. His fingers made their way down the length of my torso, causing shock waves through my body with his touch. I moaned in pleasure as Jack worked a finger between my folds and fondled my clit. Then, I arched my back against his chest and turned to meet his lips. Heat spreading through me like wildfire.

"You're so wet, Em. So wet for me," he murmured, his breath hot against my lips. "Come with me," he teased, picking me up and heading up the stairs to the hay loft. It was as if one of my favorite daydreams was coming true again. Taking two steps at a time, he asked, "Are we good, Em? Are we good?"

I knew what he meant. It was a throwback to the past. "Yes, I've taken my pill. We're good to go." I giggled.

Jack carried me up the steps, his strong arms around my body. My heart raced with anticipation as we reached the top. Moonlight shone through the rafters, illuminating a pile of fresh hay bales. Removing his shirt, Jack laid me down and climbed over me, his eyes smoldering with passion.

"You don't need this, do you?" He asked, pulling my tank top over my head and unfastening my bra with ease. His hands moved over my body,

exploring every inch as if reliving a memory. My skin burned at his touch as he massaged my nipples.

I grasped his shirt, "And I don't think you need this, do you?"

Jack stepped back. "Nope, and I don't need these or these," he growled as he threw off his boots, then off went his jeans and underwear. With a mischievous grin, he spread his legs and stepped over me, stroking his length. "You remember I could never last when you worked me over with your tongue?"

"Yes...," I whined as another surge of desire shot through my veins.

Before I could respond, he added, "I'm older now...my staying power has improved."

I rose to my knees and cupped his balls with my hand as I lapped at his cock head with my tongue. His moan was enough to make me come undone as I continued to taste him, savoring every inch of him in the moonlight. His hands tangled into my hair as he drove deeper into me.

I couldn't take it anymore, gasping for breath between moans of pleasure. Wrapping my arms around him, I pulled him down on me as I laid back.

"So, Em, what you got waiting for me?" he growled as he made quick work of my shorts, pulling them over my thighs and casting them aside. "Holy fuck, Em. You're bare..." His words trailed off as his fingers explored the newly shaven skin of my mound and, further still, towards the slick wetness between my legs.

He teased his way inside me with one finger and then another as he circled his thumb around my clit, sending waves of pleasure coursing through me like electricity. I grabbed onto his shoulders, pushing myself against him with each new movement until, finally, an orgasm ripped through me like a tsunami and left me trembling in its wake.

He smiled down at me, his eyes lit up with passion. "Oh, shit, Em. That's my girl come for me. Don't hold back."

Then Jack moved over me, heat emanating from his body as he drove himself deep inside me with one thrust. His lips found mine hungrily as we began to move together in perfect harmony, every thrust carrying us further into ecstasy.

"Jack, you're so big... I mean..." I tightly wrapped my legs around him and urged him on with each thrust. The sensations were too much to bear, and every ounce of energy was focused on pushing us over the edge together. My tits bounced with each thrust. "I'm so close, Jack. So close... I just..."

"Oh, God, so am I. Let me see you play with your clit. Do it for both of us."

Jack's words sent a shiver down my spine, and I did as he said, letting my fingers explore the slick wetness between my legs. His thrusts became quicker and more forceful with each passing second until, finally, our movements synced in perfect harmony.

I felt myself losing control again as wave after wave of pleasure ripped through me, leaving me trembling and breathless. His moans filled the air around us as he reached his climax, his body stiffening before he finally collapsed on top of me.

We lay in each other's arms, and our breathing returned to normal. Jack moved to the side so that we were lying face to face. He ran his fingers through my hair and kissed me gently on the forehead before whispering, "Em, you're still so incredible."

I smiled and snuggled closer into him, feeling a sense of contentment wash over me.

"I'm glad I can still make you feel that way," I said softly.

Jack's lips met mine again. Then, pulling away slowly, his eyes locked onto mine. "You've got this special power over me, Em... I mean..."

His words hung in the air, unfinished, as my phone on the wooden floor suddenly lit up, shattering the delicate moment. "Oh, no, I have to get that," I stammered, rolling over to snatch the device. "It's probably Dad. I need to help him into bed."

Jack nodded, his eyes filled with understanding yet tinged with disappointment. "Go, Em. Family comes first. It's time for me to be heading to the motel anyway. Tomorrow's a workday, you know."

I flashed him a grateful smile, my heart pounding for multiple reasons now. We opened the barn door and darted out, leaving Jack dashing to his Jeep.

As I rushed into the house and up the stairs to my father's room, I couldn't help but feel a mix of relief and regret. Relief that I'd managed to get back before my dad needed me desperately, and regret for the interrupted moment with Jack.

Dad was sitting on the side of the bed when I entered, a knowing look on his face. "And where have you been, young lady?"

"I was just out with the horses," I said, my voice kinda shaky, like I was trying to sell myself on the lie as much as him.

As I helped him settle into bed and tucked the blankets around him, Dad let out a little chuckle. He reached up and picked a piece of hay out of my hair. "Horses, huh?"

I could feel my face getting hot, and I was gearing up to spin another yarn when he cut me off. "Didn't I hear a Jeep roaring down the driveway just now?"

Busted. Dad always had a sixth sense for this stuff. "Okay, fine, you got me," I caved, feeling guilt and relief. "I was in the barn showing Jack Zeus."

Dad's laugh filled the room, sounding warm as a campfire. "That boy knows how to make an entrance and an exit, doesn't he?"

I grinned, feeling my heart swell and ache all at once. "Yeah, he sure does."

As I flipped off his bedside lamp, the room went dark, and my mind raced to Jack—to us—and all the unanswered questions that floated around like fireflies in the night. With a sigh, I closed the door behind me, leaving Dad to whatever dreams he had and me to wrestle with my own.

Chapter Seven

Steaks and Contemplations

Jack

A few days had passed since my trip down memory lane at Yellowstone Creek Ranch, and Emily was sticking in my thoughts more than I cared to admit. I'd just handed the arson report to Mr. Brooks, half-hoping to catch Emily there. But Roy said she was out shopping. As for the arson investigation, it was still up in the air. Inspector Mathis hadn't found any evidence yet, but under political pressure from the senator, he was keeping the case open for new leads. The quicker this whole mess got resolved, the sooner I could turn my attention to... other things.

I was about halfway back to my work site when my phone buzzed, snapping me out of my thoughts. I glanced at the screen: Dad. Perfect timing. I tapped to answer on my Bluetooth headset.

"Hey, Dad. What's going on?"

"Son, how about we grab a steak and a cold one at Rustic Ribeye Steakhouse?"

I couldn't help but smile. The Rustic was the kind of place where you could unwind and speak your mind, especially over a steak that'd make a vegetarian rethink their eating habits.

"You're on, Dad. I'll see you there."

Back at the motel that evening, I stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around my waist, steam billowing behind me. Big Red was lounging on his bed, scrolling through his phone.

"Dude, I don't know how you can stand it," I chuckled, toweling off my

hair.

"Stand what?" Big Red looked up, puzzled.

"Your own snoring. It's like sharing a room with a chainsaw."

Big Red laughed. "Hey, some people find the sounds of industrial machinery comforting."

"Sure, if they're deaf," I smirked, pulling on a fresh pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

My phone buzzed on the bedside table as I zipped up my meager suitcase. It was Dad confirming our meet-up at the steak house. I shot him a quick text back. I'd been meaning to call Mom and Dad anyway, but I'd been busy or distracted. Spending some time with Mom would be a nice bonus.

"Alright, I'm off to grab a steak with the old man. Don't wait up."

Big Red snorted. "Like I could sleep through your absence, Prince Charming."

Pausing at the door, my hand on the knob, I said, "You know, Dad did offer me a place to stay at the Rocking J for a while."

Big Red's eyes twinkled. "So you can escape my nightly symphony?"

"Something like that," I grinned, gripping my suitcase tighter. "Plus, it'd be good to see Mom."

With that, I stepped out, contemplating Dad's offer more seriously. The thought of some peace at the Rocking J, not to mention some home-cooked meals, sounded pretty damn appealing.

I pushed open the heavy, oak doors of the steakhouse, a place I hadn't been to in years. The savory aroma of searing meat and sizzling fries greeted me like an old friend. Dad was already there, seated at a corner table. He looked a tad older than he had the last time I saw him—hair more salt than pepper now, but his eyes still seemed to know more than they let on.

"Evenin', Dad," I greeted, sitting across from him.

"Jack," he smiled, "Good to see you, son. You're looking well."

"Thanks, sir. So are you," I replied, scanning the menu briefly before settling on a ribeye.

"I see the beard's making a comeback," Dad remarked, studying my face. "I've always preferred you clean-shaven."

A slight tension tightened my jaw. I was immediately reminded of one of the many reasons I left home to carve out my own path—those subtle expectations, always hovering in the air like fog. "I'll keep that in mind," I responded, trying to keep the edge out of my voice.

"I'll have the 12 oz ribeye, medium rare, with a side of mashed potatoes," I told the waitress, handing her back the menu.

"Yeah, I'll have the same," Dad said. She nodded and hurried off with our orders.

We were served our beers a few minutes later, and the small talk segued into business. But something in Dad's eyes told me he had an agenda tonight.

"So, I heard you've been spending some time at the Yellowstone Creek Ranch," he began, setting his beer down.

I did an internal eye-roll. "Yes, sir. Doing some work there. Wildfire concerns, you know."

"And how's Ol' man Brooks doing? Heard he's been under the weather."

"Roy's hanging in there," I said, sticking to a neutral topic. "His daughter's back in town, helping out."

Dad's eyes narrowed a little. "Jack, Emily's been back for years. If you'd come around more, you would've known that. How's she doing, anyway?"

"She's good," I said cautiously, sipping my beer. "It's been a while since we caught up, so seeing her again was nice."

Dad gave me a look that said he wasn't buying my casual tone. "Jack, you know as well as I do that Senator Brooks has a lot of political pull, especially when it comes to land management, and I'm pretty sure you aren't one of his fans."

"I get it, Dad," I sighed, cutting into my steak. "I'll be careful."

He eyed me for a moment, then his gaze softened. "You've got that look—the one you get when weighing your options and taking everything too seriously. Don't forget to listen to your heart, son. Emily's a good woman. Very loyal to her family. A looker, too."

I nodded. "Yes, sir. She is."

As we finished our steaks, I was more confident about my path for the future. My feelings for Emily weren't just a fleeting interest. They were worth fighting for—beard, political complications, and fatherly advice be damned.

Then, the atmosphere thickened as Dad steered the conversation to the recent arson investigations. "Senator Brooks has been inquiring about it, you know," he said, his eyes narrowing. "Seems like he's taking it personally."

"Yeah, well, there's a lot at stake for everyone. You know how the Brooks are about their land," I replied, my knife cutting into the last bites of my steak.

Dad chuckled dryly. "Son, our families have always had a healthy

competition when it comes to the rodeo, but we stick together when it comes to land management. You know that."

"Senator Brooks comes off to me as just another rich politician trying to make a name for himself." I countered, shrugging.

Dad sighed, "Well, the senator's been right more than once about some issues. You also know there are a lot of billionaire land speculators circling like vultures. Folks wanting to build resorts, stake claims for oil and gas, or build amusement parks."

My mind drifted as he talked about the politics of it all. I thought about Emily, and I couldn't shake the feeling that maybe we'd moved too fast, that maybe, down the line, we'd regret not taking our time. But then, a deeper sentiment rose within me—I never wanted to lose her in the first place. Why was I overthinking this now?

Dad must have noticed my distraction. "You listening, Jack?"

"Sorry, my mind wandered a bit," I admitted.

Dad locked eyes with me, his gaze turning serious. "This isn't the time to daydream. Between your government job and Brooks' political pull, you better mind what you're doing. Especially now."

I sighed, "I get it, Dad. But sometimes there are things more important than political pull and job security."

He raised his eyebrows, "You feel that strongly about her, huh?"

"Yeah, I do," I said, the words leaving my mouth before I could censor them.

Dad took a long pull from his beer and nodded slowly, "Then fight for her, son. Just know what you're up against."

My eyes met his, and we understood each other perfectly. I nodded, "I will, Dad. I will."

I had a lot to think about, but one thing was crystal clear. I was willing to face whatever complications lay ahead. Emily was worth it. And I wasn't going to let her go—again.

As Dad and I stepped outside, the night air wrapped around me like a cool embrace. He clapped me on the back, his laugh filling the silence between us. "Come on, let's get you settled at the Rocking J," he said, pointing towards his truck.

I hesitated momentarily, caught by a scene playing out in the parking lot across the street. A couple stood by their car, laughing, their heads close together. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but their body language

screamed intimacy.

"Jack, you coming?" Dad called, already halfway to his truck.

"Yeah, be there in a sec," I muttered, tearing my eyes away.

As I climbed into my work Jeep, that old, gripping feeling dug its claws into me. My mind involuntarily drifted back to a different night years ago, a different parking lot—the Cody Rodeo Arena.

I remembered standing in the shadows, the noise from the arena muted as I watched Emily and Casey McAllister share a conversation that seemed way too private. Emily's laughter floated through the air, a sound I thought was reserved for me during our moments alone. I gripped my rodeo rope so tight my knuckles went white.

When they slipped into Casey's car, my gut churned. The windows fogged up within minutes. I told myself a thousand reasons why I shouldn't care, why I should walk away. But I couldn't. Emily was my girl, or so I'd thought.

Later, when I confronted her, her words cut deeper than any bull's horn ever could.

"You're overthinking things, Jack."

Her reassurance felt like a lie, each syllable a brick in a wall she was building between us. That moment, more than any other, drove a wedge in my trust for her. Not long after, she ended things, heading off to college and taking Casey McAllister with her.

I shook my head, pulling myself back to the present as I turned the key in the ignition. I couldn't let memories cloud my judgment now, not when so much was at stake. But as I followed Dad's truck, my resolve wavered briefly.

Could I trust Emily? Did I even have the right to question her when my own feelings were a tangled mess?

Hell, I didn't know. But one thing was clear: I was in way too deep to back out now.

"Everything okay, son?" Dad's voice came through on speakerphone, breaking my train of thought.

"Yeah, Dad. Just thinking," I replied, hoping my voice didn't betray the turmoil inside me.

"Ah, dangerous territory," he chuckled.

As the Rocking J's moonlit hills appeared, nostalgia hit. It had been ages since this felt like home. I followed Dad. My thoughts stuck on Emily. We

were different people now, and I sensed she had changed too.

Trust was the snag. It couldn't be untangled with one call. Still, my mind was made up: I would fight for Emily. No half-measures.

Pulling up to the house, its warm glow luring me in, I decided not to call her tonight. Instead, I grabbed my bag and headed inside, my resolve settling like a weight in my chest. Time would tell if we could fix what was broken between us.

"Jacky!" Mom's delighted voice greeted me.

I hugged her tightly. "I've missed you," I said.

Dad appeared, eyes twinkling. "The more things change, the more they come back to where they started," he mused.

His words lifted some of my burden. Even in a sea of uncertainties, family and love remained steadfast.

And standing there, embraced by home, I felt a ripple of peace. It was a sign. Emily, I thought, you're my future, and I'm going all in.

Chapter Eight

A Poker Face and A Second Chance **Emily**

The dining room was buzzing for once, filled with the sound of cutlery meeting plates. Maggie had knocked dinner out of the park tonight—steaming roast beef, veggies, and oven-hot rolls. The family was finally back together. Clayton closed his vet clinic early to join us. Dusty had driven in from Texas and planned to head out with the horses in the stock trailer in the next few days. Sandy and Mark made the trip from Cheyenne for the weekend. As for Dad, he was right in the middle of it all, as always.

Usually, the table felt like a scene from a Hallmark movie when we were all present. But tonight was different. The air was charged with unspoken words—like the absence of Sarah, my sister who had run away, and my brother Conner, an organic farmer from Merced, California, who seldom returned to "boring" Wyoming. Outside, the moon hung low and wistful as if it also sensed the lurking menace of the fire that threatened to consume everything we held dear. The pallor of its light seemed to say we could lose it all—our homes, land, and memories—in the blink of an eye.

"Everything's all set for moving the horses tomorrow morning," Dusty announced, pleased as he buttered a roll. "Better to put the safety of the horses first."

"Good, good," Dad muttered, his hand shaking slightly as he picked up his fork. Parkinson's had taken a lot from him, but moments like this with his kids gave him strength. However, times like these also magnified his sadness over being estranged from two of his children.

Mark put down his wine glass and cleared his throat. "I spoke with Jack's team today. They're making progress on the firebreaks, but the arson investigator is dragging his feet. I told him to keep looking. There're plenty of damn back roads and hiking trails in Yellowstone where anyone could have slipped in and started the fires. I've pressed them to hurry it up."

"Firebreaks are a joke," Dusty snorted, interrupting. "I remember Grandpa telling me how he and his buddies dug 'em out by hand, thinking it'd save the ranch. But sometimes, all you're left with is praying for rain."

Dad let out a long sigh, a mix of frustration and resignation. "Well, prayin' or not, we gotta do what we can," he said, making eye contact with each of us for a split second as if challenging us to argue.

Finally, Dad's eyes met mine. We both knew Mark's insistence was more for the ranch's safety than political optics, and for that, I was grateful. Yet politics was always under the surface of most of Mark's activities. And as far as Dusty went, maybe he'd been in Texas long enough to forget the times growing up when he had helped dig fire breaks until his hands were blistered.

"Well, you can't rush these things," Dad finally said, his voice tinged with an authority that Parkinson's hadn't yet stolen. "But do keep pressuring them, Mark. It's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease." Everyone chuckled. It was a phrase Dad had always used, a reminder that passivity wasn't a virtue in this family.

We were tired of the musky scent of cigars and the sound of clinking poker chips, so Sandy and I excused ourselves, heading upstairs to my room for a much-needed girls' chat. We kicked off our shoes and plopped onto my bed. Fluffing our pillows, we settled into my down comforter's warm embrace.

"Soooo, spill the tea! What's the juicy gossip?" Sandy exclaimed, abandoning her usual polished demeanor in front of Mark and my dad.

"I had a moment with Jack," I said, diving into our unexpected hayloft tryst.

"No way!" Sandy's eyes lit up with a mixture of shock and amusement. "You and Jack? Again?"

I covered my face with my hands. "I know, I know. I can't believe I gave in to him so easily. And now I'm convinced he'll ghost me since he got what he wanted."

Sandy playfully nudged me. "Hey, you don't know that. Speaking of reunions, Mark's fundraiser is next weekend."

I blinked. "Fundraiser? I haven't heard anything about that."

Sandy pursed her lips. "Maybe you should start checking your mail more often, Em. This is something we discussed a few weeks ago, remember?"

I nodded. "Oh, yeah, barely. There's been a lot happening, you know."

"I'd say so..." Sandy teased.

"You've got to promise not to tell Mark about Jack," I begged, looking for our shoes.

"Are you kidding? I have so many secrets buzzing around in my head. Yours will get lost in no time."

"Politics. Better you than me. I want to live a few more years," I reminded Sandy, half kidding and half not.

We slipped our shoes back on and descended the stairs, returning to the library where we had come from earlier. Their laughter wafted up the staircase, blending with the noise of shuffling cards.

As we stepped into the room, the poker game was getting intense.

"I'm raising it by twenty!" Dusty declared loudly.

"Fold," Clayton grumbled under his breath as he threw his cards facedown onto the table.

"This is my all-in move," Mark proclaimed confidently, pushing all his chips into the middle. There was a brief silence in the room shared by everyone present.

My dad laughed while trembling a little bit in anticipation, asking, "Wow... well... which one you gonna put down first?"

I shook my head and grinned, glad my family was enjoying the evening. Then, I sorted through neglected envelopes strewn across Dad's oak desk until I found the invitation to Mark's grand event. "Holy moly! He's rented out The Irma Hotel for this."

"Absolutely," Sandy added, sipping her drink. "With his re-election next year, this fundraiser could be a game-changer for him. Marshall and Marge Johnson are attending, and they've even RSVP'd with a plus-one. That's promising, don't you think?" She leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Oh, and get this—the plus-one is probably Jack. Mark said he's been staying at the ranch for work. Better than a motel, right?"

I sucked in a quick breath. "You're kidding."

She shook her head. "Nope. Second chances, Em. They're rare. Don't waste it."

Rolling my eyes but secretly pleased, I conceded, "You should have been

a motivational speaker."

Mark, overhearing our conversation, raised his voice from the poker table. "Hey, why don't you two grab a couple of champagne bottles from the wine cooler? Got a few left from New Year's Eve."

"Sure thing," I answered, glancing at Sandy, who nodded in agreement. We slipped away, returning with two bottles of vintage bubbly, the glasses tinkling together like wind chimes as we moved.

Dusty had set up two extra chairs at the table. "Join us, ladies. The more the merrier."

I caught sight of a poker visor tucked away on a shelf. Grabbing it, I plopped it onto my head, a bit crooked. "I'll be the dealer," I announced.

Clayton chortled. "Afraid you'll lose to us, Sis?"

"Nope. I'm confident I'll wipe the floor with all of you," I retorted — a sense of mischief sneaking across my face.

Mark dealt the last hand, then pushed the deck toward me. "Well then, Ms. Dealer, show us what you've got."

I began shuffling, but just as I was about to deal the first hand, Mark looked at each of us intently. "I've got something to share. Been talking to Marshall Johnson."

"Spit it out, what's bothering you?" Dusty urged, his gaze narrowing.

"Marshall thinks there's a high chance the fire was started intentionally," Mark said, locking eyes with Dad. "Some ruthless real estate group from Baltimore has been having secret meetings around here. Even with the Chamber of Commerce president and the Cody Rodeo Board of Directors."

Everyone went silent, the weight of Mark's words sinking in.

"No proof yet, but it's concerning," he continued. "Marshall's worried about his prized Hereford stock. He thinks they might be in danger. The same goes for our horses. Another reason for Dusty taking them to the Circle Y South. Out of sight, out of mind."

"In danger? Like how?" Clayton inquired, his voice tinged with disbelief.

Mark sighed. "Either killed or poisoned. It's already happening in Montana. Trying to force folks to sell their spreads.... maybe even bankrupt them."

"Yep, bleed us dry. Land-hungry crooks from back East have been after the land around here since Yellowstone Park was formed," Dad finally broke in, his hands quivering a little but his voice steady and firm. "They're ruthless, so we can't rule anything out."

The room went quiet again, each of us lost in thought, contemplating the gravity of Mark and Dad's revelations.

I cleared my throat. "Well, let's play. May the best man or woman win," I said, forcing levity back into the room.

The cards flew around the table, the tension of earlier slowly lifting. In the end, it was Dad who won the last round. He raked in his chips with a triumphant grin, laughing with the rest of us. For a moment, the worries plaguing us were forgotten.

"Alright, y'all," Dad announced, pushing his wheelchair away from the table. "It's late, and we've got a busy day tomorrow. Time to call it a night."

We all said our goodnights, each heading to our respective rooms. Sandy gave me a quick hug. "See you early in the morning, Em."

"Absolutely," I said, waving her off as she headed down the hall. "Sleep well."

Once in my room, I closed the door behind me and laid the invitation to Mark's fundraiser on my dresser. A nagging realization tugged at my mind. I'd been avoiding it all evening. Who was I kidding? I wasn't just going to the fundraiser for Mark and to see friends I had known all my life. I was going because of Jack.

My eyes darted to the elegant gown hanging in my closet, a purchase I'd made last year on a whim, never knowing when I'd actually wear it. The idea of seeing Jack again—and his reaction to me in that gown—filled me with a jumble of emotions. I sat down at the edge of my bed, struggling to make sense of the whirlwind of feelings coursing through me.

"Screw it," I muttered under my breath. What was I waiting for?

Grabbing my phone from the nightstand, I opened up a new text message and paused for a moment before I finally typed:

Me: Jack, I am looking forward to seeing you at Mark's fundraiser. We need to talk.

A rush of exhilaration and a weight lifted off my shoulders after I pressed send. For better or worse, I'd made my choice. No more avoiding how I needed to build a family of my own. I was taking a step toward the future, toward Jack, whatever that might entail.

Sliding under the warm covers, I clicked off the bedside lamp. My thoughts weren't consumed by the risks looming over our ranch or Mark's worries about potential arson. Instead, my mind was awash with images of

Jack—his captivating smile, the fire in his eyes, the comforting touch of his body next to mine. And, of course, his irresistible cockiness. At that moment, I resolved to do whatever it took for another shot at love with my favorite cowboy-turned-hotshot firefighter..

The darkness around me became less oppressive, tinged now with a glimmer of possibility. And even though nothing was sure, that tiny glimmer was a promise of something extraordinary. I closed my eyes, letting myself drift off into a restless but hopeful sleep.

Chapter Nine

Binding Old Wounds **Jack**

I shifted my Jeep into park and stared at the Irma Hotel's facade, letting out a low whistle. Man, this place had aged like fine whiskey. Built from a blend of rough-hewn logs and old bricks, it had the sort of character modern architecture could only dream of. Above the arched double doors, a banner swayed in the evening breeze: "Wyoming Heritage Preservation Gala: A Night with Senator Brooks." I parked, angling the Jeep's hood toward the entrance, a move that told me I had game. Even if tonight was a disaster, at least I'd make a sharp exit.

As I was leaving the ranch earlier, Dad had peered over his newspaper. "You driving with me to the fundraiser?"

I'd shrugged. "Think I'll take my own ride, Dad. Might head out afterward." I'd left it at that. He didn't need to know I was scheming to take Emily out for a drink, make up for lost time. Pulling my keys from the ignition, I stepped out and adjusted my tie, giving my shirt collar an uncomfortable tug. This better be worth it.

As I entered the hotel, a wave of warmth hit me, drowning out the crisp evening air. The lights glowed with a welcoming amber hue, and the scent of polished wood and fresh linen filled the place. Of course, red, white, and blue were the color themes, accenting everything from tablecloths to drapes. Stars and stripes held the position of honor behind the bar, busy with familiar faces from around the state. An engraved sign hung from a velvet rope: "Reserved for Gala Guests."

I grinned. Hell, these people knew how to throw a party.

Waltzing into the room where the silent auction was going down, my eyes scanned the displays. Plush vacation packages, framed art, you name it. But nestled between some generic trinkets was the real showstopper—an authentic Shoshone necklace. Gold and silver entwined in intricate patterns, with a sapphire that would make a miner weep. Emily — all over it.

I picked up the pen with a smirk, checking the latest bid. Someone had scribbled a decent number, but decent didn't win the girl. I added another zero at the end because if you're gonna go, go all out. I slapped the pen back down like I was planting a flag on new territory.

As I walked away, I kept glancing back at the bid sheet — no chances taken tonight. That necklace would hang around Emily's neck, like a full stop at the end of an argument we'd been having for years. And maybe it'd also open up a new chapter for us—one where trust wasn't a five-letter word.

Nothing was gonna stand in my way tonight—not even my own damn self.

When she walked in, I was busy scouting the room for another glimpse of the necklace's bid sheet. Emily. Shit. She was a stunner, wrapped in a red and dark blue gown that made a statement without saying a word. Her red hair was coiled into a loose bun, like the prelude to a masterpiece.

And then, the earrings caught my eye—pearls. I could've sworn Helen, her mom, used to wear those—a legacy, to be sure.

Sandy, the ever-graceful hostess, interrupted my thoughts. "Your table, sir. Miss Emily, right this way," she said, directing us to a two-top with name cards waiting like sentries. I pulled out Emily's chair, the perfect gentleman this evening.

Emily sat down, her posture upright, as if every muscle held a secret. I plopped into my seat, fussing with my tie. It was a pointless gesture — the silk barrier between me and the turbulent thoughts I couldn't shake. Across the table, Emily's eyes flitted to her lap and back up again, her lips pressed into a thin line. It was like watching someone fortify their defenses in real time, a cautious player in a high-stakes poker game.

And just like that, it was on. No looking back now.

The waiter slid two brandy snifters onto our table, and I instantly caught Emily's gaze before we both reached for our glasses. The initial sip burned like fire trickling down my throat, but the heat started to melt away the invisible wall we'd built between us.

"So," I started, swirling the amber liquid in my glass. "I guess we both owe each other an apology."

Em sipped her brandy, her eyes narrowing as if measuring how much to let down her guard. "You're probably right. I'm sorry for... well, a lot."

"Same here," I admitted, my grip on the snifter relaxing as the brandy's warmth seeped through me. "I acted like an ass before you left for college."

She let out a little laugh, the sound breaking through the tension like a crack in the ice. "Well, if we're being honest, I wasn't exactly Ms. Congeniality, was I?"

The brandy worked its magic as we exchanged apologies and sipped our drinks. My words came easier, and so did hers. Her shoulders lost their rigid edge, and her eyes—those amazing eyes—started to soften. It was tentative but hopeful, like watching the sun peek through after a storm.

"Speaking of acting like an ass," I continued, setting my snifter down and locking eyes with her, "I should also apologize for the hayloft escapade. It was impulsive and immature. We can't pick up where we left off in high school, as much fun as it was."

Em let out a demure giggle, sending a jolt straight to my gut. "Well, don't apologize. I enjoyed every second of it."

The way she said it made me shift in my seat. Damn it, she had no idea what she did to me.

"But," Emily continued, "I worried that reliving a hot moment from our past was all you wanted, and then you'd vanish on me again."

Her words doused my rising heat with a splash of reality. Em had a point. That was our pattern. Spark, burn, then I vanish like smoke off to another weekend rodeo — or drag her along to bolster my ego. It had been our way in high school, and here we were, tiptoeing around it again.

As the brandy worked its warmth into my bones, we both began thawing, inching closer to something like trust or understanding. As awkward as it started, this conversation was us navigating our way through the dark. And for the first time, we might actually find some common ground.

Emily broke the silence, glancing up from her plate. "Jack, you remember accusing me of cheating 'cause I was in Casey McAllister's car? You never wanted to hear the truth. When I'd try to talk to you about it, you would always change the subject or something. Casey was showing me pics of Texas A&M. He and my brother were roommates there then."

My steak was a masterpiece, but Emily's revelation hijacked my attention.

"You were going through Texas A&M photos with Casey?" Doubt laced my words.

"Yeah, Jack. And you've been nursing this grudge all these years without knowing the full story."

I paused. The weight of the years and the miles that had kept us apart were compressed into this single moment. "Why didn't you tell me back then?"

"I tried, but like I said, you never wanted to hear the truth. And you became possessive to the point I shut you out," she replied, her voice softer now. "By the time I was ready to talk to you again, we were already off to our separate colleges. The damage was done."

I looked down at my untouched steak, feeling like an ass. After years of brooding, it turned out I was the villain in my own story. A cold realization dawned on me, shaking my very core. I had cut myself off from Emily over a complete misunderstanding. How could I have let my trust be shattered so quickly?

"I didn't know," I said, meeting her eyes, my voice tinged with regret. "I didn't know, and I'm sorry."

"Me too," she said, and for the first time that evening, Emily's guard lowered a bit. "I missed you, Jack. I left for college with a hole in my heart, and I think part of me always blamed myself for not fixing whatever went wrong between us."

I could tell she meant every word, and something in me unclenched. Maybe it was never too late to right the wrongs of the past. Maybe Emily and I had a fighting chance after all.

"I'm such an idiot," I muttered, finishing the last sip of my brandy.

"Don't be too hard on yourself," Emily replied. "We were both young and foolish. What we do now is what counts."

And I was going to make damn sure I didn't lose her again—over a misunderstanding, my ego, or anything else. I'd spend the rest of my life making up for it if I had to. "Here's to being less foolish," I said, lifting an empty glass.

Emily smiled, her eyes shining. "And to new beginnings," she added.

Mark was stepping up to the microphone, his authoritative presence commanding the attention of the room. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being here tonight. Your generosity is making a difference in preserving our beautiful Wyoming heritage."

He paused for effect, sweeping his gaze across the room, and waited for the applause to die down. "I'd like to give a special shout-out to Matrix Security from Casper, Wyoming. They're donating cutting-edge cameras to be placed in remote areas of ranches near Yellowstone. The trip wires we've been using aren't enough anymore. But Matrix is stepping up to the plate with both the technology and the people to keep our land secure."

I glanced at Emily. We both got it. The unspoken message was clear: That's how politics works here.

With a wink that seemed more rehearsed than spontaneous, Mark added, "And I assure you, state funding will be available through a land management grant. If you need help applying, my assistant Sandy will gladly walk you through the process."

Emily's eyes narrowed, and I couldn't help but grin. Mark was laying it on thick, making sure his friends in high places rose higher. As for the rest of us, we were the spectators to his polished performance.

"Thank you all for your support. Together, we're making a difference for the citizens of our state and for being good stewards of the birthright passed to us from our families," Mark concluded, stepping away from the microphone.

A Bluegrass Band started playing as if on cue, their lively tunes signaling a shift in the atmosphere. Chairs scraped, and the room filled with the buzz of conversations and clinking glasses.

"Subtle, wasn't he?" Emily said, leaning in close so I could hear her over the music.

"As a brick through a window," I replied.

Mark might've been the politician, but this evening, Emily and I had negotiated our own form of diplomacy, a silent understanding that ran deeper than any speech. It was a small win but a significant one.

Emily excused herself to check on her dad. I took in the sway of her hips as she walked across the room. The way that gown accentuated her curves was a showstopper in its own right. When she returned, her eyes twinkled like her father's.

"Dad's doing fine. Enjoying his evening with Nurse Lisa. He's sitting in a regular chair, and his wheelchair is parked against the wall," she said, sharing a bit of family update as if to say, 'Life moves on in unexpected ways.'

"Well then, shall we dance?" I offered my hand, and when she took it, I felt a charge, like a connection re-established after years of static.

The band shifted to a slower song, and we moved together as if our past and present were now finding a middle ground. Our eyes met, and I realized we had grown up from our high school days, their lessons not forgotten but transformed into something wiser, something sustainable.

The evening moved to the auction results. "And the winner of the exquisite Shoshone necklace is..." The host's eyes scanned the crowd. "Mr. Jack Johnson!"

Well, wasn't this perfect? Grabbing Emily's hand, we walked up to the table. I accepted the ornate piece and then turned to her. "For you," I said, draping it around her neck. The room erupted in applause, but all I heard was the silent thank you in her eyes as her fingers gently touched the piece.

"With all this applause, one might think we got engaged," she whispered as I led her back to our table.

"Hold your horses, haven't shopped for a ring yet!" I shot back, surprised at my wit.

She smiled. An irresistible blend of youth and wisdom sparkled in her eyes. "So, how about the drink you mentioned earlier?"

"I know a place," I said, taking her hand. As we left the Irma Hotel, the crowd's applause seemed to follow us, but her hand's quiet, solid grip in mine told me we'd turned a significant page in our messy, beautiful story.

Chapter Ten

Shattering Illusions Emily

"**W**hat bar do you have in mind, anyway? I asked, sliding into Jack's Jeep.

"How about the Cozy Cowboy near the outskirts of town?"

"Oh, perfect. They have the best margaritas."

The Jeep's engine sprang to life as Jack fiddled with the radio, skipping through a few channels until he found a chill acoustic tune. It was the perfect accompaniment for relaxation and some private conversation.

Just as I lost myself in the melody, my phone vibrated in my purse, its screen lighting up with an incoming text. My heart sank as I read the message from my brother:

Mark: Dad's fallen. Gash on his forehead. He won't go to the ER. What should I do?

My fingers trembled as I tried to think of how to respond to my brother. Dad had always been the rock in our lives, but Parkinson's' was getting the upper hand, yet he still had his wits about him. I covered my face with my hands, unsure what to do either—my stomach twisting into knots.

With Jack's eyes on me, I could feel the atmosphere in the Jeep shift—the chill music now starkly contrasted with the internal storm I was weathering. I thought about how the evening was supposed to be a simple visit over drinks. The universe, it seemed, had other plans.

"You okay?" Jack's eyes searched mine. His face, usually so easy and

confident, turned serious in an instant.

"My dad's had a fall. He's hurt but won't go to the hospital. We have to go... go back inside the hotel, Jack," I said, the urgency clear in my voice. My thoughts spiraled into worst-case scenarios. Dad could have a concussion or internal bleeding. Why does he have to be so stubborn?

"Of course, let's go."

I found the words for my return text.

Me: I'm on my way back!

Jack killed the engine, and we both bolted out of the Jeep. My mind spun with alarming possibilities. Each step I took toward the door was heavier than the last. Jack's steady presence anchored me, but he couldn't quell the worry within me as we raced back to my father.

We burst into the bar of the Irma Hotel from where we had just come, the door slamming against the wall with a loud thud. My eyes immediately darted to Dad, slumped on the floor against a chair, holding a napkin to his forehead—a makeshift bandage, dark with blood.

Mark's voice was terse as he spoke on the phone to the EMS. "Yes, a gash on his forehead... No, he's conscious but refusing medical help. What should we do?"

When I spotted Nurse Lisa hovering nearby, a sigh escaped my lips. She was holding a first aid kit and preparing to press a sterile gauze against the cut. Her face was a study in concentration, but her eyes met mine for a moment—a silent message of concern.

I knelt beside my dad, my knees unsteady. As my eyes met his, a torrent of emotions overwhelmed me: relief that he was conscious, anger at his stubbornness, and fear of the unknown that lingered unsaid.

Dad passed me a feeble grin, his eyes clouded yet stubborn. "Sis, I've had worse scrapes fixing the fence back at the ranch. Just get me out of here!"

The tension was palpable as the thick cloud in the room was punctuated by the distant wail of sirens. My hands trembled as I pressed my palm to my heart. Dad's disdain for medical help was clearly putting his life at risk, and I didn't know how to persuade him.

"Too late, they're pulling up outside!" Jack thumbed over his shoulder.

Mark's tone was short, with no sugarcoating or empathy. "Well, what was I supposed to do? Let him bleed all over the place?" I bit back a sharp reply. Arguing with Mark wouldn't help Dad, no matter how much I wanted to give

Mark a piece of my mind.

Before I could find words to express my thoughts, the EMS crew burst through the door. Two paramedics rolled in a stretcher, and a third carried a first aid kit. Their presence, meant to be a relief, only tightened the knot in my stomach. I glanced at Dad. His eyes met mine, his tense shoulders relaxed, and the corner of his mouth twitched into a grin.

"Don't even think about it," Dad warned the paramedics, reading their intentions as they approached him. "I told y'all, this is nothing more than a scrape... fixed worse by myself more than once!"

One paramedic, a woman with stern eyes and a no-nonsense demeanor, locked eyes with Dad. "Sir, with all due respect, head injuries can be more severe than they appear. You should come with us to the ER."

Dad waved her off, annoyed and stubborn as ever. "Just help me get back into my damned chair!"

I stood there, torn. My father's steely determination clashed with the paramedic's stern warning. The air grew thick with tension, every face in the room a mixture of concern and disbelief. The woman's words hung over us, a dark cloud threatening to burst. Was it a scrape or a silent time bomb? I gripped Jack's hand until my knuckles turned pale, needing his strength now more than ever.

Blowing a lock of hair out of my face, I steeled myself for the decision I had to make. "Dad, I love you, and if you say you're fine and don't want to go, then that's your choice. But you better let Nurse Lisa patch you up properly."

Dad sighed, a mixture of relief and pride morphing over his features. "Alright, pumpkin. If it'll make y'all stop fussin'."

The paramedics exchanged a glance before one of them spoke. "We strongly recommend a full medical evaluation, but we can't force him to go with us." With that, they helped Dad back into his wheelchair and assisted Nurse Lisa in securing a clean, well-placed bandage around his head.

Before they left, Dad pulled me closer, his voice barely a whisper. "Mixed a couple of drinks with my new medication. That's why I slipped." My chest tightened, unsure if I was about to laugh or cry. Dad was becoming a ticking time bomb, and his casual attitude about it shook me to my core.

The admission was a gut punch, but it tore open a space for a conversation we'd avoided for too long. "Dad, we're going to have to talk about this. You need to take better care of your health."

He looked up, his eyes meeting mine, and for a moment, the stubbornness gave way to vulnerability. "Yeah, reckon we do. But let's save that for another day, shall we? I want to go home!"

With final nods and tight smiles, the EMS crew packed up their gear and left, but their presence still hung in the air. As the door closed behind them, I felt Jack's arm wrap around my shoulder—a quiet promise I wouldn't be facing them alone, whatever discussions lay ahead.

Sitting in the back seat of Mark's truck, I rode back to the ranch in weighted silence. The tension was almost suffocating. Dad was up front, his bandaged forehead a stark reminder of the night's events. Sandy's makeup was wearing off, and her eyes were red — exhausted from her duties as Mark's assistant and party coordinator. As we pulled into the driveway, even the ranch seemed to sense our collective unease, standing as a silent sentinel in the faint moonlight.

Jack had followed us in his Jeep, his headlights appearing like a guardian angel in the rearview mirror. When we parked, he was with us, helping Dad out of the truck and into the house. Inside, everyone dispersed to their refuge of thoughts and concerns. Sandy, especially, seemed on the verge of unraveling. "I'll make some chamomile tea, good for calming nerves," I suggested, guiding her toward the kitchen.

"That sounds lovely," she managed, her voice shaky but appreciative.

I slipped a chamomile pod into the Keurig and pressed brew. The machine hummed softly, filling the kitchen with its soothing scent. I handed Sandy the warm mug. "You should get some rest; it's been a long day. You did great tonight, by the way."

She nodded, her fingers cradling the mug for comfort. "Thanks, Emily. It was so much fun seeing everyone we grew up with having such a great time."

Jack squeezed my shoulder, a silent exchange of support. I took my phone out and quickly dialed Lisa. "Hey, it's Emily. We're back at the ranch. I wanted to thank you for your help tonight."

"Absolutely, Emily. Take care, I'll be there bright and early in the morning," Lisa's voice came back, steady and comforting.

After hanging up, I locked eyes with Jack. The night had been tense, but here we were—still standing, still together. As I looked around the ranch house where I'd grown up, its comforting, rustic details seemed muted against the backdrop of the questions that still loomed.

Then, like a ray of sunshine piercing through storm clouds, Dad wheeled

into the kitchen, Mark right on his heels. The shift in atmosphere was palpable, almost laughable. It was as if Dad had rolled in to announce, "Alright, what's the next crisis?"

"So, how'd the fundraiser go?" Dad asked, his eyes twinkling with mischief and genuine curiosity. It was like he'd almost forgotten the evening's earlier drama.

Sandy's demeanor noticeably improved after sipping the chamomile tea and adding a spoonful of honey to her cup. "Let me check," she said, reaching for the tablet in her bag. She swiped her finger across the screen and pulled up some numbers. Her eyes widened, and she gasped. "We cleared a half-million after expenses, and more donations are coming in!"

Dad turned his wheelchair to face us, his eyes widening, not just from surprise but also from a glint of pride. "See, everyone's just as committed as we are to keeping this land untouched, not selling out to some investors who'd turn it into a wasteland."

The tension that had clouded the room seemed to dissipate, like morning fog lifting. A newfound sense of unity replaced it and, perhaps, a collective realization that we were all fighting for the same thing—our family, land, and legacy.

The numbers on the screen seemed to serve as a validation, not just of the fundraiser's success but of our family's mission. It was as if the universe had aligned itself, confirming we were on the right path.

Jack, who had quietly observed the emotional highs and lows of the evening, finally chimed in. "Well, it sounds like the community's got your back, loud and clear."

Dad grinned at him. "That they do, son. That they do."

Relief washed over me as tonight's whirlwind finally came to a pause. Jack approached from behind, enveloping me in his arms and kissing the top of my head. "Can I crash on your couch?"

I pivoted to face him, my grin unstoppable as I hugged him back. "I'd love that."

Jack's eyes were sincere when he mentioned, "Just need a pillow and a blanket."

We went upstairs together after he picked up his essentials from the closet. The air seemed to crackle with tension when we reached my bedroom door. Jack leaned in, his kiss a silent promise, saying, "I'll take care of you."

As we pulled apart, our eyes met and held. A complex blend of gratitude

and lingering family dilemmas filled the moment. No kiss could untangle that web.

"See you in the morning," Jack whispered.

"Goodnight," I replied.

I shut the door and exhaled. My reflection in the bathroom mirror was a knot of conflicting emotions—love, worry, and responsibility.

Climbing into bed, the day's events flickered through my mind. Dad's stubbornness, Mark's caution, Sandy's resilience, and Jack's steadfastness melded into a complicated portrait. Today had clarified one thing — we were all part of a tapestry of messy threads.

Chapter Eleven

Crossroads and Choices

Jack

I woke up on Emily's leather couch, early morning light sneaking in through the blinds. That creek stone fireplace caught my eye. Old as the Brooks' history but fit right into this place. It reminded me of her heritage—no show, just genuine quality.

Rubbing sleep from her eyes, Emily was in the kitchen, squinting at her high-end coffee maker like it was a newly discovered artifact.

"Morning," she greeted me, her voice softened by sleep. "You in the mood for playing barista?"

"Sure, but it might take a minute," I replied, wrestling with knobs and buttons. Just as I thought I'd nailed it, Maggie swung open the kitchen door.

"Mornin', you two. Room for one more?"

We glanced at each other. "Of course, Maggie," we chimed.

With that settled, I finally coerced the coffee maker into producing a couple of espressos. We took our breakfast to the kitchen bar, eggs and fruit plated neatly before us.

Busy with her morning routine, Maggie paused to admire Emily's necklace from the night before. "That's a lovely piece you're wearing."

Emily touched the delicate chain. "Thank you. You won't believe it. Jack actually got it for me at Mark's fundraiser."

I had to chip in, "Yeah, it was part of the silent auction. I had no idea it would be so... authentic."

Maggie chuckled, eyes twinkling. "I made that necklace. I sold it to the

gift shop with a few pieces of my jewelry at the silent auction. It's Shoshone craftsmanship."

A surprised look crept over Emily's face, then mine. "You made this, Maggie? I had no idea you crafted jewelry!"

"Life's full of surprises," Maggie mused. "Never know. We may be related somehow. You too, Jack. The Johnsons and the Brooks were involved in saving the remnant of the tribe that wasn't forced to the reservation. Those are my ancestors."

Maggie's words hung in the air, creating a sort of bridge between past and present, between different worlds and histories. Her chuckle broke the silence as she began gathering the empty plates. "Never underestimate the power of connections," she said, giving both of us a knowing glance. "You two might be related, yourselves."

Sitting in the ranch kitchen, it clicked—Maggie was onto something. Emily, Maggie, and this place were already part of my tapestry, embedded in my roots. I shot a final look at the two, still cozy in the morning glow, and headed out. The unmarked trail of the day and the beckoning firebreaks awaited.

I grabbed my gear and hit the road. A quick glance in the rearview had me wondering—could we three share more than just memories, maybe even DNA? But as the ranch gave way to the work site, I snapped out of it. Game face on, the workday was about to kick off. When I arrived, the site was already buzzing with activity. My hardworking and dedicated crew was getting set up for the day. Big Red was at the controls of the dozer while Chloe was calibrating her instruments, and TJ was operating the backhoe.

"Morning, boss," Chloe greeted me, her eyes still glued to her screen. "Readings are already spiking. It's gonna be a hot one today."

I leaned in to glance at her screen—humidity was low, temperature was rising. Fire conditions, for sure. "Thanks, Chloe. Any signs of arson?"

"Nah, only hunters so far. Found a couple of old campsites, but nothing suspicious," she said, pausing for a moment. "But it's worth mentioning, the ground is getting really dry. Like, bone dry. And there's no rain in the forecast for at least the next two weeks."

Nodding, I put on my gloves and walked toward Big Red. The bulldozer roared to life, its engine a low grumble that reverberated through my bones. "All systems go?"

Big Red grinned. "Like a charm, boss. Ready to push through anything

and everything."

For the next few hours, we were lost in the daily grind. The backhoe's bucket bit into the soil, carving out the firebreak while the dozer cleared brush and stumps. Each roar of my chainsaw seemed to amplify the emotional gap between me and Emily. From where I stood, I could make out the Circle Y's ranch house, a distant glimmer of hope on the horizon. And that's when it hit me—Emily and I were doing the same thing, in our own ways, fighting to preserve something far bigger than either of us.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, interrupting my daydream. It was a text.

Emily: Dad's being bull-headed about the supplies Carl ordered. Wish you were here to weigh in. How's your day?"

Me: Tough grind, but making progress. We should catch up later. Maybe dinner?

A small smile crept over my face. Even amidst our individual challenges, it felt good to be the one she turned to.

Emily: Would love to! :-)

Me: Can't wait. See you soon.

Stowing my phone, I looked over at the crew. Everyone was dialed in, doing their part, kinda like how things were meshing with Emily and me.

My eyes locked onto TJ, manning the backhoe like a pro. We weren't only knocking down trees and digging up dirt. We were laying down a line that said, "Fire stops here."

The backhoe's bucket had released another mound of soil when the world seemed to pause. A creaking sound filled the air, like the eerie groan of an ancient ship. All eyes turned toward the towering pine tree that had started to tilt, slowly at first and then with a terrifying speed.

"Watch out TJ!" Big Red's voice was a thunderclap, snapping everyone to attention.

But time didn't wait. I felt my boots dig into the earth as I sprinted towards the scene, the taste of dust and panic sour in my mouth. The tree's descent was a slow-motion disaster, each second stretching out as if begging for a different outcome.

Crash. The cacophony of splintering wood filled the air. I sprinted over, lungs on fire, expecting the worst. But when I got there, TJ was still in his

seat, upright and untouched, the backhoe unscathed. A massive tree had fallen but missed the machinery by mere inches.

"Everybody good?" I hollered, pulling off my gloves as I reached TJ.

"Yeah, man, we dodged a bullet," he said, visibly shaking off the adrenaline.

"Well, I guess I've got another safety form to fill out," I mumbled, relieved but annoyed at the paperwork that'd inevitably follow.

As I turned to leave, something caught my eye—a jagged, unnatural notch near the base of the fallen tree. This wasn't a typical fall, not the work of wind or rot. It looked deliberate, like someone had tampered with it.

I glanced back at TJ, who was already revving the backhoe back to life, oblivious to my discovery. My gut churned. This wasn't only a close call... someone might be trying to make trouble for us.

"Hey, TJ," I called out, "shut it down for a sec. We might have a bigger problem on our hands."

He looked confused but complied. "What's going on?"

I walked him over to the suspicious mark on the tree. "Does this look normal to you?"

TJ squinted at it. "Hell no, that looks like someone's been messing around."

The rumble of another machine ceased, and Big Red swung down from his dozer, curiosity etched on his burly face. "Something up, Jack?"

Before I could answer, Chloe came running up, eyes wide. "Is everyone okay? I saw the tree fall."

"We're fine," I said, "but Chloe, get your data pad. I need you to prepare an incident report. This doesn't look like an accident."

Big Red eyed the notched tree, then nodded gravely at me. "Say no more. Let's see if there are any more like this one."

We moved down the freshly marked firebreak path, and it didn't take long to spot them — other trees, also notched at the base, waiting like traps to fall.

"Someone's gone to a lot of trouble to mess with us," Big Red muttered, scratching his red beard in disbelief.

"Or worse," I said, feeling the gravity of the situation.

I pulled out my phone, intending to call Captain Diaz and get some law enforcement eyes on this. No bars. No service.

"Damn it," I cursed, jamming the phone back in my pocket.

Before I could dial Captain Diaz on the sat phone, a cloud of dust caught

my eye in the distance. It grew larger, resolving itself into a work truck that I recognized as Diaz's. The truck pulled up and out stepped Diaz himself along with a man I didn't recognize but who had the no-nonsense look of law enforcement.

"We figured you might be having trouble with cell connections," Diaz said, eyeing the sat phone in my hand. "We've been alerted by rangers inside Yellowstone. Seems like someone's jammed local cell communications. They thought it was a prank, but we were coming out here anyway for the arson inspector to finish his report."

The man with him stepped forward. "I'm Inspector Mathis. Came out here to finish the report Senator Brooks is asking for. Mind if I take a look around?"

I nodded, "Be my guest. We were about to call you, Captain."

"What for? Everything alright?" Diaz squinted.

"Incident report. See those trees over yonder... and the notches at the bottom. One fell the wrong way and almost crushed the backhoe with TJ inside," I told him, pointing in the direction of the tree.

Diaz and Inspector Mathis moved closer to the trees in question, scrutinizing them with trained eyes. After a few minutes, Mathis took out a pocket knife and began scraping away the outer layer of bark near one of the notches.

Shaking his head, "Those marks are old," Mathis said, wiping his blade on his pant leg before sheathing the knife. "Been here for a while, probably months or more."

Diaz looked at me. Concern colored his features. "Jack, was this area thoroughly scouted before you started the job? We should've caught this."

The seriousness of his words hit home. My crew's safety was my responsibility, and I'd missed these signs. "I thought we'd been thorough," I admitted, "but I guess we missed it."

Diaz sighed softly and shook his head, not in blame but more in shared worry. "Jack, this could've escalated quickly into something dangerous. We've got to be extra careful, especially given the nature of this work."

Mathis added, "If we're considering arson, even old marks like these could be crucial. Looks like we all need to keep our eyes peeled."

Diaz turned to me again, his tone gentler. "We'll take it from here, alright? I do have to report this. You know how it is. Senator Brooks is already wanting updates on the recent incidents."

"Yeah, I get it," I said, feeling embarrassed and frustrated. I had missed a crucial detail, and it had almost cost us dearly. "I'll get my crew out of here and leave you to it."

"We'll wrap up here and let you know if we find anything else," Mathis assured me as he and Diaz began walking back to their truck.

As I turned to face my crew, I felt the heaviness of the situation settle in. I had messed up, and it was a mistake I couldn't afford to make again. This job wasn't just about cutting down trees. It was about ensuring the safety of everyone involved, and I had fallen short. I gave the signal for the crew to pack it up. We had a lot of reassessing to do.

As we worked, my thoughts kept drifting back to Emily. It was weird; imagining her face in the chaos gave me a sense of calm. Made me want to get through this mess and head back to her. To share whatever today threw at us over dinner.

The Cody job was nearly complete. Once this firebreak was finished, we'd load up the gear and head to the next inferno, waiting to be tamed. Yet, I couldn't shake the thought of the other fire—the one back at the Circle Y. It started as a spark but had turned into a full-blown blaze in the blink of an eye.

My Jeep's engine growled as I navigated the dusty path, leaving the worksite in the rearview mirror to become a hazy blur. That's when my phone buzzed to life, finally back in cell range. A voicemail from Emily popped up on the screen. I hesitated, staring at the message.

Nah, not now. I pocketed the phone instead. That message could wait until I'd washed the day's grit off me. My eyes returned to the road ahead. Its winding turns were a metaphor for the choices and risks in my future. A grin tugged at the corners of my mouth—half excitement, half dread.

Hell, maybe today wouldn't turn out to be a total wash after all.

Chapter Twelve

Facing Rekindled Embers Emily

I 'd left Jack a voice message asking him to meet me at the Cody Cowboy. The same place we were headed the other night before Dad's accident changed our plans. I was determined to make things right tonight—Dutch style, no fuss, just two people reconnecting and having a good time.

My heart raced as I anxiously scrolled through my phone, passing the minutes with random social media updates, when suddenly, the door swung open, and there stood Jack. His characteristic smile flashed on his face—half ruggedness, half boyish innocence—completely disarming.

Without wasting another second, he strode over and slid into the seat next to me, and leaning in, he kissed me. It was one of those intimate kisses that spoke volumes without uttering a word that meant—I've missed this, and later, I want more.

"Glad to see me?" Jack grinned, his eyes searching mine.

"What do you think, sexy?" I teased, setting my phone face-down on the table.

Jack met my smile with a look of relief as if the weight of the day had suddenly lifted. "You have no idea how much I needed tonight, Em. Work was a rollercoaster. We had a close call with the backhoe—could've been disastrous. And then we found these weird cuts in some trees. Almost like they were marked intentionally."

I sighed. "You think it's something serious? That sounds unsettling, to say the least."

"It could be. Diaz wasn't thrilled. Made me question my attention to detail, actually."

I took a moment, letting his words sink in before sharing my own frustrations. "You're not the only one having a bad day, you know. Dad insisted on walking out to see Carl turn on the new irrigation system. Lisa helped him, but I'm worried he's pushing himself too hard."

Jack nodded, understanding filling his eyes. "They're both strong-willed, your Dad and Diaz. But sometimes you wonder if they're focusing in the right direction."

"Exactly," I agreed, relieved that we were both in the same emotional space, even if the circumstances were different.

The waitress sauntered over her pad and pen at the ready. "What can I get y'all tonight?"

"I'll have a bourbon, neat," Jack said, handing back the menu without glancing at it.

"Make that two," I chimed in. The waitress scribbled down our orders and scurried off.

"Remember our first rodeo date?" I asked, ready to get the evening started with some fun memories.

He chuckled. "How could I forget? My dad had his best bulls there, ready for those crazy cowboys to try and ride. And your dad broke the record for men's barrel racing."

"And our first kiss tasted like cotton candy," I added, as a warm rush of nostalgia flooded my senses.

"Best first kiss ever," he affirmed, his eyes twinkling. "But you know, one of my favorite memories was driving you home after school for the first time in my new red pickup."

I laughed, "Ah yes, the famous red pickup, the symbol of your newfound freedom all those years ago. You were grinning from ear to ear."

He smiled at the memory. "I'd turned 16, got my license, and the truck was like my chariot, you know? But having you next to me made me feel like I'd won the lottery. We drove around for hours one day, remember?"

Recalling how the countryside had zipped by, I smiled — a colorful blur framed by the windows of his truck. "We got lost, literally lost, out on those back roads inside the ranch. We had no real place in mind—it was all about the drive."

"Yeah, and remember how we stumbled upon a hidden overlook?" he

added, a mischievous glint appearing in his eyes. "We watched the sunset and didn't care about anything else. It was only you, me, and a future we couldn't begin to imagine."

"That was the day I realized how easily I could lose myself with you," I admitted, my voice tinged with wonder and a dash of nostalgia.

Jack smirked, eyes mellowing out. "Yeah, same. Missed that whole 'high school love lasts forever' vibe, you know?"

I giggled as we shared a quiet moment, our memories bridging the years between then and now.

The band kicked off a country tune, electrifying the room. Jack shot me a grin. "So, we dancing or what?"

"Thought you'd never ask," I said, taking his hand and following him to the dance floor.

Jack pulled me close, and as if the song was written for us, we swayed with the music. His hands were snug on my waist, my arms around his neck—a comfortable embrace. We moved as one, just like before. Yet something was different tonight—maturity.

As the song's tempo picked up, Jack and I followed suit. He placed his arm behind my back, lifting me slightly as we moved into a challenging dip, eliciting cheers from onlookers. The music ended, leaving us both a little winded but laughing, unashamed nonetheless. Jack whispered as we took our seats, "We're unstoppable, aren't we?"

"Absolutely!" I nodded.

Invigorated, it was like the universe was sending us a message—despite life's many complexities, the two of us together made perfect sense, at least on the dance floor.

And for now, the obstacles we faced seemed less daunting.

As my hand circled the rim of my bourbon glass, I pondered how effortlessly Jack and I had slipped back into our old dance. Sure, the context had changed—we were adults with responsibilities now—but the way he led me through the dips and turns of that country tune felt like we'd picked up right where we'd left off years ago.

And that's what scared me.

We'd always had this unspoken, potent chemistry, but could that outlast the complications of adult life? Could we navigate the obstacles that had surfaced with time—his hazardous job, my family responsibilities, and our personal baggage?

In that quiet lull, I felt a wave of dread crash over me. It was a jarring contrast to the chemistry we'd displayed on the dance floor. I shook my head slightly, hoping to disperse my inner turmoil before we dived into a conversation that could decide our future.

The band switched tunes, opting for a softer melody that tapped directly into the emotion in the room. Jack and I both stayed in our seats this time, each lost in our thoughts as he signaled for another round of bourbon.

I stared into my glass, watching the liquid swirl as if it could hypnotize me into forgetting. But the soulful music, the intimacy of the dance, and the weight of old memories made it impossible to keep my quiet voice of reason bottled up any longer. When I thought I might drown in my thoughts, Jack broke the silence.

"Emily, we need to discuss where we're going with us, don't you agree?" His voice was low and tinged with a seriousness that immediately commanded my attention.

I took a slow sip of whiskey and met Jack's eyes. Gone were the playful grins and flirtatious glances. "Yeah, we do," I admitted, setting down my glass.

Jack took a deep breath. "Where does this leave us? The last weeks since I've been back in town have been... amazing. But we can't pretend we don't have a ton of stuff to sort through."

"You're right," I said. "And the funny thing is, the closer we get to being 'us' again, the more I realize how our adult lives are standing in the way." A knot tightened in my chest. "And it's not only about us anymore. We have responsibilities. Once we step out of this place, I have my father and the ranch to deal with, and your workplace is at the site of the next forest fire."

"Exactly," he said, his scowl reflecting my inner struggle. "So, what's our next move? What do you suggest, Em?"

I sighed, the weight of our situation settling in. "Honestly? I don't know. But whatever it is, we have to decide together."

Jack nodded his gaze intense yet filled with a vulnerability I couldn't ignore. "Agreed. But let's not forget what we've been through together since I came back to town, okay? Because it showed me we still have something worth fighting for."

My eyes misted over, my heart aching yet hopeful. "Yeah, funny how life has ways of showing us what we need to see."

The waitress appeared on cue, setting down the bill between us. I glanced

at it briefly, then looked away, my fingers drumming on the table. The total amount was inconsequential compared to the sum of what lay unsaid between us.

Jack picked up the bill and started fishing for his wallet without a word. The smooth leather slid out of his back pocket with a sense of finality, signaling the end of something beyond the evening.

I finally broke the silence, my words catching in my throat. "I said it was Dutch style, remember? Let me get my half."

He paused, studying me for a second. His eyes were unreadable, like the cloudy skies hinting at a storm but never committing. "Sure," he said, his voice devoid of the warmth that colored our earlier conversation.

I took out my credit card and placed it on the bill, ensuring our fingers didn't touch as he returned it to the waitress. It's funny how a touch could send sparks flying across a room or throw ice on the moment. This was definitely the latter.

The waitress returned our credit cards with the receipts neatly separated. "Whenever you're ready," she chirped, blissfully unaware of the thick tension setting between us like an unwelcome guest.

Jack scribbled his signature quickly with a mechanical movement. I followed suit, acutely aware of the growing distance between us, measured not in miles but in our lingering obligations.

"Ready?" he finally asked, not meeting my gaze as he put on his jacket.

"Yeah," I muttered, fumbling with my purse strap, avoiding eye contact as we both stood. The space between us felt like a chasm compared to the closeness we'd shared just an hour earlier.

Outside, the night was still and eerily quiet except for my beating heart and the gentle hum of distant traffic. We were so close the heat between us was laced with mixed emotions. But as he leaned in to kiss me, his phone buzzed loudly in his pocket, a jarring interruption that made us both cringe.

"Hold on, Em," he said, pulling away to check the message.

I watched his face as he read it, and I didn't like what I saw. His brows furrowed, the tension evident, his jaw clenched. The lighthearted, flirtatious Jack who met me for dinner was replaced by someone burdened with new, unspoken issues.

"It's Captain Diaz," he finally said, looking over the roof of the building toward the mountains. "I gotta go, Em."

"Another fire?" I quipped.

"Yeah, and this one's not waiting for us to figure our lives out." He jammed his phone back into his pocket and glanced toward his Jeep.

I struggled to breathe. Something was squeezing my insides. All my attention focused on Jack's face, searching for a clue, indicating we weren't about to add another layer of confusion to our already tangled lives.

"Jack, what does this mean for us? Are you leaving Cody?" I couldn't stop the words. They tumbled out, my heart racing with anticipation.

He took a deep breath, careful not to say something he'd regret. "I don't know, Em. I wish I did. Quick, let me walk you to your car!"

As my hand grazed the car door, I turned to give Jack a kiss. But he was already dashing toward his Jeep. I stood there, watching his taillights vanish into the night, leaving me isolated and uneasy. My heart throbbed with a blend of dread and sorrow. The laid-back evening I had envisioned abruptly ended, mirroring the joy and vitality we'd abandoned at the Cody Cowboy. Standing on the brink of tears, I was clueless about what the future held.

As I sat in my car, my thoughts raced. I started the engine and began the drive home. Each mile widened the gulf between Jack and me. The radio played soothing tunes, but I wasn't listening. My mind grappled with the emotional turmoil of the evening. Just as I was about to cross the bridge out of town, an unmistakable odor wafted into the car—smoke!

My heart raced, pounding as if trying to escape. The wildfire in Yellowstone had been extinguished weeks ago, but Jack's sudden departure intensified my sense of foreboding.

I floored the gas pedal. The car surged forward, and the scent of smoke intensified. Thoughts swarmed in my mind—my dad, home alone since Lisa's shift ended. Was a fire threatening our ranch? A chill cascaded down my spine.

Fumbling for my phone, I dialed Dad's number. It went straight to voicemail, and my gut twisted in apprehension. Was the fire close? I sped under the weathered sign arching over our driveway, my chest a knot of anxiety and dread. A plume of smoke rose ominously in the distance—just beyond our ranch.

"Dad, hang on. I'm coming!"

Chapter Thirteen

Encroaching Flames Emily

I sped onto the pavement, my tires screeching as I brought the car to a hasty stop. Before I could cut the engine, I saw him—Dad, parked in his wheelchair at the front door, his face etched with concern.

Our eyes met as I slammed the car door shut and ran up to him. "Dad, are you all right?"

He gestured with his chin toward the horizon, where that menacing plume of smoke was still rising. "Just noticed it a few minutes ago," he said, his voice tinged with worry but strangely calm, as if he was still processing the magnitude of what we were seeing.

"We may need to pack some things, just in case," he added, wheeling himself back to let me through the door.

The air hung heavy with tension as I stepped inside, a stark contrast to the homey warmth that usually greeted me. I glanced back at the sky, painted in hues of impending disaster, and felt the weight of Dad's words sink in. This was serious.

I rushed to my father's room, flipping open his dresser drawers and grabbing handfuls of clothes—socks, shirts, trousers. As I tossed them into a suitcase laid open on his bed, my phone buzzed from the nightstand. I lunged for it, praying it wasn't bad news but fearing it would be. My breath hitched when I saw Jack's name flash on the screen.

"Emily, you must get out of there," Jack's voice crackled over the line, taut with fear.

"Jack, what's going on? How bad is it?"

"It's spreading faster than we thought. It's headed your way. You and your dad have to evacuate now."

A lump formed in my throat. "Okay, we're packing even as we speak. Be careful, Jack."

"You too, Emily. Please hurry."

As I ended the call, I sighed. A gathering wave took over my senses, heavier than before. The urgency in Jack's voice had stripped away any illusions I might've had about the crisis. This was no longer a precautionary measure but a matter of immediate safety.

My hands shook while I added Dad's medications to his suitcase and zipped it up. Each ticking second felt like borrowed time in a deteriorating crisis.

I lugged the suitcase off the bed and wheeled it into the hallway. Dad had already started maneuvering his wheelchair toward his office.

"Where are you going?" I asked, my voice edging on panic.

"I need to open the safe and get our valuables out. Where can I put them?" His tone was matter-of-fact, like we were preparing for a vacation instead of fleeing a potential disaster.

"Dad, the safe is fireproof. It's designed to withstand this kind of thing. Just grab the insurance papers; that's all we really need."

He paused, considering this. "As far as I know, that theory hasn't been tested."

"All Mom's jewelry is in a safety deposit box at the bank anyway, Dad, except her pearl earrings. I'll grab them before we leave."

He nodded, relaxing the furrows in his brow. "Alright, I'll get those papers."

As he wheeled himself into the study, I made a quick detour to my bedroom. My eyes darted from my closet to my bathroom, each glance capturing snippets of a lifetime's worth of memories. There were clothes and my laptop, and then my gaze settled on the necklace Jack had given me. It wasn't just a piece of jewelry but a tangible connection to Jack, Maggie, and our family history.

Without a moment's hesitation, I clasped the necklace around my neck. The pendant's weight felt like a comforting talisman like I was carrying a piece of Jack with me. My eyes then landed on Mom's pearl earrings. I impulsively slipped them on, adding another layer of emotional fortitude.

Back in the living room, Dad handed me a manila envelope. "Keep these insurance papers safe," he said, locking eyes with me.

"Got it. They'll go in my bag," I replied, dashing back upstairs to add the envelope to my essentials.

Returning downstairs, suitcase in tow, I joined Dad, eager to depart. "Time to go, Emily," he said, urgency coloring his voice.

"You're right. Let's go," I concurred.

Stepping out into the growing dusk, the necklace anchored me amidst the swirling chaos. We loaded our bags into the car, each piece feeling like a minor triumph over the looming wildfire.

Then, the roar of an SUV pulling into our driveway cut through the tension hanging in the air. It was Lisa, Dad's nurse, her expression etched with concern. She clambered out of her car and strode toward us with purpose.

"Lisa, what are you doing here?" My voice rose slightly, caught off guard by her sudden appearance.

"I got the emergency alert. Evacuations are mandatory. I knew I needed to get over here to help with Roy," she said, "he can't stay here!"

"I appreciate your concern, Lisa, but we're managing. We're leaving now," I retorted, my voice tinged with defensiveness.

She stopped and looked me squarely in the eyes, her gaze unyielding. "Emily, I've been trained for emergencies like this. Your father has specific medical needs. He's on a schedule for his medications. They need to be administered at exact times. He can't be on the road for an extended period. It will wear him out."

Dad had wheeled himself close enough to hear our verbal tug-of-war. "Now, wait a minute, both of you," he interjected, trying to make his voice heard.

Ignoring him, I shot back at Lisa. "He's my father. I know he has medical needs, but you're not the only one who can care for him."

Dad sighed and tried to get a word in again. "Ladies, let's try to—"

"Think practically, Emily," Lisa interrupted, still not taking her eyes off me. "If conditions worsen, which they likely will, I know exactly what steps to take medically. Plus, my SUV is equipped with emergency medical supplies if we have to evacuate from my place."

Caught between the primal urge to keep my family together and the rational understanding of Lisa's expertise, I finally relented. "Okay, fine. But

we're all going together. We won't be separated."

Lisa's stern expression softened. "Agreed. Every second counts. Let's move."

As we began to transfer Dad's suitcase and the portable oxygen tank into Lisa's medically equipped SUV, I felt a stab of something akin to defeat but knew deep down it was for the best. Dad tried to catch my eye, but I was too focused on the tasks. His voice, usually so assertive, had been drowned out by our urgent debate. Yet, his eyes told me he understood, even if neither of us liked our situation.

As I was about to close the trunk, my phone buzzed again. It was Mark.

"Emily, are you evacuating? The fire's spreading, and it's headed your way," Mark's voice thundered through the phone, laced with unmistakable concern and authority.

"We're in the process, Mark. I need to get off the phone," I said, anxious to end the conversation. I felt a tinge of irritation; now wasn't the time for a sibling heart-to-heart.

"Wait. Where are you heading?" Mark pressed.

"I don't know yet, just east, away from the fire," I snapped, my nerves fraying.

"You need a plan, Emily. Is Lisa there?" His voice softened, but the urgency remained.

"Yes, she's here. She wanted to take Dad with her, but I talked her out of it."

"Em, you need to listen to me. Let Lisa take Dad to the assisted living center in Cody. I've already called them. They're equipped for emergencies, and they've reserved a place for both Dad and Lisa for as long as needed," Mark urged, his tone unyielding.

"Why do you always think you have all the answers?" I fumed, frustration bubbling over. "I can take care of Dad just as well as Lisa can."

"You're missing the point, Em. This isn't about you; it's about doing what's best for Dad. Lisa's got the medical training and the equipment in her SUV. You need to get your butt to my cabin in Cheyenne. And don't forget to bring the insurance papers," he added, each word punctuated for emphasis.

I sighed, the fight draining out of me. As much as I hated admitting it, Mark was right. This wasn't the time for pride or ego; it was a time for pragmatism.

"All right, fine," I said, swallowing my irritation. "I'll let Lisa take Dad to

Cody."

"And you're coming to Cheyenne," he pressed, seeking confirmation.

"Yes, to your cabin. I'm bringing the insurance papers," I conceded, feeling my control slip away even as I recognized it was for the best.

"Good. Be safe, Emily. Call me when you're on the road," Mark said before hanging up.

I looked over at Dad, who was privy to the entire exchange, his eyes reflecting a mix of relief and disappointment.

"Looks like you're going to Cody with Lisa, Dad," I said, opening the trunk and pulling out Dad's suitcase and medications. "I'll be at Mark's cabin in Cheyenne."

He finally found his voice, tinged with resigned authority, "Well, then, I guess that settles it."

I felt a knot of complicated emotions loosen slightly within me. "Yeah, it does," I replied, my voice laden with trust and defeat.

As I picked up my bag and we completed our final checks, I felt the weight of the necklace I wore. It seemed heavier now, each second ticking away as we prepared to enter an uncertain future. Dad looked at me as if to say, "I understand, even if I don't like it."

I met his gaze, my own eyes misty, and nodded. Sometimes, family was about making complex and selfless choices, even when every fiber of your being screamed to do otherwise.

So, I walked over to him, threw my arms around his neck, and held him tightly. "I love you, Dad," I murmured, my voice thick with emotion.

He hugged me back, "I love you too, Emily."

I looked at Lisa, my eyes stinging—whether from the smoke or impending tears, I couldn't tell. Though I wasn't ready to embrace her, I found the grace to say, "Lisa, thank you for taking care of Dad. I know he'll be in good hands with you."

She nodded, her eyes locking onto mine through the smoky haze. "I'll do my best, Emily."

We parted ways, our cars peeling out in opposite directions. As I drove off, I glanced in the rearview mirror; the cloud of smoke loomed like a menacing shadow, looking over our beloved Yellowstone Creek Ranch.

Gripping the steering wheel, my phone vibrated in the cupholder. First things first—Maggie and Carl had to know what was happening. A quick call to Maggie and I filled her in. She was worried but understood—another call

to Carl, who also promised to stay alert for any news. Staff notified — box checked.

Next up was Jack. Hesitant but resolute, I dialed his number. My pulse raced as each unanswered ring gave way to his voicemail.

"Hey, it's Jack. Leave a message."

My throat tightened. "Jack, it's Emily. We're evacuating. Dad is with Lisa, and they're safe. I'm heading to Mark's cabin in Cheyenne. Please call me as soon as you get this. I need to know you're safe. I love you."

I hung up the phone, tears blurring my vision. Every ring that went unanswered was another puncture in the thin fabric of my hope. Brushing the moisture from my eyes, I mashed the gas pedal to the floor.

My headlights sliced through the pitch-black night, a beacon guiding me toward Mark's cabin in Cheyenne. As the emotional heaviness of the day threatened to collapse under its own weight, my concentration remained laser-focused until I tried to call Jack again and got no answer.

Chapter Fourteen

The Inferno: A Race Against Time **Jack**

The inferno was a raging beast, all-consuming and relentless. Sparks shot into the night sky like demented fireworks, and the constant crackle of timber being devoured filled the air. TJ, Big Red, and I stood there, clad in our heavy fire-resistant jackets and pants, helmets secured, and visors down. Our Nomex hoods shielded our necks and faces as much as they could. We had fire blankets, shovels, and a palpable sense of urgency that throbbed with our pounding hearts.

Big Red was elbows-deep in creating a firebreak. With his thick gloves gripping the shovel, he dug a trench through the earth, his face a mask of concentration and sweat despite the protective gear. A few feet away, TJ was in a battle of his own, smothering minor flare-ups with his fire blanket. His firefighting boots protected him as he danced around the hot spots.

"Jack, you need to shift east. The wind's changing," Chloe's voice crackled through the radio, tension unmistakable even through the static.

I gritted my teeth and plunged my shovel into the earth, tossing soil onto a patch of hungry flames. "On it, Chloe," I responded, my voice tinged with a desperation I couldn't hide.

Captain Diaz's voice broke into our radio frequency. "Team, hold your positions. I want to get a drone up for a better view."

I shot a skeptical glance toward where I knew Diaz was stationed. "Captain, it's night, and the smoke is thick. A drone's not going to show much."

"I'm aware, Jack, but we need every tool at our disposal."

I glanced at the Rocking J Ranch in the distance. Its familiar shapes, usually visible in the moon and starlight, were distorted by the thick haze of smoke. My family's land and the Yellowstone Creek Ranch were both at stake. The weight of that reality was as suffocating as the smoke-filled air.

Suddenly, my pocket vibrated—my phone. I'd have ignored it in any other circumstance, but some instinct made me glance at the screen. Emily.

"Push, guys! We've got to save the buildings!" I bellowed, hoping my voice carried over the howling wind and crackling fire. And as we battled the raging force of nature, a part of me wondered what Emily wanted, what her call meant. But right now, the legacy of our ranches, and potentially our lives, hung in the balance. I couldn't stop to check in with Em right now.

"I told you guys, we've got this. Rocking J Ranch has seen worse," I said, my voice brimming with faux confidence.

"We're not out of the woods yet, cowboy," Big Red retorted, but I could see a small smile tugging at his lips.

"Yeah, yeah, but come on. With Chloe's eagle eyes and our rugged good looks, what could go wrong?" I quipped.

"Cut the chatter," Captain Diaz interrupted.

Chloe's voice buzzed through the radio again. "You might want to listen to the Captain, Jack. Wind's picking up towards the east. Get moving."

My smile faded. "Copy that."

We hustled, the adrenaline pushing us forward almost as much as the encroaching flames at our backs. Yet, the fire seemed to laugh at us, leaping higher, stretching its flames in all directions.

"Damn it, we're losing ground!" TJ yelled.

"We need to pivot. Chloe, any suggestions?" I asked, desperation creeping into my voice.

"Air support's another 20 minutes out. It would be best if you retreated," Chloe said, her voice all business.

Diaz chimed in. "Chloe's right. Pull back to a safe distance and wait for air support. We're due for a fire retardant drop, and I want everyone clear."

Grudgingly, we started our retreat. As we pulled back, I felt my phone slip from my pocket. When I glanced down, it disappeared under the massive wheel of a fire truck rushing past. Crushed. Another line was severed, not just to Emily but to my parents. What if Emily's still at her ranch? What if something happened? My mind raced, but there was no time to dwell. I had

bigger fires to fight.

We reached a safe distance, and Diaz ordered, "Everyone, take five. Remove your helmets and get some water. You won't be effective if you're running on empty."

I removed my helmet and shrugged off my heavy fire-resistant jacket, welcoming the cooler air against my sweat-drenched shirt. I knew it was risky, but the brief relief was too tempting.

"TJ. Look out!" Big Red's shout ripped through the smoke.

I turned in time to see a wall of fire surge toward TJ, who had tripped and was struggling to his feet. Without thinking, I lunged at him, pushing him out of the way. The fire roared past us, scorching the side of my face and arm in its wake.

"Medic!" Big Red's voice was distorted through the pain and my adrenaline rush.

As the ambulance's siren wailed, taking me away from the chaos, my loss exceeded my physical injuries. My phone wasn't just a piece of technology but my link to Emily, my parents, and the world beyond this fire-ravaged landscape.

The medics moved efficiently, applying clean gauze to my burns and hooking me up to an IV, but their medical jargon faded into background noise. All I could think about were the people I couldn't contact, the land we were losing, and the ever-changing wildfire that seemed to be closing in from all sides.

As I was wheeled into the ER, the bright lights above me seemed to spotlight my isolation. A woman whose name tag indicated she was Dr. Foster examined the burned areas on my arms and face. She looked at her resident and muttered, "Looks like second-degree burns."

Before I could ask what that meant, a nurse administered pain medication through my IV. The relief was almost immediate, but it didn't touch the deeper ache—my worry for Emily, the ranch, my family, and my team.

"Start fluid resuscitation," Dr. Foster ordered. "He's likely lost a lot of fluids, and we need to avoid shock." Another nurse quickly adjusted my IV, this time with a balanced electrolyte solution. My veins seemed to thirst for it as if every drop was a step back from the edge of a cliff.

"Let's also check his oxygen levels," Dr. Foster added, placing a pulse oximeter on my finger.

A nurse fitted a mask over my nose and mouth, the oxygen flowing cold

and dry. As I breathed in, I realized how smoky my lungs had been. But my thoughts were still clouded. I was cut off from my team battling that relentless inferno and the people who meant the most to me.

I lay there, wrapped in antiseptic white, my mind whirring despite the drugs. What were Emily's missed calls about? Was she safe? And my parents—did they evacuate like they were supposed to? Our family's ranches were vital, but what's land without the people who make it mean something?

After what seemed like an eternity, Dr. Foster left to attend to other urgent cases, the swish of her white coat fading into the bustle of the ER. The nurse told me I'd be observed for a few more hours at least—time I could ill afford to lose. I needed to call or text Emily. I needed to know she was okay.

I looked around, desperate for a way out of my isolation. A few beds over, a nurse was handing a firefighter his phone. A glimmer of hope surged through me.

"Excuse me," I croaked, the words straining against my dry throat. "Could I borrow your phone for a second?"

The firefighter looked over, puzzled, then recognized me even with a bandaged face. "Jack, right?"

"Yeah, that's me."

He handed me the phone, and as I held it, I realized my predicament—I didn't remember Emily's number. I'd always just tapped her name, a digital convenience that now felt like an insurmountable wall. I handed the phone back, my face flushed not from the burns but from a mixture of frustration and embarrassment.

"Thanks anyway." I tried not to roll my eyes.

I laid back, staring at the ceiling tiles as if they might offer some escape. The ER was a mix of controlled chaos and strained silence. Nurses hurried from one bed to another with professional precision.

A few beds away, a firefighter with a bandaged arm was talking to a medic. I didn't recognize him. He must've been from another forestry sector. Across the room, another firefighter was inhaling oxygen through a tube in front of his nose. Our eyes met for a brief second, strangers linked only by the shared mayhem of the wildfire.

Emily. My parents. My team. Our ranches. The thoughts circled in my mind like a storm refusing to pass. My eyes shifted to the clock on the wall. It was almost six in the morning. I let out a long sigh, each tick accenting the empty caverns of my worry. A nurse approached with her digital tablet in

hand. "You'll be moved to a room soon," she offered as if a hospital room could offer some solace.

"Ah, can't wait," I mumbled, the corners of my mouth pulling into a half-hearted grin laced with sarcasm. She caught my tone, offering back a tight-lipped smile that didn't quite reach her eyes before pivoting on her heel to leave.

The door barely had time to close behind her before it creaked open again. In walked my parents, their expressions a perplexing mix of concern and relief, as if they were torn between emotions.

I blinked, fighting the moisture, blurring my vision. "Mom...Dad..." A lump formed in my throat, and I could feel tears forming a precarious dam at the corners of my eyes.

My mom hurried over to my bedside without missing a beat, her eyes wide and darting over my bandages as if trying to tally up my injuries. "Oh God, Jack—are you alright?"

Drawing in a shallow, pained breath, I managed, "I've had better nights," my voice hoarse.

My dad stood back, his arms crossed over his chest. His jaw clenched, unclenched, and then clenched again—a telltale sign he was wrestling with his emotions. "We were worried sick. Couldn't call you. Your phone's off."

"Crushed under a fire truck wheel, to be exact," I replied, gesturing vaguely with my good hand.

His eyes narrowed, focusing on something beyond me, beyond this hospital room. "And the ranch? What about the fire? We have no idea what's going on. We were evacuated."

"We're still in it, Dad," I sighed, my shoulders slumping. "We had to pull back for air support. It's not contained. At least it wasn't when I was carried away in the ambulance."

Locking eyes with me for an instant, Dad soon looked away. A nearly invisible nod conveyed his unspoken understanding. Adding to my current worries wasn't on his agenda. It was a silent exchange, one that spoke volumes. Our collective concerns were almost palpable in that quiet space filled only by the soft beeps of hospital monitors.

"We tried calling Emily," my mom interjected, as if reading my mind. "Her line's dead or something. Perhaps she's talking to her family."

Or possibly she couldn't reach anyone either. The thought churned in my gut.

"Look, Jack, the nurse said you'd be in here a few days," my dad began, clearing his throat, "we'll handle things on the ranch side. You need to focus on getting better."

Easy for him to say. My mind was a roulette wheel of worst-case scenarios, each spin ending on a different disaster. I needed to be there, fighting—both the literal and metaphorical fires.

"I appreciate it," I said, though my voice carried the weight of doubts and unspoken fears. Mom squeezed my hand, her touch comforting and unbearable because of the helplessness it conveyed.

As they left, promising to return in the morning, I sank back into my thoughts. Isolated by circumstance, surrounded by unanswered questions, I was a man trapped in fate's web, each strand pulling tighter with the passing second.

Chapter Fifteen

Cloaked in Smoke **Emily**

Stretching ominously ahead, the road became a winding path of anxiety and sadness from which escape seemed impossible. My headlights pierced through the dense smoke, illuminating only a small section of the countryside at a time, mirroring the confusion of life these days.

With trembling fingers, I reached for the radio dial, desperate for any form of escape or diversion from the haunting darkness.

Scrolling through static, I caught fragments of late-night talk shows before landing on a country ballad. The singer's crooning about love and loss sent a fresh wave of worry coursing through me—lousy choice.

Eager for new information, I quickly switched to a news station. The anchor's sober voice filled the car as he spoke about the fire—its relentless spread, the valiant efforts of firefighters, the homes and lives disrupted.

My fingers shot to the volume dial, cranking it high. "...EMS teams whisk firefighters away from the blaze..." the anchor continued.

A lump formed in my throat, and my eyes welled up with tears. The unnamed firefighters, could one of them be Jack?

I gripped the steering wheel, knuckles whitening as I fought back tears. "Dammit," I muttered, slamming the off button. The ensuing silence was suffocating, an eerie void that amplified my fears. I couldn't help but wonder—what was Jack up to now? Was he out of harm's way?

I pulled into the driveway of Mark's cabin, a sigh escaping my lips as the headlights danced across the weathered wooden facade. The front porch light

beckoned, casting a soft glow in the surrounding darkness, inviting me into Mark's sanctuary. This was where he sought solace from the tiresome pressures of the Senate and the turmoil of his ongoing divorce.

My brother opened the door with his phone at his ear as I turned off the engine. He motioned for me to come inside, and I grabbed my overnight bag from the passenger seat. With each step, precious time was ticking away.

Mark enveloped me in a half-embrace, his arm draped around my shoulders as I crossed the threshold inside. A fleeting wave of relief swept through me, only to be replaced by a gnawing anticipation. Without missing a beat, he pivoted away, his head nodding attentively to the unseen voice on the other end of the line.

"Mhmm, yes, confirm that with the Forestry Director," he murmured, ushering me inside with his free hand. "And keep me posted on any changes in wind direction."

I walked into the warm living room, illuminated by the dim glow of a table lamp. Mark motioned toward the second bedroom, where I could put my things. But my brother was dialing another number before I could ask about Jack, his face tense.

I stood there, bag in hand, my worries pooling into a knot in my stomach. Desperate for some connection, I fished my phone from my bag and dialed Jack's number. It rang and rang before dropping to voicemail.

My heart sank a little more. "Hey, it's me," I whispered into the silence, my voice catching. "Call me when you get this. I need to hear your voice."

Ending the call, I dialed his parents next with anticipation building in my chest. Yet, my hopes were dashed as the call failed to connect, the poor reception in this remote area sabotaging my lifeline. Perhaps the fires had taken down a cell tower, leaving me with a useless device in my hand.

I shook my head, the weight of disappointment sinking in as I placed the phone on the coffee table. Its screen emitted a faint halo of light, illuminating the dimly lit room. At that moment, it became painfully clear that even with all the technology at our disposal, there were instances when we couldn't bridge the vast distances or shatter the silence.

In the solitude of the cabin, I found myself in the peculiar company of my brother, yet trapped in a profound sense of isolation. Though physically present, he was busy dealing with the disaster that held us all captive.

Heading towards the second bedroom, I placed my bag on the floor, feeling the weight of the situation sink in. Consumed by his work, Mark

seemed oblivious to the emotional support I craved.

As I glanced at my wristwatch, the hands pointed well past midnight. For a second, hesitation crept in, and I contemplated whether to disturb Sandy at this ungodly hour. Then, fueled by a surge of selfish need, I held my breath and shot off a text.

Before I could lock my phone, it buzzed—Sandy was calling. "Hey, Em, I saw your text. You okay?"

"Can you come over?" I blurted out. "I'm at Mark's cabin. I...I need someone to talk to, and Mark is busy managing things."

"On my way," Sandy assured me, ending the call.

I sank into the couch in the living room, its cushions cold and unwelcoming. Mark was pacing back and forth in the kitchen, still talking on the phone. He guzzled down a cup of coffee and poured another, his voice tense, a never-ending flow of updates and directives.

Soon, a welcoming knock broke through the heavy atmosphere. I opened the door, and there was Sandy, focused on me. "Hey," she said, stepping inside as I moved to let her in. For the first time in hours, my shoulders relaxed.

She grabbed my hand. "You look exhausted, and you smell like smoke. Why don't you go get a shower while I fix us some hot chocolate."

"Thanks, Sandy. A shower sounds awesome," I sighed, grateful for her caring suggestion. "And the hot chocolate sounds yummy."

"You got it," she said, her words filled with confidence that piqued my interest. As we settled into the cozy cabin, I couldn't help but notice the ease with which she moved, as if she had been here countless times before. Perhaps these late-night sessions with Mark were more than work. The thought intrigued me, and I hoped it was true. But I kept it to myself, savoring the mystery.

As I returned from my shower, I relished the familiar comfort of Sandy's presence as she sat on the couch, scrolling through her phone. Mark had acknowledged her with a swift nod before disappearing into the kitchen, his phone seemingly an extension of his ear as always.

"Sandy, I don't know what I'm going to do," I whispered, sipping my cocoa. "Jack and I, we had dinner, and it was like we both realized...our futures are on completely different paths."

She leaned in, her eyes brimming with concern and empathy. "Emily, you know, life throws unexpected curveballs like this fire. It's amazing how

everything can change in an instant."

I smiled at Sandy, her words hanging like a thick, impenetrable fog. "Changes everything?" I repeated, my mind racing with possibilities and fears.

Sandy looked up, her eyes alight with awe and grit. "We're really in for it now, huh? Who knows what'll happen after this fire? But you know what's weird? Trouble like this tends to shake things up in ways we can't even imagine."

I leaned back into the couch cushions, locking eyes with Sandy. "You really think this fire could change everything between me and Jack?"

She nodded, her expression thoughtful. "Sometimes it takes a crisis to bring clarity, Em. It shakes us out of our comfort zones, forces us to confront what we've been avoiding."

"I guess you're right," I took a deep breath, my eyes scanning the room before returning to Sandy. "It's just... all so overwhelming."

"Yeah, I can imagine," Sandy said, her eyes softening with empathy. "But hey, let's not get ahead of ourselves. For now, let's hope Jack's safe and that this nightmare ends soon."

"Right," I nodded, appreciating her support.

She paused, looking thoughtful. "How's your dad, by the way? And Lisa?"

I sighed. "Well, Mark took the reins and made arrangements for them. He moved Dad and Lisa to an assisted living center until this situation is under control."

Sandy's face lit up. "Oh, Emily, that's fantastic! One less thing to worry about, right?"

"You'd think," I said, looking away. "But, it's like... I don't know. I still want to be the one making those decisions for Dad. Mark means well, but this is my responsibility, too."

Sandy nodded. "I get it. Losing control, even temporarily, is hard. Maybe this is Mark's way of stepping up so you can focus on other things, like your own life and your relationship with Jack."

Glancing back at her, my eyes met her understanding smile. "I agree. You're right, Sandy. It's just hard to let go of that control. Especially when it comes to my dad's health. But you're right. Mark's heart is in the right place."

Sandy put her hand on mine. "Sometimes, you've got to let others help you, Em. You can't carry all the weight on your own."

"I know, I know," I said softly, my eyes drifting back to the TV. Its light cast uneasy shadows on our worried faces, mirroring the fear that loomed over us all.

Mark strolled into the living room, fatigue etched on his face, but his posture still emanating authority. He settled down between Sandy and me, throwing his arms over the back of the couch behind us.

"Okay, I have some updates," he began, his voice laced with a gravity that commanded immediate attention. "My contacts say the Yellowstone Creek Ranch is safe for now. The fire didn't touch it. The Johnsons' Rocking J Ranch lost a barn and a machine shop, but the house is standing. That's the good news." Mark paused, squinting with concern. "The fire is still raging, but the winds have shifted. It's burning into the forest in Yellowstone Park. So at least it's not threatening any more homes."

My pulse quickened at the news, a flicker of relief mingled with still-smoldering fears. "Mark, any news about the firefighters?"

"Nothing yet. I'm waiting for a call from the authorities, Em. I'm sorry."

"And Jack? I can't just sit around if something's happened to him."

"I get it, Em, but I'm in the dark too. They aren't saying yet!"

"So what's the plan? We wait?"

Mark patted my shoulder. "That's all we can do right now. Let's just stay put."

Before I could fully process everything, Mark reached for the remote and unmuted the TV. The news anchor returned to the screen, his tone somber, his face grave. "We have just received reports that several more firefighters have been injured fighting the blaze. No identities yet."

We fell silent under the heaviness of the newscaster's words. Like a leaden cloud, it snuffed out any remnants of comfort we had found earlier. At that moment, our eyes locked - Sandy's, then Mark's—and my own fears stared back at me, mirrored in their expressions.

Sandy squeezed my hand, her grip tight but reassuring. Mark kept his eyes on the TV but pulled his arms closer around our shoulders as if trying to shield us from the ever-spreading fire of reality as it began to sink in.

Finally, the program shifted to a commercial, and Mark broke the silence. "Look, you two, it's late. We all need some rest. There's nothing more we can do tonight."

Sandy nodded and began to rise. "You're right, Mark. Sleep is probably the best thing for us."

"Take my room, Sandy. I'll crash here on the couch," Mark offered, arranging the pillows into a makeshift bed.

After saying our goodnights, we dispersed. I climbed under the covers but couldn't shake the restless energy that plagued me. Reaching for my phone one more time, I dialed Jack's number. The line buzzed, then went dead. 'Disconnected' appeared in the phone's window.

Caught in the clutches of worry, I finally surrendered, my mind sprinting with relentless questions. We all sought refuge in sleep, but the wildfire was still burning out of control—unyielding, untamed, mirroring the tenacious grip of fears and unanswered mysteries that refused to grant me peace.

Chapter Sixteen

Scars and Lingering Hope Jack

I woke up to that damn heart monitor beeping away like it was keeping time to a weird song. Everything was a haze, like trying to ride through a fog, but underneath it all, the pain lingered, humming its ugly tune.

The door creaked open, and some fella in a white coat sauntered in. I couldn't really see his mug, but the way he washed his hands, you'd think he was prepping for Sunday dinner. He snapped on some gloves, and I thought, "Alright, showtime."

The guy introduced himself as Dr. Jacobs and started peeling off the bandages wrapped around my face. First, I noticed that clean, antiseptic odor, like the inside of a brand-new pickup. But then, something else crept in—the smoky, acrid scent of my own burnt flesh. Smelled like a campfire that'd gone all sorts of wrong. Those two odors mixed into a kinda hellish perfume I'd never forget.

"Let's take a look at those burns, shall we?" He began to remove the gauze around my face.

The anticipation twisted my insides. "Can I look at the damage?" I croaked, my voice still not more than a whisper due to the smoke I had inhaled.

The doc handed me a small mirror after a moment's pause. "Alright, face the music," I told myself, steeling for the reality of my wounds. When I looked, it was worse than I'd imagined—charred flesh, oozing, and an area of my cheekbone showed through.

Sucking in a deep breath, I mused, “Emily will never opt for a lifetime staring at this face, and I don’t blame her!”

Dr. Jacobs cleared his throat, jolting me out of my funk. "Jack, we plan to transfer you to the Burn Unit at Denver General. It's world-renowned, with some of the best outcomes you'll find. Your parents came by earlier and gave their consent for the transfer in case you didn't wake up in time. But you're awake now, so we need your approval." He handed me his tablet, indicating where I should sign.

The decision pressed on my chest like an iron weight. Denver was hundreds of miles from Cody — and Emily, but if it had one of the best burn units in the world, then it was also my best shot at getting better.

"Now, on a scale of one to ten, how's your pain level?"

The doc's question lingered. “Pain? I'd put it at a solid eight. But let's be real, doc—the hurt isn't just skin deep." I shrugged.

“The burn unit is equipped to help you. Their team has years of experience.”

“Alright, take me to Denver.”

He nodded, making a note in my records. "We'll manage your physical discomfort, especially during the transfer. The therapists at Denver General will help you with your emotional issues as well. Please understand that experiencing some hurt that meds can't fix is normal. Don't beat yourself up over it. You'll learn how to work through it."

He left the room with a final tap on his tablet, leaving me to grapple with my jumbled thoughts and that damning reflection in the mirror.

Soon, the door swung open again, and a nurse walked in, cradling a brand-new phone in its box. "Captain Diaz dropped this off for you," she said, sitting it beside me. "Straight from the forestry office.”

I squinted at her. "Diaz came by, did he? Anybody else from my unit get cooked, or was I the lucky one?"

She chuckled. "Minor burns for the most part. You took the brunt of it."

"Great, I always wanted to be the star of the show," I mumbled. "What about the fire? They put that beast out yet?"

She paused. "No, not yet. But the wind shifted. They're hoping for the best. Next update's in a few hours."

I nodded. "And this Denver place—what's the word?"

"If I were lying there instead of you, I wouldn't think twice. The burn unit is top-notch, but I have to warn you that you might be in Denver for a while.

You're gonna need a skin graft."

I raised an eyebrow. "Skin graft? Where are they gettin' the extra hide?"

She grinned. "Off your backside. Guess it's time to kiss your ass goodbye."

I chuckled. "Well, always knew it was good for something."

As she turned to leave, her eyes met mine for a fleeting moment. Something was there—a softness tinged with a hint of pity. It was as if she'd already measured the long road ahead of me, every pitfall, setback, victory, and defeat.

That look gnawed at me, raising questions I wasn't ready to face. Would all my friends look at me the same way from now on? A mix of sympathy and discomfort, like I was a puzzle with missing pieces?

"Appreciate it. Thanks for bringing me the phone," I said, but my gaze returned to the tray table as soon as she was gone. The phone buzzed, lighting up with messages from Emily.

I picked it up and stared at Emily's name. Should I call or send a text? In the end, I put it down with the screen facing the tray table like I could mute her and the rest of the world that way.

With a sigh, I felt something sting my eyes, which wasn't from the burns. It was the sudden smack of reality, the grip of a new life settling in—a life where I'd have to relearn everything, even how to laugh at my own jokes.

I was facing a new dawn, not knowing if it'd be as bright as the ones I was used to. But heck, if there was one thing a bull-riding cowboy knew, it was how to ride into the unknown.

The room darkened as the sun set behind the distant mountains. The nurse returned, holding a syringe filled with a clear liquid. "This should help you relax and fall asleep before the transfer," she said, expertly administering the sedative into my IV line.

"Is this the good stuff?" I asked as the first tingles of the drug warmed my veins.

"The best we've got," she assured, a wry smile appearing on her face. "It'll make the ride to Denver a little less rough."

I laid back — a tranquil numbness spread through my body. The hum of the heart monitor, and the creaking of the hospital's infrastructure seemed to meld into a single, distant tune, like a lullaby sung by a world slowly fading away.

After a while, the door opened again, and this time it wasn't the nurse. A

flood of light poured into the room, forming silhouettes of figures stepping inside. My eyes, half-open and sticky from the sedative, couldn't focus clearly, but the outline of a woman caught my attention. My heart surged; I thought it was Emily. "Em?" I mumbled, my voice sluggish, words mired in a foggy daze.

But as the figures moved closer, a cold realization cut through my foggy mind. It wasn't Emily. It was Chloe, flanked by TJ and Big Red. All were part of the firefighting crew I'd known for years, but none were the faces I had hoped for.

"Jack," Chloe said softly, her voice threaded with concern and something else I couldn't place. She sat in a chair beside my bed, her eyes avoiding the patchwork of burns and gauze on my face. "How are you holding up?"

I tried to muster up a grin, but I grimaced instead. "Been better, been worse. Mostly, I've been sleeping."

Chloe let out a weak laugh. "We heard about Denver. It's a good move."

"Yeah," I slurred, the sedative pulling me under like a riptide. "Can't wait for the road trip."

I noticed something in Chloe's hand. Her fingers obscured it, and my eyes were too heavy to make it out. The sedative and the anticipation mingled, and I wondered—what was in the plastic bag she was holding? The answer was on the tip of my consciousness, but it swam away, diving into the depths of the drug-induced fog settling over me.

TJ stepped forward. "We'll be rooting for you, man."

"And visiting," Big Red chimed in, his bear-like frame filling up the doorway. "So get better, alright?"

The room began to spin, its walls bending like soft rubber, as I mumbled a drowsy, "Will do." The world turned into a blur of colors and shadows. I strained to see Chloe's face as she leaned over, whispering something inaudible—a secret that would have to wait for a clearer day.

My eyelids felt heavy as I looked at my team. Were they still my team? Or had they come to tell me they were transferring to a new team leader? The sedative's pull proved too strong, and I sank into a sleep that was both an escape and a surrender.

I drifted into a dream as the meds were pulling me under. I was back in Yellowstone Park near the border of the ranch with Emily, both of us on horseback. We'd taken a trail to a secluded lake, hidden like a secret jewel. We dismounted, standing side by side, watching the sun throw diamonds onto

the water. For a moment, the burns, the hospital, and the looming transfer to Denver all slipped away, leaving me, Emily, and the deep blue lake.

Suddenly, the sparkling water morphed into something else—the object Chloe had been holding when she came to see me. I couldn't make out what it was, but it was as though my dream had melded with the fragments of my reality, offering me a sign. The diamonds. A sign that maybe it was time to ask Emily to be more than just the woman I loved. Perhaps it was time to ask her to be my wife.

The dream was so real and vivid that I almost missed the sensation of my hospital bed rolling away. I was jerked back to the present, the wheeling of the bed scraping the tranquil surface of my dream like a stone tossed into the lake. A strange blend of emotions washed through me—happiness for my dream, sorrow for the current mess of my life, and anticipation for whatever was still to come.

"We're moving you now, Cowboy," a nurse's voice floated toward me as though coming from a great distance. "You'll be in Denver before you know it."

"Denver," I mumbled. I was barely aware of what was happening around me, my surroundings blurring into smears of color and sound.

My thoughts stumbled back to the dream, to Emily, and the diamonds on the water that seemed so much like what Chloe had been holding. Unfinished business, I thought. So much unfinished business. Would Emily see me now and run? Or would she look at my scars and see a roadmap to our future?

The sedative finally took over, pulling me under like an undertow, dragging me away from my questions, my worries, and my plans. The last thing I remember hearing was the soft rumble of my hospital bed's wheels on the floor, transporting me from one world to another.

I plunged into a sleep that was both an escape and a surrender. Doped up, but I was aware of the unanswered questions and unfilled roles that lingered in the air, like the smell of a campfire long after the flames had been snuffed out.

Chapter Seventeen

A Scattered Trail of Hope Emily

I woke up to the soft morning light filtering through the curtains at Mark's cabin in Cheyenne. Mark and Sandy were still sleeping, bundled in their blankets like peaceful cocoons. I crept out of bed, tiptoeing around the room to gather my stuff.

With a pen poised over a notepad, I jotted down a message for them.

Heading back to the ranch. Need to check on Dad and everything. Will call soon. - Emily.

I left the note on the kitchen counter where they couldn't miss it, gathered my stuff, and stepped outside. The crisp morning air filled my lungs, contrasting the heaviness in my chest.

I had a lot to check on—the ranch, Dad, and Jack. My mind spun with questions as I started the car and drove down the winding road that would take me back to the life that waited.

As the miles rolled on, the car's engine wasn't the only thing revving. My thoughts were a chaotic blend of worry and hope. My phone chimed when I thought I'd looped through every possible scenario for the hundredth time, jolting me from my musings.

Maggie's name flashed on the screen.

"Hey, Maggie, tell me you have good news. Mark heard the house was spared last night and thought the barn was alright, but what about everything else?" I asked as I answered the call on speaker.

"Hey, Em. Yes and no," Maggie said, her voice tinged with exhaustion. "Your dad and the ranch house are fine, and most of the livestock was saved. Firefighters managed to control the flames before they reached the house and the other buildings."

While it was a relief to know the ranch house had been spared, my heart sank for even a few of our lost animals. "Thank you, Maggie. What about Jack? Is he okay?"

Silence hung between us before she responded. "I don't know, Em. I haven't seen or heard anything about him."

Frustration surged through me, hot and quick. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I wish I was, Em," Maggie replied. "I really do. The Johnsons weren't as lucky as you all. I tried to call over there, but the call didn't go through. They were evacuated, of course."

My grip tightened on the steering wheel. I muttered a hurried goodbye and disconnected the call. Not knowing about Jack made every mile ahead seem even longer. Every minute stretched out like an hour.

As I drove, my surroundings morphed into a chaotic tableau—media vans parked everywhere, camera crews and reporters buzzing around like hornets, and emergency vehicles stationed at intervals. A frenetic news hub choked off the entrance to my quiet, peaceful ranch.

My phone vibrated, pulling me from my thoughts. Clayton's name lit up the screen.

"Hey Clay, you alright?" I asked, my voice tinged with worry.

"I'm okay, Em, but I can't make it to the ranch. Roads are closed, and, honestly, there's a lot happening over here in Cody," he said, sounding unusually anxious.

"Oh? What's going on?"

"I've been swamped with calls from our neighbors. Some lost their livestock to the fire and are dealing with the grim task of burying what remains. Others have animals that are injured—some tried to bolt through fences, and many have severe burns. It's heartbreaking, but some animals can be saved, so I've been doing what I can."

My veterinarian brother always had a soft spot for animals, and I could

hear the strain in his voice.

"Wow, that's a lot," I replied. "You're doing important work, Clay."

"I'm trying to, Sis. But listen, if that's your next question, I haven't heard anything about Jack."

Of course, it was my next question. And once again, there was nothing but a hollowness in the conversation where news about Jack should be.

"Thanks for the update, Clay. Stay safe," I said before ending the call.

My mind was a whirlpool again. Navigating through this media circus to get to the ranch seemed increasingly daunting. And yet, there was another place I felt compelled to visit—another person who needed me.

Making my decision, I took the next exit and headed for the assisted living center where Dad was supposed to be.

I parked my car in the familiar lot at the center. After the media circus, the calm atmosphere inside felt like a warm hug. I found my dad in the common area, his eyes squinting at a newspaper through his reading glasses.

"Dad," I said, my voice thick with relief.

He looked up, and his face brightened. "Emily, sweetheart! What a surprise!"

I hugged him tightly, grateful to find him safe and healthy. "How are you holding up? Are you okay?"

"I'm doing alright," he said, setting aside the newspaper. "What brings you here? Everything okay with the ranch?"

"More or less," I evaded, not wanting to bring down the mood. "How are you and Lisa?"

Before he could reply, Lisa appeared from the adjoining room, greeting me with a smile.

"We're fine, Emily. In fact, we have some exciting news. A neurologist friend of mine has agreed to see Roy. There are some experimental medications for Parkinson's, and Roy seems like a perfect candidate."

"What? That's... surprising," I said, my eyes flicking to my dad's hopeful face. "Dad, did you know about this?"

"I did," he said, not meeting my eyes. "I've already filled out the paperwork."

"You did what? Without talking to us?"

Before the tension escalated, Lisa took me aside. "Emily, your father is still capable of making decisions for himself. We should be celebrating that there's hope."

I looked back at Dad, who was watching us with quiet intensity. It dawned on me that perhaps I'd been underestimating him.

"You're right, Lisa," I said softly. "I should be happy there's a glimmer of hope."

As I returned to my father, my phone chimed again. But for the first time today, I ignored it. Sometimes, the most pressing matters aren't the loudest ones.

As I got into my car, I gripped the steering wheel, staring at the assisted living center's entrance as if it held answers to the questions swirling in my head. Dad made a life-altering decision without even a call to his daughter or my brothers. Our ranch was hanging on by a thread, its fate uncertain in the wake of the wildfire.

What had happened to the world I thought I was a part of? The stability I had assumed was a given. People were making life-changing decisions — was I only a spectator in my father's life? The sensation wasn't unfamiliar to me. It had grown since I first left for college, but today, it seemed amplified a hundredfold.

Sure, Maggie had reassured me that the ranch house was unharmed and she was doing fine. Clayton was offering help to the community. And Dad... Dad was taking steps, too. They were all managing, finding paths through their own issues. Dusty had contacted Mark yesterday, and they agreed it was the right thing to move Storm and Zeus to Texas.

Why did I feel like I was the one lost?

I shook off the thoughts, reminding myself that even if I wasn't part of every decision, I had my own path to tread and crises to resolve. I had to find Jack. My phone lit up again, a text from Sandy I decided could wait. There were answers I needed, and I wasn't going to find them parked here.

I put the car in drive, heading toward my next destination—the hospital. Because sometimes, the only way to find your way back into the story of your own life is to turn the page.

As I pulled into the hospital parking lot, my gut churned with a cocktail of anticipation and dread. Even though they'd told me Jack wasn't here, something deep down insisted I must go to see for myself. Maybe it was mistrust in the system, or perhaps it was just the unshakeable sense that our connection was still there, hidden under layers of life's complexities.

Walking into the lobby, the hospital's smell of antiseptics and filtered air wafted through my nostrils. It was weirdly comforting in its familiarity. I

approached the front desk, where a middle-aged woman was shuffling through some papers.

"Excuse me," I began, trying to steady my voice. "I'm looking for Jack Johnson. I know I was told he's not here, but—"

The clerk glanced up, meeting my eyes. For a moment, she scrutinized me as if trying to read my story in the lines of my face. Then she sighed, "You have a right to know. He was here, but he's been discharged."

I quietly clapped my hands and grinned. He was alive, or at least okay enough to leave the hospital. But as quickly as the relief came, it was replaced by a surge of frustration. Why hadn't he called if he was well enough to be discharged? Had he moved after the fire?

"Did he, um, say where he was going?" I asked, my voice tinged with desperation.

The clerk shook her head. "Sorry, honey, I can't provide that information."

I thanked her and turned away, my mind racing as I exited the hospital. Jack had always been a bit of an enigma, a puzzle I thought I'd solved, but those pieces kept changing. The last time I saw him, I remembered the distance in his eyes, a canyon formed by life's diverging paths. And now, his absence felt like a void, pulling me into a spiraling heartache.

Sitting back in my car, I realized that while grappling with lost livestock and downed fencing, I was also wrestling with something far more elusive—a lost connection, a love interrupted but not forgotten. And for the first time, I had to ask myself — was it time to turn a new page or try to rewrite the old one?

I let the car engine idle, laying my head on the wheel as if it could provide some clarity. The radio murmured some forgettable tune, a soft backdrop to the memories resurfacing like long-buried treasure.

The last time Jack and I were together was at the Cody Cowboy, our old stomping ground. We'd sat at a corner booth, the table sprinkled with crumbs from the basket of hot bread we'd demolished. For a fleeting moment, it felt like old times—laughter bubbled from our lips, our feet swayed together under the table, and the sparks between us were undeniable as we danced to a slow country tune.

As the night progressed, the conversation veered toward the inevitable—the future. Jack was married to his job and passionate about firefighting and saving lives. Me? I was equally tethered to my family's ranch, the land passed

down for generations, and caring for Dad.

Our eyes locked, a flicker of love still burning, but it felt like we were on opposite sides of a growing abyss. "This hotshot life takes me everywhere," Jack shared, avoiding my eyes, "could be to California, Colorado, or Montana — even the Dakotas, I just never know." The unsaid words hung heavy between us. Jack's life was nomadic, not built for raising families or sustaining relationships.

"And I can't leave Wyoming, you know that," I'd replied, my voice carrying a note of finality.

Soon after, his phone sounded—a text alert that he was needed immediately. A wildfire had broken out. We'd ended the night not with a kiss but with a smothering silence. Our separate worlds swallowed up each other.

As I sat in the parking lot today, engine still on, I wondered if that was it for us—a love story with an anticlimactic ending. Was it a tale of two souls converging, diverging, wondering what could have been?

Reality may have shaken us hard, but I was still rattled, contemplating whether love could return to a story that felt more and more like a maze.

I switched off the engine, suddenly aware that my life had been nothing but reactions—reacting to family crises, the wildfire, and Jack's unavailability. I stared out the windshield at the horizon, feeling the weight of a hundred choices and chances not taken.

Enough! It was time to grab the reins, to make decisions instead of just facing them.

Starting the car, I was fueled by a newfound sense of direction. And as I pulled onto the highway, my phone vibrated again—a voicemail notification. Odd, the number was not in my contacts. Heart pounding, I hit play. Silence. No words, just the empty quiet that filled the line. My skin prickled.

Who called? Why was there no message? A mistake or something more ominous? There was only one way to know.

"Call the number back, Emily!"

Chapter Eighteen

Fires Within, Ashes Without Jack

I woke up foggy-headed, my eyes gritty and throat parched. I took in the soft hum of machinery, different machinery. I realized the setting was unfamiliar.

This wasn't Cody.

Busting into the room like she was double-parked, the nurse glanced at me. "Mr. Johnson? You're awake." Her eyes flicked over her digital tablet and eyed my vitals, but they never really landed on me. I could tell she was all business, no chitchat. Back in Cody, nurses felt like old friends—asking how I was doing and acting like they gave a damn. But her? She was like an airplane set on autopilot.

"Denver? Last thing I remember, I was in Cody, getting wheeled out of a room." My voice came out raspy as if filled with dust.

Adjusting the IV drip beside my bed, she glanced up. "You've been transported to a specialized burn unit here."

More advanced care? Surgery? I only half-listened. My mind reeled. At the center was Emily. I'd left so much unresolved with her. Now it seemed I was miles and worlds away.

"Oh, yes, I remember now."

Unfinished business—that thought was on loop inside my head. The unanswered calls weighed on me.

Placing my phone on the bedside table, she spoke. "And your phone, just so you know, was fully charged when we got your personal effects."

I stared at the device, suddenly heavy with the weight of its potential. I knew one of the calls I had to make, and it was a call I'd been both longing for and dreading. But before any of that, I had to come to terms with the new reality of my life. And it started here, in this hospital miles away from Emily, my folks, and my friends.

A different nurse wheeled in a cart of medical supplies. "Okay, Mr. Johnson, before we prep you for surgery, we need to change your dressings and examine the wounds."

I nodded, bracing myself for what was to come. As the bandages unwrapped, each layer removed felt like peeling back a chapter of my past life, revealing the raw, unsettling present. When the last layer was off, I asked for a mirror, unable to help myself.

"Good God, it looks even worse than I remember—a chunk of my face is ready to just fall off." My stomach churned.

The nurse looked at me squarely, her eyes holding a glimmer of optimism. "I've seen much worse. You were lucky. We'll do our best in the surgery."

I sucked in a quick breath. "I was lucky? They would do their best? This was my face, my identity—now forever changed. Damaged." I muttered, careful not to piss the woman off.

"What was that, Mr. Johnson?"

"I said, 'Call me Jack. You can drop the Mr. Johnson thing,'" I tried to paste on my best grin but couldn't. It hurt too much.

Shifting my gaze, I glanced at the phone. It was like a landmine on the table, just sitting there, daring me to pick it up. I grabbed it and scrolled through those mystery numbers. Emily had to be one of them. I hit redial on the latest one and waited.

Ring after ring after ring. My pulse kicked up a notch with each one. Then voicemail, that damn beep—Emily. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, so I bailed and ended the call.

Next up, I recognized a number—my folks. I hit call. Dad answered, his voice not its usual sturdy self. "Jack, are you all right? Your mom can't even leave the ranch. Says she still smells the fire everywhere inside the house."

"And you, Dad? You holding up?"

"We're making do," he mumbled. "Just get better, all right? We'll be there as soon as we can swing it."

Then he hit me with it. "Talked to Emily yet?"

I stalled. "Nah. Not yet."

"You best clear the air, Jack. Remember what I told you!"

That stung. Unclear, unsettled, whatever you call it—that was me and Em. I tossed the phone back on the table. It was a ticking time bomb, and I wasn't sure when it'd go off. But, like it or not, surgery was on the horizon, my folks were emotionally shattered, and Emily was MIA.

I eyed my mug again in the small mirror they'd given me, my messed-up face glaring back. This was the new reality—a damaged face and dwindling time. Dad wasn't wrong—time was running out on me. I couldn't afford to dodge bullets anymore, not when life was firing them at me point-blank.

The door clicked and swung open, a new face this time—glasses, a notepad, and a vibe that said, "I'm here to dissect your feelings."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Johnson. I'm Dr. Fields, the hospital's psychologist. Mind if I have a seat?"

"Sure, go ahead. Not like I can run away," I said, nodding to the chair beside the bed.

She settled in, all posture and calmness. "I'm here to talk with you about the emotional journey ahead. The surgery isn't just skin-deep. The emotional scars can be as complicated as the physical ones."

"Tell me about it," I muttered.

She continued, "Many patients find that a solid emotional support system can be critical to the healing process. Do you have anyone you'd consider your support system?"

Her question threw a spotlight on that still-quivering corner of my mind where Emily was. But I hedged. "Got family. Friends back in Cody, too."

She looked up from her notepad, a slight squint to her eyes. "No one more specific?"

For a sec, I almost caved. I almost told her about the tangle of thoughts and feelings named Emily that I couldn't sort out. "Nah," I said instead, "Not much into the touchy-feely stuff."

"I understand, but these are not normal circumstances, Mr. Johnson. You're going through a life-altering event. Emotional support isn't a sign of weakness. It's a part of resilience," Dr. Fields pushed.

"Resilience, huh?" I glanced at the idle phone on my bedside table, thinking about my old man's words and Emily's invisible presence like a low hum in the room. "Guess I'll think about it."

"You should. Remember, the path to wellness is more than a physical

one. Emotional battles await as well," she stated, wrapping up. "I'll let you rest. Take some time to think about what I've mentioned. I'm here to help. Even if it doesn't seem like it right now."

As she left, her words stuck to me like a barb I couldn't shake. I stared at the ceiling, my mind wrestling with itself. Resilience? Emotional battles? Damn it, I was tired of all these terms that seemed too clean for my messy reality.

But simple wasn't an option anymore.

A nurse, one of those eternally cheerful types with a voice like Sunday morning, popped in. "Mr. Johnson, you're so brave. Not everyone handles situations like this so well."

Brave? What the hell did that even mean? I hadn't chosen any of this. "Thanks," I mumbled, not meeting her eyes.

The last one was a young tech, maybe in his late twenties, setting up some equipment for the upcoming surgery. He looked like he was fresh off a video game marathon. "Nervous?" he asked, half-grinning as if he knew a secret cheat code to life.

"Ain't my first rodeo," I lied. It was absolutely my first rodeo of this kind, and every muscle in my body was tighter than a drum.

Each interaction chipped away at me, making me question what I was doing here, causing me to question myself. Brave? Nervous? Hell, I was a complete mess.

I sat there, eyeing that damn phone like it was a cobra ready to strike. Finally, hands shaky, I picked it up. I went into the messages and clicked on the new contact I'd made for Emily. A blank message box stared back at me like a challenge.

"Hey, Em, it's me..." I typed, then backspaced it all. Too casual.

"Emily, this is difficult for me, but..." Backspace. Too formal, like I was heading into a breakup or something.

"Em, I need to talk to you about..." Delete. Now, I was making it sound like an obligation.

I sighed, glanced at her most recent message—a simple "Call me?"—and my heart twisted.

Screw it, I thought. I tapped out, "I should've picked up your calls, Em. I know that now. There's a lot I need to tell you." My thumb twitched over the 'send' button, but a buzz from an incoming message interrupted me. It was from the hospital's admin: "Surgery prep in 20 mins. Please be ready."

I looked at my unsent message to Emily, then deleted it. Twenty minutes to surgery, and here I was, unable to send it.

Grimacing, I dropped the phone back on the table. I was swamped with—fear, regret, hope—but I couldn't do it.

Maybe later, I told myself. Yeah, later. As if time was something I had plenty of.

The curtain separating my room rustled, and I caught a glimpse of my pre-op neighbor for the first time. An older gentleman, face etched with the lines of a well-lived or well-weathered life. He had overheard my restless mumblings, my phone beeping, and perhaps even the unsent text drafts I'd been wrestling with.

"Rough night, eh?" he asked, his voice gravelly but warm.

"Something like that," I replied.

He chuckled. "Life has a funny way of pushing us to the edge, doesn't it? Forces you to really look at what's important."

I raised an eyebrow. "You mean like a wake-up call?"

"Exactly," he nodded. "In my years, I've learned that you should never leave love unattended. It's like a garden. Neglect it, and it'll wither. Tend to it, and it blooms."

I looked at my phone, then back at him. It was like he'd read my thoughts, tapping into my deepest worries about Emily.

"So, what're you waiting for?" he added with a knowing smile.

"Who says I'm waiting?" I was getting defensive.

He raised his hands. "Didn't mean to intrude. Just sayin', the longer you wait to water that garden, the harder it'll be to bring it back to life."

I pondered his words as he retreated back behind his curtain. Suddenly, the room felt a lot smaller, the walls closing in, but in a good way. It was as if his words had turned into a spotlight, illuminating the path I needed to take.

"Screw it," I muttered, finally hitting 'send' on a new message to Emily:

Me: Need to talk. It's important!

Yeah, it was just a text. It was the hardest thing I'd done all day.

The medical team filed into the room, their faces stoic, hidden behind masks. A nurse approached me, pushing a cart laden with sterilized instruments and swabs. "Mr. Johnson, we'll be prepping you for surgery now. Any last questions?"

"Just... will I still recognize myself when it's over?"

She hesitated, her eyes meeting mine. “Of course you will. We’re only fixing one place, and it’s rather small.”

As they wheeled me out, my phone buzzed, and a nurse handed it to me. I glanced at the screen and felt my stomach drop. A text from Emily:

Emily: Tried to call. Can't get through. Need to see you ASAP :-
)

The next thing I knew, the anesthetist was positioning the mask over my face. "Take a deep breath, Mr. Johnson."

And my world went black.

Chapter Nineteen

The Road to Answers **Emily**

As my car approached the EMS checkpoint, I took a slow, steadying breath. My eyes traced the burnt skeletons of trees lining the road, their once-vibrant foliage now reduced to ash. The singed prairie grass seemed to stretch on forever. My heart ached, realizing how dangerously close the wildfire had come to the Circle Y.

Despite having numerous unanswered calls and a whirlwind of emotions surrounding Jack, my determination remained unwavering. I firmly believed Jack's parents knew his whereabouts and had already made their way back to their ranch after being evacuated.

The EMS officer waved me through, and although relieved, I was far from at ease. The road to the Rocking J remained closed. A knot of worry tightened in my stomach, but my path was clear. I was desperate to connect with the Johnsons.

I pulled into the ranch's driveway, the fading daylight casting long shadows. The scenery was comforting as I turned into the Yellowstone Creek Ranch lane. The land appeared untouched with its rolling pastures and the distant outline of the barn and outbuildings. It was as if time had stood still here while the world burned around it.

I parked beside the familiar old oaks and lodgepole pines, their branches sprawling like arms, ready to embrace me. But instead of providing comfort, they seemed to weigh heavy, laden with the unspoken story of the inferno they had escaped.

Exiting the car, I noticed the silence—a sharp contrast to the recent sirens and news reports that filled the airwaves. For a brief time, I savored it, letting the quiet sink into my bones. Then, my sense of urgency rekindled. I had to move if I was going to reach the Johnson's ranch before nightfall.

I pushed open the front door, stepped inside, and pulled my suitcase behind me. The rush of familiarity made me smile—the worn leather couch, the heirloom family photos, and the lingering scent of Dad's cigar tobacco. I sighed and offered a brief prayer of thanksgiving. Everything was as we'd left it when I'd set out for Cheyenne.

Yet, the stillness was unsettling, the rooms frozen in a bygone moment. I shook off the eerie feeling. Now wasn't the time for sentimentality. I headed for the key rack, my eyes catching a glimpse of the gun cabinet. My thoughts raced to the encroaching night and the wildlife displaced by the fire. Grabbing the keys to Dad's 4-wheeler, I decided to arm myself with Dad's shotgun—just in case.

Then, stepping back outside, I locked the door behind me and took a moment to inhale deeply, filling my lungs with the crisp evening air. Even so, the faint redolence of the wildfire was still noticeable. Placing the shotgun into the 4-wheeler's rack, I cranked the engine, and it roared to life.

The sun began its descent behind the mountains, painting the sky with shades of orange, pink, and deepening blue. It was a masterpiece only nature could create, but tonight, it served as a ticking clock, each color change reminding me that time was running out—I needed to know if my high school crush was alright.

Riding along the dirt trail that connected our land to the Rocking J, I shivered as the temperature dropped with the fading sunlight. I reached the boundary that separated the ranches. It was an old iron gate we'd opened and closed countless times over the years, a simple yet significant demarcation that seemed to say, "Different families, same struggle."

Hopping off the 4-wheeler, I unfastened the latch that required a precise touch. The metal was worn and twisted from years of use, and the gate creaked as I swung it open, alerting the cattle—or perhaps something else—that I was entering new territory.

As I drove through, a shiver crawled up my spine. I glanced back one last time at the Circle Y, its silhouette now merging with the evening shadows. I took another steady breath, closed the gate securely behind me, and mounted the 4-wheeler again.

With one last glance at the darkening sky, I revved the engine and continued along my way. In the twilight, the shotgun beside me was a cold reminder that caution was my closest ally.

Navigating the vehicle through the Johnson's property, the fire's toll was even more palpable up close than Mark's grim description had made it seem. I was prepared—mentally, at least—to see destruction, but nothing truly readied me for the visceral experience of it. The twisted metal frame of the old windmill, which had always stood like a loyal guardian of the ranch, now seemed like a memorial to what was lost.

My heart clenched as I took in the scene. Mark had already told me their ranch house had been spared, but the loss of livestock and outbuildings was devastating. Despite being prepared for it, seeing the charred landscape hit me in a new way.

The windmill and water trough weren't just objects; they were stitched into the fabric of daily life here, part of routines and seasons, part of the Johnsons, part of me, part of Jack.

I blinked back tears. The Johnsons had suffered but were alive, and their home was intact. If I were to find answers about Jack, if there were any solace or resolution to be had, I would find it up ahead, beyond the scars left by the flames.

With a newfound resolve, I moved along. I couldn't afford to dwell. I needed to reach Jack's parents to connect these burnt fragments of reality into something that made sense again.

I drove up to the ranch house and killed the engine, finding it intact but visibly scarred by the fire's proximity. As I approached, I noticed Marge was on the front porch, her hands busy scrubbing at soot stains on the white wooden rails. She was a stout woman in her sixties, but her posture was unbent by the years or recent hardship. Marshall stood a few steps away, leaning on the porch column. He met my gaze before drifting back to his wife.

"Marge, let the stains be. We have to wait until the insurance adjuster gets everything for our claim before we start cleaning up around here," he sighed, his voice tinged with exhaustion beyond physical tiredness.

Marge paused, but only for a moment. "If we don't keep fighting for normalcy, then what are we doing, Marshall? Come on now," she said, returning to her scrubbing as though the very action could erase the past days.

The shotgun, still in the 4-wheeler now, seemed superfluous. I removed

my helmet, my fingers nervously combing through my wind-tousled hair.

Marge looked up, her eyes meeting mine. There was a flicker of confusion for a second, then recognition dawned. "Emily," she breathed, a softness smoothing the worry lines on her face. She dropped the scrub brush into the bucket beside her and came toward me.

I stepped forward, my face mirroring her relief and sorrow. "Marge, Marshall, I—"

"You don't have to say anything, honey," Marge interrupted, pulling me into a hug that enveloped me in the scent of laundry detergent and woodsmoke.

Marshall joined us, his strong arms completing the circle. Right then, we were just people, united in the aftermath of a tragedy too immense for words. But as the hug broke, the weight of my unanswered questions settled back in.

"Is Jack...?"

Marge's eyes flickered with an unreadable emotion. "We'll talk inside, Emily."

And just like that, my stomach twisted with concern. What was she not saying?

Marshall sighed, leaning back into his chair as he gestured toward the couch. "Sit down, Emily."

The tone of his voice drained the warmth from the room, and I hesitated before taking a seat. Marge folded her hands in her lap, her eyes fixed on Marshall. It was as if the room held its breath, waiting for him to speak.

"Captain Diaz called us while the fire was still going on," Marshall began, pausing as if gathering the strength to continue. "Jack was in the hospital, over in Cody. He has burns on his face and arm."

A cold shiver ran through me. "How bad is it?"

Marshall exhaled heavily. "We saw him briefly. He was awake and coherent. But the hospital called again not long after we got back here. They're moving him to a specialized burn unit in Denver. He needs a skin graft on his face."

Denver? Skin graft? The words hung heavy in the air.

Marge's voice broke the silence, quivering as she spoke. "And here's the thing, Emily. He needs someone with him. We can't go right now. We can't leave the property when everything's so up in the air. Jack understands, but..."

My eyes met hers, and it was as if no more words were needed. "I'll go. I can leave tonight."

Marshall rose from his chair, a look of restrained relief crossing his features. "I was hoping you'd say that. Jack needs family, and we need someone we trust to be in Denver with him."

"The sooner you go, the better, Emily. Time is of the essence," Marge said, clutching my hand.

Marshall looked at me intently. "Emily, Jack's struggling emotionally, not just physically. He needs you."

His words were like a call to arms. I thought of Jack's smile, his charm, and how much he meant to me. "Say no more, Marshall. He's going through hell, and if I can make it even a tiny bit better, I will."

"You've always been his rock, Emily," Marshall said. "He'd be asking you to come if he could."

Marge's eyes met mine, shimmering. "You're family, Emily. We trust you with this."

Family. That word energized me. "I'm in. I'll head to Denver as soon as I can," I declared, looking each of them in the eye.

The atmosphere lightened instantly. "Thank you, Emily. This means the world to us," Marshall exhaled, tension leaving his shoulders.

"And to Jack, when he realizes you've come to support him," Marge added, enveloping me in a hug.

Hugging her back, I felt a resolve solidify within me. There were countless unknowns ahead, but one thing was crystal clear: I was holding onto something real, something invaluable. Family. And for now, that certainty fueled me.

Breathing a sigh of relief as I pushed open the door of Jack's childhood home, a mixture of dread and determination assaulted my senses. Before striding away, I turned back to look at Marge and Marshall, who had followed me out onto the porch.

"I'll call you as soon as I book my flight," I assured them. "And I'll let you know the moment I get to Denver."

"Safe travels, Emily," Marshall said, his eyes conveying a mixture of worry and gratitude.

"We'll be praying for you both," Marge added, her hand lingering on my arm as if she could impart strength through her touch.

I nodded, unable to speak, then climbed back onto the 4-wheeler. Starting the engine, I felt a lump form in my throat as I left the familiar grounds of the Johnsons' ranch. In a matter of hours, my destination had shifted from a local

emergency room to a Denver hospital room—each equally urgent, neither any easier to face.

Arriving back home, I rushed inside, put the shotgun back in the cabinet, and made a beeline for my bedroom. My suitcase from Cheyenne lay open on the bed, half unpacked.

A glance at my phone confirmed what I already suspected—a red-eye flight was leaving Cody for Denver in a few hours. I booked the flight with shaking hands, hastily repacked some clothes, toiletries, and essentials into a larger suitcase, and grabbed my backpack off the shelf.

My eyes fell on a framed picture of Jack and me, grinning like idiots at our high school prom. I picked it up and gently placed it inside my backpack. A small but significant piece of us.

After grabbing some snacks and a comfy spread, I stuffed them into my pack, zipped up my bag, and bolted out of the house. The car's engine purred to life, and I sped down the road, praying I'd make it to Cody in time.

As I boarded the plane, a text notification buzzed on my phone. I opened the message to find updates from Marshall and Marge. "Jack is out of surgery and in recovery. He should be back in his room by the time you get there."

Relief washed over me as I sank into my seat. While so much remained uncertain, those words were a small yet crucial lifeline.

Taking a deep breath, I leaned back in my seat. The engines hummed, and the plane taxied onto the runway. I felt a strange sense of calm for the first time since the wildfires began.

Jack was alive. He was fighting. And soon, I'd be there beside him.

The plane lifted off, soaring into the night sky, and I felt a chapter close behind me and a new one begin. But most of all, I couldn't wait to welcome Jack back into my life again.

Chapter Twenty

In Sickness and In Health Jack

Waking up felt like navigating through a fog made of shards of glass. Everything appeared too bright, too harsh. And my face ached as if someone had taken a sander to it. For a sec, I was disoriented. But then the familiar scent and the beeping of my heart monitor snapped me back to reality. This wasn't some random motel—it was the hospital's recovery suite—about as relaxing as a slap in the face.

When I touched the bandage on my face, I immediately regretted it—pain shot through me like a live wire. My thigh stung where they'd taken skin. No mirror needed to know I was messed up.

I turned my head to listen. The murmur of hushed conversations buzzed like a distant radio, but one phrase cut through the noise: "Someone's here to see you." My ears perked up. A visitor? Had to be a family member; nobody else knew I was in this place. Or could it be... No. Emily wouldn't know I was here.

Before I could meet my mystery guest, the nurse hit me with a little task. "You've got to show me you can breathe deeply five times in a row. Help us know you're getting enough oxygen."

Well, talk about rotten timing. Breathing was the last thing I wanted to mess with. My face felt like it was on fire, but what the hell? I took that first deep breath, wincing as I sat up to breathe into the tube she put in front of me.

Two breaths. Three. Each one was a battle against the rawness, a subtle

torture test I had to pass. But I kept my poker face on. No way was I letting on how much it hurt.

Four. Almost there. Finally, five. I exhaled, probably too quickly, and glanced at the nurse, praying my eyes said, "I aced your damn test. Now, where's my visitor?"

She nodded, satisfied. "You did well," she said as if she was doing me a favor. "Let's get you back to your room."

As they wheeled me down the hallway, curiosity got the better of me. I reached up and touched the bandage on my face. It felt different—smaller.

"Did you folks downsize me?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

The nurse looked at me and nodded. "We did. Your graft only covers a small area, so we were able to switch to a smaller bandage."

I tried to smile, but the pain changed my mind. "Really? I thought you were going to use that skin from my thigh to fix half my face or something."

She chuckled. "Oh no, it was just for a localized area. The graft wasn't as extensive as you might have thought. We always prepare our patients for the worst."

I sighed, relieved, "Alright, smaller it is then. But my thigh isn't telling me that."

She nodded, jotting something down in my chart. "Often, the harvest site is more painful than the burn itself."

"Yeah," I mumbled.

"Home sweet home," the nurse announced, steering my bed toward my room. The door swung open, and I caught sight of a silhouette standing at the window, the moonlight outlining her shape. My breath hitched. It was Emily.

She was facing away from me, lost in her own thoughts, and I felt a surge of self-consciousness for a moment. What would she think of me now? My face, my scars, would she still look at me the same?

As if sensing me, Emily turned around. Her eyes met mine, searching, assessing, and then—she smiled. And not just any smile. It was that all-consuming, world-fading-away kind of smile that I'd missed so much.

"Jack," she said, rushing over and enveloping me in a cautious hug. "You look... sexier than ever."

I chuckled, ignoring the flare-up of pain in my face, my arm, and thigh. "Well, that's a nice way to put it. You sure know how to make a guy feel special, Em."

She pulled back, her fingers dancing through my hair as she looked me

over. "I mean it. You've got this rugged, battle-hardened look now. Totally suits you."

Right then, all the anxiety and tension melted away. I was still me, scars and all, and in Emily's eyes, that was more than enough.

"Sit, Em. I wanna hear everything," I said as I eased myself off the gurney and onto the hospital bed. I tried not to let Emily see me wince, but sitting on a bed had never been such an accomplishment before.

Emily pulled up a chair, eyeing my bandages before locking onto my gaze. "Your parents told me you were here. I've been searching for two days."

"Two days?" I blinked, suddenly remembering my forgotten phone.

She nodded. "It's past midnight, you know. But I couldn't wait another minute. I had to see you."

A wave of guilt washed over me as I thought about the missed calls and the unread texts. "I'm sorry, Em. I didn't—"

"Don't. No apologies," she interrupted, shaking her head. "We're together now, and that's what matters."

"But two days, Emily. Christ, you must've thought—" My words hung in the air between us. A palpable silence enveloped the room, making the distant beeping of the monitors seem like an intruder in our bubble of intimacy.

Emily looked down at her hands, then back up at me, her eyes slightly misty. "I thought... a lot of things," she admitted, her voice softening. The words seemed to cost her, and the weight of what was unsaid was palatable. "But I never thought you'd disappear on purpose without telling me."

Our eyes met, and in that charged moment, my chest tightened. A second felt like an hour. She was searching for validation, maybe, or assurance. And I found myself desperately wanting to give it to her.

Exhaling slowly, I inched my hand closer to hers until our fingers barely touched. A magnetic pull lingered in that sliver of space, daring me to close the distance. Finally, I laced my fingers through hers, both of us feeling the electric charge from the contact. "We've wasted so much time," I murmured, my thumb caressing the back of her hand in slow circles as if I could rub away the lost moments.

Em giggled, and a soft blush colored her cheeks. "Maybe," she admitted. Then her fingers tightened around mine, capturing my gaze and locking it with her own, intensifying the connection between us. "But sometimes, wasted time teaches you what you can't afford to lose. And I can't afford to

lose you, Jack."

The wisdom of her words settled in the space between us, filling it with an intimacy I'd feared was lost. Our lives had been nothing but near-misses and bad timing for so long. But here we were, sitting in a burn unit, holding hands like the world outside didn't matter—and it didn't.

"So, what now?" I asked.

She leaned in, brushing her lips against my cheek, mindful of the wound. "Now, we stop wasting time," she whispered.

I looked into her eyes, seeing my future reflected in them. We were a mess of scars and missed opportunities, but we were also a promise of what could be. And for the first time, that future seemed not just possible but inevitable.

Emily shifted in her seat, her grip tightening on my hand. "There's something we need to talk about, Jack. It's about the Circle Y and your family ranch."

I raised an eyebrow. "Give me your assessment of the situation, Em."

"Was the wildfire moving toward your ranch before you got burned?" Emily leaned closer.

"I honestly can't tell you where we were. My whole world was turned upside down as the flames ransacked the area."

She took a deep breath, looking like she was choosing her words carefully. "The Yellowstone is doing okay, but the wildfire did a lot of damage to the Rocking J. You've lost some cattle, and a part of the ranch needs major repairs."

My heart ached. "I talked to Dad. He said things were a mess. But how bad is it really? Mom must be beside herself."

Emily looked down, then met my gaze. "When I visited, it was rough. Most of the trees are gone, and the pasture is pretty much charcoal. There's... there are dead cattle, Jack. But on the upside, the horses are okay, and the house is still standing."

"So, what's the plan, Jack? Heading back to the fire crew? You've got a contract, right?" Emily's question sliced through the tension, but her eyes were full of concern, not judgment.

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Yeah, I've signed on for five years and have served three as far as my job goes. But I don't know, Em. I can't stand by while my family and yours are in bad shape. I need to find a way to help. The Brooks and Johnsons have stuck together since the days of the Wild

West, and I'm not going to be the one to put a monkey wrench in that tradition."

She nodded, understanding filling her eyes. "We'll figure it out, Jack. If I've learned anything about us, it's that we are beginning to handle what life throws our way—together."

The gravity of the situation hung in the air, but it was different this time. It wasn't just my problem, Emily's, or even the problems that belonged to the ranches. It was ours, and for the first time in a long while, that 'ours' could bear the weight of it all. The room fell into silence. We were both grappling with the same monster—uncertainty.

I finally broke the quiet. "What about your family, Em?"

Emily sighed, her worries visible in her eyes. "Daddy and Nurse Lisa evacuated to the assisted living center in Cody. Now, Dad's got a new neurologist. Lisa's managed to get him into some experimental treatment for his Parkinson's. As for the ranch, well, I evacuated to Cheyenne to my brother's cabin. Mark spent most of his phone time coordinating with his fire contacts. But every other second, I was scouring updates, hoping for news about you, Jack."

A knock on the door broke into our conversation, and a young aide pushed in a cart laden with hospital breakfast trays. "Morning," he chirped, a little too cheerfully for my liking. "Breakfast for one."

I picked up the fork but paused, offering it to her. "Want some? The eggs actually look edible today."

She shook her head, her lips curving in a gentle smile. "You need to eat, Jack. You're the one recovering."

As if to prove her point, she reached for the remote lying in my bed and ordered another tray. "Can we have an additional breakfast tray here? Mr. Johnson needs more sustenance than what's been offered."

I looked at her, struck by how incredibly attentive she was. Even in a hospital, looking after someone else, she still knew exactly what I needed. "You've always been like this, haven't you? Taking care of others."

She shrugged, a tender smile playing on her lips. "Someone has to."

Once the aid left and the door clicked shut, the air in the room thickened like molasses. "So, Jack," Emily broke the silence, her eyes holding my gaze. "Wanna talk about what happened after the alert you got at Cody Cowboy?"

I hesitated, then shrugged. "Yeah, might as well fill you in. We were trying to hold back the fire. TJ and I were on the ground, manning the shovel

and fire blanket."

"And the others?" She asked, her hand finding its way into mine.

"Further back, ready to move in. We got a call to pull back; the fire was gaining. But as we were retreating, TJ tripped and fell flat."

She squeezed my hand, urging me silently to continue.

"I couldn't leave him. Ran back, yanked him up just as the fire roared through where he'd been."

"Jesus, Jack," Emily exhaled, her eyes teary but steady. "You saved his life."

"Yep, I guess I did," I added, the room closing in for a second.

Her grip tightened. "You're still my hero, Jack." Emily stifled a yawn, her eyes growing heavy. The stress of the last few days had caught up with her.

"Why don't you close those curtains?" I suggested, nodding toward the window.

She got up and pulled the curtains together, dimming the room. I shifted to one side of the hospital bed, making room for her.

"Come here," I said, patting the empty space beside me.

She hesitated, glancing at the medical equipment surrounding us, and then made up her mind. Em climbed carefully into the bed next to me. Our lips met in a gentle kiss, a touch that spoke of hardships overcome and new beginnings.

As Emily nestled against me, the sense of completeness was almost palpable. Just as she was on the verge of drifting off into a much-needed sleep, the door clicked open, and Dr. Fields, my psychiatrist, walked in. "Ah, I see you have company," she said, not unkindly. She looked from Emily to me, a soft smile crossing her lips. "I'm happy to see you won't be needing sessions with me after all, Mr. Johnson."

And with that, she left, closing the door gently behind her.

I wrapped my arm around Em and pulled her close. "I love you, you know."

"Yeah, I know. I love you too, Jack."

Chapter Twenty-One

Desire, Dreams, and a New Dawn Three Months Later Jack

The sun sparkled in through the curtains, beaming down onto Emily's face. Her eyes gleamed with a hidden passion as we lay in her bed at the ranch, embracing an intimate silence. Lisa had taken Roy to some doctor's appointments in Vegas and to try their luck at the tables, so we were all alone for a change.

It was like we had this bubble around us: no deadlines, no emergencies—just peace. That kind of stillness was an endangered species in our lives.

Emily turned over, locking eyes with mine. How she looked at me cut through the crap I'd been hauling around for months. But for this morning, it was me, her, and our passion.

"Good morning, sunshine." I pulled her in for a slow kiss.

"More..." Em stretched her arms out above her head. It didn't take a genius to know what she wanted, so without hesitation, I moved onto my knees and pulled off her nightshirt before tossing it aside on the floor.

She leaned back against the pillows with a satisfied sigh, crooking her fingers inside the elastic of my boxers, pulling me closer. "These have got to go."

I chuckled, running my fingers through her hair. "Em. You know I can't resist you." I shimmied out of my constraints and tossed them aside.

Raising to her elbow, she giggled and twirled my chest hair around her fingers. I snuggled closer and peppered kisses along the soft flesh of her

neck, giving special attention to her sensitive pulse point. When her luscious lips parted and whispered, "Jack, I need you inside me," all bets were off.

An involuntary groan escaped my lips. I was helpless to resist her. Like always, her touch sent a rush of blood to my already hardening cock.

I gripped her knees and nudged her thighs open. I then grabbed my dick and applied steady pressure, rubbing the tip up and down her sweet spot. Her groans of pleasure were music to my ears. The sounds of her breath hitching as I buried myself in her wetness were like a drug to me.

I wanted to hear her scream my name again. I wanted to see her bite her lip, trying to hold back the urge. "Jack," Em's breathy voice whispered out sweetly. Her warm legs wrapped around my waist, drawing me in.

A wild, intoxicating rush of blood raced through my veins. I watched her face as I drove into her, over and over, her hips rising to meet me, taking my throbbing hard cock deep inside.

"God Em," I snarled loudly, the sensation of her warm wetness. "I love how you are always so wet for me." I pulled my hips back and surged forward. Her moans increased, and I felt her delicate muscles start to contract, but I wanted her to be on fire as much as me, so I slowed my pace.

"Jack... Please." Em pleaded, digging her nails into my back.

"Please, what, baby? Tell me what you want." I lifted my hips and pushed back in with just the head, teasing her and making her want me. I watched her face, pleading for more with her eyes.

"Don't make me beg. Jack, I need you to move." She tossed her head back, biting her lip.

I grabbed her thighs, using them as leverage to pump her harder. I listened to her soft, throaty moans, the words she spoke, even the way she said my name—it had all become a drug that I had been addicted to since we were in high school.

"I love you, Jack. I need you. I want you to fuck me harder," she begged, her words barely audible.

I leaned down and started nibbling on her earlobe, whispering, "I love you, Emily. I'm gonna give you what you've always wanted."

She let out a long, throaty moan. Her walls began contracting around me, and I felt the telltale throbbing against the head of my dick. Her orgasm intensified, and she squeezed me tightly as she came, sending me careening over the edge. The waves of my orgasm overtook me, and I emptied myself into my woman, trembling with the intensity of it.

I collapsed on top of her, breathing heavily and holding her close. I couldn't get enough of her, all of her. I had become so dependent on my Em for everything. My heart, my breath, my love—it was all for her.

Smiling, she whispered all I needed to hear, "I love you, Jack."

I hugged her to me, burying my face in her sweet-smelling hair. "I love you too, Em," I said, kissing her lips.

We relaxed there in the afterglow for a few minutes. Then, quick as a bull out of the gate, Emily was out of bed. Pulling her nightshirt back over her head, she teased, "The last one in the kitchen is a rotten egg."

After Emily's playful challenge, she darted out of the room, heading for the kitchen. I chuckled, threw on my boxers and a T-shirt, and followed her to the kitchen. I might have lost the race, but I wasn't gonna lose at flipping pancakes.

Soon, the kitchen smelled like morning—coffee brewing, bacon sizzling. Emily was at the stove, spatula in hand. "Good job with the coffee, cowboy," she grinned, tossing a pancake onto a plate.

I sidled up next to her, giving the bacon another turn. My face had mostly healed. Just one more doctor's appointment in Denver, and I'd be good as new.

In the kitchen, we operated like a well-oiled machine—Emily flipping pancakes, me in charge of the bacon and eggs. It was easy and relaxed, but we were cautiously excited. If things went as planned, I figured something big was coming down soon.

My phone buzzed, breaking the moment. I wiped my hands and glanced at the caller ID. "It's Dad," I said, answering the call. "Hey, what's up?"

I listened for a moment, my face lighting up. "An envelope from my job? I hope this is good news, Dad. We'll come by in a bit."

I hung up and looked at Emily. "Looks like we'll be getting some answers we've been waiting for."

Her eyes met mine, reflecting the excitement and uncertainty I felt. "This is really happening, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yep," I nodded, "I have a feeling our dream is coming true."

As Emily and I rode the 4-wheeler across the ranch, the wind in our faces felt like freedom. Passing through the familiar pastures, I noticed something different—where there used to be debris from the old windmill. Now, there was just empty space.

"Looks like they finally cleared out that old windmill, huh?" Emily said,

her voice tinged with excitement.

"Yeah," I responded, my gaze lingering on the empty spot. Seeing it gone felt like turning the page on a long chapter of my life.

Em squeezed my hand. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just reminiscing," I said. "Change can be a good thing, but sometimes it's hard to let go, you know?"

She nodded, Em's eyes showing she understood more than her words could say.

We pulled up to the Rocking J to find my folks sitting out front of their camping trailer, parked in the side yard under some aspens. Mom and Dad had been staying there while the smoke smell was cleaned out of the house and the painters finished painting the walls.

Dad came striding over, grinning from ear to ear, holding an envelope high in the air like a trophy. "Jack, this came for you. Looks like official Forestry Service business."

Eager as a kid on Christmas morning, I tore open the envelope. Inside was my canceled contract and a check for a half-million dollars—a settlement for my injuries. "Look at this!" I cheered, waving the check for all to see.

Emily's eyes widened, and she threw her arms around me, pulling me into a long, lingering kiss right there in front of my folks. "You're officially staying!" she exclaimed.

"We got it, Mom! The check and all the paperwork. I'm sticking around to help rebuild the ranch!" The atmosphere was electric. Each face, even Mom's tired one, lit up like the Fourth of July. The air was thick for the first time in a long time, not with smoke or uncertainty, but with the palpable sense of a fresh start.

Mom looked at me, her eyes brimming with a mix of exhaustion and relief. "That's wonderful, sweetheart. Let's go see what they've done with the house."

We stepped inside, the smell of fresh paint hitting me like a wave. It looked nothing like my childhood home, but that wasn't necessarily bad. Still, the difference was stark. Bittersweet.

"This is it," Mom said softly. "Look's a lot different, doesn't it?"

Dad looped his arm around my mother's waist. "Marge, tell them about the furniture."

Mom continued with a burst of enthusiasm. "Oh, and I almost forgot! We ordered a new couch and dining set. And guess what, I'm finally getting that

stainless steel stove and fridge I've been eyeing."

While she was talking, Emily and I exchanged glances, our eyes darting back to the life-changing check in my hand. It was hard to focus on furniture and appliances when our future had just clicked into place like the final piece of a puzzle.

I winked at Emily, carefully folded the check, and tucked it securely into my wallet. Then, I pulled her close to me and planted a tender kiss on the top of her head.

"We have some planning to do, Em," I whispered.

I turned to face my folks, "And Dad, go ahead and order that windmill. We can't replace the cattle until we have a way to water them!"

"Will do. Already have one picked out." Dad clapped me on the back. "Nice to have you home, son."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Magic of Whisper Lake **Emily**

We all breathed easier when Jack got the news from the Forestry Service. It was like a weight had lifted off us. That wind of change carried in more than good news. It also brought back our horses. Dusty had rolled in from Texas a few days ago with the ranch's big ol' trailer hitched to his truck, carrying Zeus, Storm, and the rest of our four-legged family members.

Seeing the horses roaming in the pasture again was like watching the pulse of the Yellowstone Creek Ranch slowly come back to life—or maybe even beat stronger than before. Things were turning around for all of us, and the air was thick with something it hadn't been filled with for a while—hope. Dad's mood was lighter, like years had been peeled off his tired shoulders, and even the ranch hands were walking around with smiles you couldn't scrape off.

The excitement in the air was palpable, and nobody was more pumped than Jack and me. We were standing on the brink of a new and beautiful chapter in our lives. We took it all in: the joyous return of our horses, the newfound smiles gracing our family's faces, and the alluring promise of a bright future ahead.

As dawn broke, Jack and I hurried through the kitchen, assembling sandwiches and grabbing apples and baby carrots. Our secret plan? A getaway before the ranch woke up.

"Whisper Lake?" I asked in a low voice, holding the saddle bag open for

him to slide in a couple of wrapped sandwiches.

Jack looked up, his eyes meeting mine. "Yeah. Had a dream about it when I was laid up in the hospital. I think the universe was giving me a nudge or something."

I shivered, but not from being cold, more like a tickle of destiny. "Whisper Lake it is," I agreed, buckling the leather strap on the bag.

There was something magical about planning a spur-of-the-moment trip, especially with the person you love. With our saddle bags secure, we saddled up Storm and Zeus and headed out to seize the day, both of us eager to see what Whisper Lake had in store for us after all those years.

We'd gone only a few hundred yards when I noticed the pastures were greener, a stark contrast to the lingering smell of burnt wood still clinging to parts of the ranch. As we rode away from the scarred earth and toward greener pastures, the stench faded, replaced by the invigorating scents of fresh pine and damp soil. Our saddles exuded the warm, comforting smells of saddle soap and well-worn leather.

Zeus and Storm picked up on our emotions, their steps lively and full of zest. They needed this ride as much as we did. On the way, we spotted a family of mule deer foraging near the woods, their ears twitching at our approach. Above, a red-tailed hawk circled, its keen eyes searching for its next meal. Our ride was a cleansing ritual for our souls.

Time flew, and suddenly, Whisper Lake appeared, just as Jack had dreamed, and I had remembered from our youth. "We're right where we're supposed to be," I said, locking eyes with him.

With a nod and a smile that spoke volumes, Jack slid off his horse, reaching into his saddlebag. He pulled a neatly folded blanket out, which he unfurled and laid gently on the ground near the water's edge. I dismounted and opened my own saddlebag, retrieving our picnic stash.

Once we were settled on the blanket, we started laughing as the tension melted away, giving room for contentment to settle in its place. We ate, savoring each bite, each flavor, as if trying to commit the whole experience to memory. The food was simple, but in that setting, it tasted like the most exquisite meal we'd ever had.

Jack fetched a canteen from his pack as we ate, taking a swig before passing it to me. We drank in the scenery as much as the water—our eyes tracing the contours of the surrounding hills, the shimmering lake, and the sky that looked like an artist's palette.

Finally, our meal was done, and we sat in a serene silence that only nature and true companionship could offer. Jack's face grew serious, and he took a deep breath. It was a weighty inhale that seemed to carry with it the gravity of the moment.

"Emily, these past months have shown me a lot," he began, clearing his throat a little as if fighting to find the right words. "Life throws curveballs. It tears you down to build you up stronger. And I've realized that there's no one else I'd rather go through all of it with than you."

He paused, swallowing hard. "I looked everywhere in Cody for a ring, but nothing seemed right. Nothing was... worthy of you."

My eyes misted over, and my breath caught in my throat. It was as if the air around us crackled with anticipation, each second stretching longer than the last.

"And then it hit me," Jack continued. "You're not a diamond ring kind of girl. You're far more unique than that. You're the song in the wind, the color in the sunset, the ripple in the water."

Tears spilled down my cheeks. It wasn't only his words—it was the sincerity in his eyes like he was laying his soul bare.

"So, I don't have a ring. All I have is this question." Jack took a deep breath. "Will you marry me?"

Words failed me. But I wanted to scream a resounding 'yes.' I threw my arms around him, pulling him close, and we kissed—a kiss that pulled together every fragment of our shared history, every hope, and every dream.

"It's always been you, Jack," I managed to whisper through my tears. "It's always been you."

And as we sat there, wrapped in each other's arms, gazing at Whisper Lake's sparkling waters, it was as if the universe itself was nodding in agreement. We were right where we were supposed to be, and everything that led us to this point felt impossibly perfect, as though penned by fate itself.

He slid his hand away from mine and reached down, plucking some long, supple strands of prairie grass from the ground. Each movement was deliberate as if he were choosing words for a love letter. I watched in silent awe as his strong, callused hands began to braid the strands, weaving them into a loop. My heart was racing, every beat marking this unforgettable moment.

Jack caught my eye, and his lips curved into a tender smile. "It's not a diamond, but it's straight from the earth, as genuine as my love for you."

He slipped the braided prairie grass ring onto my finger. It fit perfectly—as if it was meant to be—like us.

I looked down at the ring, then back at him, my eyes brimming with emotion. "It's beautiful, Jack. So uniquely us."

Jack shot me a devilish grin. "Let's make this engagement unforgettable, eh?" He was sprinting towards Whisper Lake in a flash, stripping off his clothes as he went. "I dare you to follow me!" He yelled over his shoulder.

"Wait for me!" I laughed. My own clothes littered the ground as I hurried to catch up with my fiancé.

Jack shot me a devilish grin. "Let's make this engagement unforgettable!"

I laughed as we raced, then plunged into the icy water. We shivered before climbing out and wrapping up in our blanket. Snuggling for warmth, I admired my ring. "Jack, only you would make something so simple so special," I said, kissing him as I felt a flame rising inside me.

Jack's hand slid to my back, and he kissed me hungrily. His arousal pressed against me, and his moans filled my body. We hid beneath a blanket as I straddled him, lowering myself onto his hard cock. His eyes widened in pleasure as I rocked my hips faster and faster.

Effortlessly taking charge, he flipped me over as we both surrendered to the moment. Our ecstasy reached its pinnacle, blending us together in a beautiful testament to our unwavering connection. With anticipation gleaming in his eyes, the air crackled with exhilaration, promising an unforgettable future ahead. "How 'bout it, Em? Time to kick off our next wild ride, don't ya think?"

"Let's do it." I pulled on my clothes and folded up the blanket, still basking in the glow of our spontaneous, passionate moment.

Storm and Zeus carried us back to the ranch in half the usual time. As we raced across Circle Y Ranch's open pasture, Jack nudged Zeus into a spirited canter, filling the air with laughter. Upon arrival, Carl greeted us warmly. Then, after dismounting, we handed him the reins, and he led the horses back to their stalls. As he walked away, an irresistible aroma filled the air. "Do you smell that?" I asked Jack.

"Yep. Either we're about to find a BBQ joint magically popped up on your land, or someone's cooking up a storm," he grinned.

Approaching the house, we noticed Dad's folded wheelchair. "Dad's on a cane now!" I exclaimed.

"Those new meds are a game-changer," Jack said, eyes lighting up.

As we stepped into the house, the atmosphere was buzzing with laughter, and the mouthwatering aroma of grilled meat filled the air. I glanced over to the kitchen where Maggie and Marge had their heads close together, engrossed in hushed conversation and chuckles as they chopped vegetables and stirred pots.

Jack's eyes widened in surprise. "Mom! Dad! What are you guys doing here?" he exclaimed, clearly caught off guard.

Peering out the window, I noticed Mark and Dusty were by the grill. Mark was flipping burgers with the skill of a seasoned chef, his face focused but relaxed. Meanwhile, Marshall and Dad were inside the living room, deep in conversation.

The sense of family and love was overwhelming, and it was clear that Jack was pleasantly shocked to find his parents here.

I couldn't contain the grin that spread across my face as Jack and I walked hand in hand into the kitchen, our fingers entwined. The room was buzzing with energy as if everyone's spirits had lifted in tandem with ours.

"We've got some news," Jack announced, his voice tinged with unmistakable joy.

All eyes turned towards us, and the room fell silent for a moment—a pause filled with anticipation.

"We're engaged!" I blurted out, my words tumbling over each other in a rush of elation.

A roar of cheers erupted, filling the room with an even warmer atmosphere than before. Hugs and handshakes were exchanged; Maggie even shed a tear or two. Mark's eyes lingered on my hand as we navigated our way through the well-wishes.

"What's this?" Mark asked, gesturing to my braided grass ring. "Planning on upgrading that to a diamond soon?"

I couldn't help but smile as I glanced at Jack. "Actually, Jack thought about getting a diamond. But it's not really my style."

Mark let out a hearty laugh, slapping Jack on the back approvingly. "That sounds just like my sister. Em is always marching to the beat of her own drum."

Amidst the buzz of laughter and joyous conversation, Dad stood a bit away from the crowd with a contemplative look in his eyes. Drawn to him, I walked over. "Hey, Dad. You look like you're miles away. What's on your mind?"

He turned his gaze to me, his eyes softening. "Ah, Em, I was thinking about the day I asked your mother to marry me. I remember how she cried when I slipped that engagement ring onto her finger."

Hearing Dad talk about that precious memory amid our own engagement celebration pulled at my heartstrings. "Seems like love and proposals are timeless, aren't they?"

He smiled, eyes still a little distant but filled with warmth. "They sure are, Emily. They sure are."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Family Heirlooms Jack

The air was thick with the smell of BBQ, which could only be described as the olfactory equivalent of a warm hug. I stood there beside Roy, feeling damn content and proud. Emily and I finally decided to make it legit, and it felt good. But as I sank my teeth into a burger, a distant Jeep engine growled like a hungry wolf.

I shot a sideways glance at Roy, who was already busy wiping BBQ sauce off his beard. "Hey, Roy, we got more folks coming?"

He shrugged, that slow cowboy way of his. "Round these parts? Could be God himself, for all I know."

Curiosity pricked me like a bull's horn. I wrapped my arm around Em, and together, we sauntered toward the back door. What greeted us could only be defined as a 'blast from the past'—my old firefighting crew spilling out of Big Red's work jeep.

"Well, slap my knee and call me impressed," I grinned, my eyes widening.

Emily squeezed my hand like she was grounding me in this new life. "Y'all, welcome to Yellowstone Creek Ranch! Come on, make yourselves at home. The food's hot, and the beer's cold."

Big Red's eyes went comically wide. "Did someone say 'beer'?" He ambled past us like a man on a singular mission—drink and food, probably in that order.

TJ, meanwhile, looked like he'd seen a ghost—or, in this case, a giant

moose head hanging in our living room. "Holy smokes, that thing's massive."

Chloe was the last to enter, her eyes lingering on me. "This place got its hooks in you deep, huh?"

"Yep, this land is home to me," I admitted.

Chloe shifted uncomfortably, gripping her purse like it was some lifebuoy. "You remember us visiting you in the hospital?"

I chuckled, shaking my head. "I was higher than a kite, but I remember."

She finally revealed what she was showing me that day—a plastic bag and a shard of thick glass covered with what looked like dried blood. But before I could dive in, Big Red sauntered back over, beer in hand. "Retiring, are we? Settling down with Miss Wyoming here?"

"You could say I've hung up my firefighting helmet, Big Red. It was time," I told him, my voice tinged with relief and peace.

TJ huddled closer, still looking at me like I was some legend. "You saved my life, Jack. Thank you, man."

I shrugged, but it wasn't out of modesty. "We were brothers in that hellfire, TJ. No thanks needed."

"And you're looking unscathed, bro," Big Red observed, looking me up and down like he was checking for visible battle scars.

"Skilled docs," I offered. "And Emily's loving care."

Now Chloe cut in, holding that bag up like an exhibit in a courtroom drama. "Jack, this is serious. This glass may have started that fire."

My eyes narrowed, suddenly alert. "We need Mark on this. If it's as bad as you're saying, someone's gotta take it seriously."

"I tried, Jack. Inspector Mathis practically snorted when he saw it," Chloe warned.

"Well, Mathis isn't Mark," I emphasized. "He's as stubborn as hell when protecting the land against anyone with shady motives. Let's go show it to the senator."

Mark wasn't exactly the life of the party today. Standing off to the side, he juggled a phone wedged between his ear and shoulder while trying to keep his plate of ribs from slipping. His expression was a mix of irritation and exhaustion—not his usual senatorial charm. Em and I caught a snippet of his conversation as we passed, "I told you I'd be over as soon as I get back to Cheyenne, Rebecca. I haven't signed anything yet!" before he angrily ended the call.

Chloe was near enough to notice, too. She was engrossed in a

conversation with TJ and Emily, but her eyes snapped to Mark when she heard the harsh edge in his voice. Her purse remained on her shoulder, yet its importance seemed more pronounced. I could tell she sensed he wasn't in the best of moods.

"Mark," I gestured for him to come over once he'd pocketed his phone. "Mind joining us for a sec?"

Setting his plate down on a nearby table, he walked over, a forced smile attempting to reclaim his face. "Sure thing, Jack. Who's up for introductions?"

He sauntered over, putting on the smile that had won him votes for years. "Who do we have here?"

"Chloe, TJ—this is Mark," I said, doing the introducing myself, though I knew Mark had seen Chloe on the job. "Mark, this is Chloe and TJ from my old firefighting crew."

"Yes, I remember. It's a pleasure to meet you," Mark said, extending his hand to Chloe.

Chloe returned the gesture, her eyes meeting his for a fleeting moment before she reached into her purse. "Senator, I've been pushing for an investigation into the fire. I remembered you had asked for that arson's report. And I've found something that might help."

She handed Mark the sealed plastic bag containing that piece of glass stained with a substance that looked suspiciously like dried blood.

"Curious stuff," Mark said, squinting at the bag in his hands. "Where'd you come across this?"

"Yellowstone Creek Ranch, not far from the firebreaks," Chloe replied, gesturing vaguely behind her toward the mountains.

Mark looked thoughtful for a moment. "Well, this could be the very thing we need. You see, funding is currently available through the Wyoming Land Preservation Stewardship Initiative for investigating evidence like this. Oddly enough," he smirked, "I just happen to be the director."

Chloe's ears perked up, as did Big Red's and TJ's. All three exchanged a glance.

"You're saying there's opportunities, as in jobs?" TJ asked, visibly intrigued.

"That's right," Mark confirmed. "We're looking for persons who are focused on land preservation and identifying mismanagement, criminal or accidental. Sound like something you all might want to sink your teeth into?"

Big Red grinned, "Well, Senator, you might've just given us a damn good reason to stay in Cody."

"Excellent," Mark said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a card. "Here's Sandy, my assistant. Give her a call to discuss the details. She'll help you navigate the process of applying."

"Will do," Chloe said, taking the card as her eyes met mine, a spark of possibility in them.

Mark pocketed the bag, looking thoughtful. "Sometimes, Jack, you've got to push back. And I've been known to be a wave maker. I'll make sure this gets where it needs to go." Then he scowled and pulled out his phone to check for messages.

Emily and I exchanged a knowing look. The fragments of his earlier conversation with his ex still lingered.

"Mark, tonight's about looking forward to our future, not looking back," Emily said, her eyes narrowing slightly as she looked at her brother. "Maybe it's time to leave the past where it belongs and enjoy the evening, huh?"

He sighed deeply, locking eyes with her for a second. "It's not that easy, especially after ten years of marriage. But you're right."

"Things will work out," I clapped him on the shoulder as Emily and I headed over to Chloe, TJ, and Big Red to share our news with them.

"Listen up, y'all. Emily and I have an announcement," I started, squeezing Emily's hand. "We're engaged."

Their faces lit up like a Fourth of July sky, and a cheer erupted from our little gathering. Big Red almost spilled his beer as he raised it in toast. "Hot damn! Congratulations, you two!"

Emily's eyes sparkled, but then they flickered past us to where Roy, Dad, and Mom had discreetly vanished into the office. The door closed softly behind them. She nudged me, her eyes still on the closed door. "What do you think they're up to?"

"I guess we'll find out soon enough," I mused, a twinge of curiosity adding to the evening's emotions.

Maggie waltzed out of the kitchen, her eyes glowing like a kid on Christmas morning. She set down a platter stacked high with chocolate cake slices in the middle of the festive commotion. The air filled with the intoxicating aroma of cocoa and sugar.

"Sweet heavens above, don't tell me that's homemade chocolate cake?" Big Red rubbed his hands together in sheer joy.

"None other than my secret recipe," Maggie said, taking a bow.

Big Red wiggled his eyebrows. "You got any ice cream to throw on top of that heavenly creation?"

Maggie chuckled. "You think too small, Big Red. How about some bourbon vanilla ice cream?"

His eyes widened. "Girl, you're talking my language!"

We were all swept up in the festive atmosphere when I noticed Roy standing at the entrance of his study. Our eyes met, and he motioned for Emily and me to come over. A weight of anticipation settled over me, thickening the air.

Emily felt it, too. "Guess we better find out what this is all about."

We walked into the room, and there stood Roy, my dad Marshall, and unexpectedly, Mom, looking solemn yet eyes wide with hope.

"Come in, you two," Roy beckoned, his eyes dancing. "Close the door."

The room was filled with an air of importance as we complied. "What's going on, Dad?" Emily looked from one face to another, her tone tinged with curiosity and a dash of concern.

"Emily, Son," Dad began, clearing his throat, "we've been thinking a lot about what would make for a special wedding gift."

Mom stepped forward, laying a handwritten document on the desk. "And we couldn't think of a better gift than this."

I glanced at the document, then up at the trio before me. "This is... is this a draft of a quit-claim deed?"

"To a 15,000 acres slip between the Yellowstone Creek Ranch and the Rocking J," Roy said, grinning.

Emily gasped, covering her mouth with her hands. Her eyes filled with happy tears, and I wrapped my arms around her in shock.

"We want you to have land to call your own, to build a future on," Mom added, her own eyes misty.

A feeling of overwhelming gratitude rushed through me, filling every crevice of my being. "I don't know what to say."

Emily stepped in, wrapping her arms around her dad, and the emotional dam broke. As Roy summed it up, we all joined this tightly-knit family circle. "Family's what you build on, and now you have plenty of ground to start one."

Mom, ever the family matriarch, winked at us and said, "And don't forget, fertile ground is perfect for planting little seeds. I'm not getting any younger,

you know! I don't want to be too old to enjoy my grandbabies."

As everyone began filing out to get some cake, Roy caught my arm, pulling me back into the quiet of the study. "Hold on a minute, Jack. I got something to show you."

Curious, I stayed behind. He reached into a drawer and pulled out a small, antique velvet box. When he opened it, I saw a ring—Emily's mother's engagement ring, if the family tales were to be believed—a classic piece with an elegant diamond setting and intricate gold band.

"Son, I've been saving this for when Emily found the right man," Roy said, a hint of emotion seeping into his weathered voice. "But, given its age, you might want to modernize it before you give it to her. It was her mother's ring."

I looked at the ring Roy was holding. It had a diamond that caught the light just right, flanked by some smaller ones. The band was a simple platinum, but some subtle carvings gave it character. "Ordered it special from Tiffany's in New York," Roy said, obviously proud.

As I held it, I thought about Emily—how she's always done her own thing. "You know, Roy, I appreciate the offer. But we should ask Emily what she wants to do with it. It's her mother's ring, after all."

Roy smiled, a slow, approving grin that said I'd passed some test. "A wise decision, son."

With the box in hand, we rejoined the crowd. Emily caught my eye, her face lighting up when she saw me approach. "Everything okay?"

"There's something very important we need to talk about," I teased, leading her away from the bustling room to a quieter corner. When I opened the box, Em's eyes widened, and her hand moved to her mouth.

"Oh, God. Is that...?"

"Your mother's engagement ring," I finished, my voice barely above a whisper. "Your dad suggested I might want to modernize it before giving it to you. But let's make that decision together."

Emily picked up the ring, her fingers trembling. For a moment, she just stared at it. Then, she looked at me, her eyes misty but full of love. "It's perfect just the way it is, Jack."

"I thought so too," I said, embracing her.

We walked back to our family and friends, my arm around Em's shoulder, the ring catching everyone's eyes. Emily glowed as she announced, "Everyone, I'm wearing my mom's ring. We're keeping it in the family!"

Chloe and Maggie were the first to rush over, oohing and aahing at the sight. "It's just so beautiful, Emily," Chloe gushed.

Maggie wiped a tear from her eye, a soft smile forming. "I remember Mary wearing that. I don't think she ever took it off. What a lovely gesture, Roy."

Roy nodded, eyes glistening. "Thank you, Maggie. It means the world that Emily loves it."

Chloe looked between Emily and me, her eyes twinkling. "So, have you guys have set a date yet? You know TJ, Big Red, and I might not be leaving Cody, and we don't want to miss the wedding."

"We haven't set a date yet," Emily chuckled, "but you can bet your boots you'll get an invite."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Wedding Day Six Months Later Emily

The late morning sun streamed through the white lace curtains of my bedroom, painting dappled shadows on the wooden floor. I'd barely slept, too buzzed on anticipation to drift off for more than a few minutes at a time, but as soon as the sun came up, I fell sound asleep and was awakened by a soft knocking at my door.

"Em, wake up. Time to get ready, sleepy head," Maggie's voice rang out.

"Mags, can you believe it? Today's the day!" I swung my legs over the side of the bed, my feet meeting the soft rug below. My eyes met Maggie's in the mirror across the room, her grin reflecting my excitement.

"I know, Em! You're getting hitched, woman!" Maggie twirled around in her flower-patterned robe, her laughter filling the room like a melody. She held up a bottle of champagne. "Mimosa?"

"Oh, you know me so well." I chuckled, accepting a flute from her. We clinked our glasses together, the tiny chime sealing the promise of the incredible day ahead. "To love, happiness, and a life full of adventures."

"And to the best dang cowboy wedding Wyoming has ever seen!" Maggie added, winking at me as we sipped our drinks. "Now, let me go get our Eggs Benedict."

"Sounds yummy!"

I wandered over to my wedding dress and tenderly caressed the ivory lace, admiring the feel of hand-stitched wildflowers and turquoise beads. The

seamstress had expertly altered the bodice to fit my curves. And the pearl buttons down the back hinted at elegance. As I lifted the petticoat, imagining how the skirt would swirl during our first dance, a knock at the door abruptly pulled me back to reality.

Dad poked his head in, his eyes growing misty when he saw me. "Oh, sweetheart, you look... well, you're not even dressed yet, and you're already beautiful."

I laughed, a bit choked up myself. "Dad, wait until you see the dress."

He stepped in, giving me a warm hug. "It's lovely, Em."

As I looked into my father's face, who'd been my hero from day one, I knew one thing for sure—today would be the best day of my life.

In the late afternoon, I heard the rhythmic sound of horse hooves on the driveway. Glancing out the window, I saw Jack's dad steering his team of show-quality draft horses. They were pulling an antique buckboard filled with church pews, heading toward Yellowstone Creek Ranch. The wagon would take guests to the pasture for the ceremony. As they stopped in front of the barn, the first guests started to arrive. My heart danced with excitement—this was really happening.

"Dad, come look!" I called out, but his voice floated up the staircase before I could get another word out.

"Em, Mags, time to come down! Jack's here, and y'all need to get saddled up. But remember," he added with a chuckle, "no peeking at the groom."

Maggie and I exchanged glances. "Well, I guess it's showtime," she said, grinning from ear to ear.

"Definitely," I agreed, my stomach aflutter with nerves and anticipation.

As I left my room, taking one last glimpse of my wedding dress—I couldn't help but feel a rush of emotion. My heart swelled as I pictured Mom looking down from heaven and blowing a kiss at me. She would have loved to see me so happy and in love.

The sun smiled down on the green pastures and Wyoming mountains, perfectly framing our cowboy wedding. "Ready?" Dad asked, smoothing my skirt before climbing into the buckboard beside Lisa, bound for the venue.

The barn doors opened to reveal Jack on Zeus, every inch the western hero. Our eyes met, and the world blurred. His scar had faded as if conceding to the day's magic.

"We made it," he said, riding beside me toward the pasture.

"Couldn't be more perfect," I agreed, awed by the scenery, fully

rejuvenated after the fire.

We dismounted; our horses led away. "Now, we walk," Dad whispered, offering his arm. We moved through hay bales to the familiar chords of the wedding march played on acoustic guitars. Mark, who was officiating the ceremony, gave me a reassuring nod. We approached Jack and his dad – his best man, with Maggie, my maid of honor, opposite them.

All the stress dissipated when I locked eyes with Jack. The pulse now quickening in my chest signaled not nerves but boundless love. Surrounded by our closest family and friends, with Dad beside me, I was ready.

It was "I do" time.

Mark, a grin lighting up his face, cleared his throat to capture everyone's attention. "We've gathered here, surrounded by the beauty of Wyoming, to join Emily and Jack in matrimony. And now, for the vows. Emily?"

I looked into Jack's eyes and began, "Jack, from the moment I met you, I knew you were the one I'd been waiting for. You've shown me what it means to be truly loved, even when I didn't know how to love myself. I promise to support you, to laugh with you, and to be by your side for every new adventure that comes our way. And as we continue the legacy of our families, I look forward to the day when we can pass down these traditions and values to our children."

Jack's eyes shone with emotion, but his voice was steady when he spoke. "Emily, life with you has been a journey that's made me a better man. Your faithfulness when I was wounded gave me a strength I didn't know I had. I vow to honor, cherish, and stand by you as we build our life together, no matter the obstacles."

With a nod from Mark, Maggie handed me a platinum band she had fashioned to compliment Mom's engagement ring, which I slipped onto Jack's finger. Jack slid a similar band from his dad onto my finger.

"Is it time?" Jack whispered as if he couldn't hold back any longer.

Mark beamed at us both. "By the power vested in me by the State of Wyoming and by the love and commitment you've both shown today, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

The world seemed to be still. When Jack whispered, "I love you, now and forever." Our lips met. It was as if time folded in on itself.

"I love you, too, with all my heart, Jack."

The crowd erupted in cheers, but all I heard was our hearts beating, ideally in sync.

As we pulled apart, Mark announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, let's give a big Wyoming welcome to Mr. and Mrs. Jack and Emily Johnson!"

The joy I felt was beyond words. It was love. It was life; it was our forever, finally beginning.

Jack's face lit up as if touched by sunlight. "Folks, let's keep this celebration going. I can already smell the BBQ ribs from here. We'll meet you back at the ranch house for the reception!"

Jack turned to me, his eyes sparkling as he whispered, "Ready for the best ride of our lives?"

"Couldn't be more ready," I replied, my voice tinged with emotion.

We hopped back onto our horses and rode a short distance, ready to join our guests for the reception.

As we returned, I caught glimpses of the ranch house, twinkling lights adorning its facade. Servers laid out long tables filled with home-cooked treats and bottles of Wyoming's finest brew. The festivities were far from over, but for now, I was basking in the glow of our perfect ceremony.

As I stood beside Jack, greeting our guests as they arrived on the buckboard, I couldn't help but reflect on the ceremony. Every laugh, tear, and whispered "I love you" led to this moment. The weight of my new ring felt like a hug around my finger—a permanent token of our promises. I was Mrs. Emily Brooks-Johnson; the feeling was as grand as the Wyoming sky. Love had found Jack and me and blessed us with a second chance.

Epilogue

New Possibilities **Mark**

Beer in hand, I took in the bustling crowd, the lively strum of Bluegrass tickling the air. Folks from Cody mixed with the Cheyenne crowd—starched collars meetin' leather boots. Shook hands with politicians from Cheyenne, slap on the back, yada yada about bills and budgets. But in that moment, standing under that oak, I felt a tinge of envy watching Em. She was glowin' brighter than the Wyoming sunset. Made me ponder my own twists and turns—divorce papers in my pocket, ambitions in the other.

Caught sight of Dusty and ambled over, setting my beer down on a table. "Lookin' sharp, kid," I told him, eyes flicking to his tie. Not often you get all dressed up.

"Can't say the same 'bout you," he returned, grin hiding behind his stubble. "No Stetson today?"

"Stetson's takin' a day off. Today's all about Em," I said, eyeing Dad as he spun Lisa around the makeshift dance floor. "Speaking of which, Dad's lookin' like a man reborn."

"Yep. Lisa's done wonders, ain't she?" Dusty agreed, eyes tracking the couple's steps.

"When you planning to fly off back to the Lone Star State?" I asked, curious if he'd stick around for more than a few beers.

"'Bout a week. Wanna check in on Dad, see how he's doin' when it's quiet."

"Good. Man could use some company." I tipped my hat—even though it

wasn't there—and took another swig. As I looked back at Emily, radiant and beaming, a flood of contrasting emotions filled me—happiness for her, introspection for myself. Man, what a day to take stock.

I drifted closer to the dance floor just as the DJ cued up something romantic. Perfect timing, I mused. It was the bouquet ritual, and everyone gathered 'round, hooting and hollering like it was a Friday night at the rodeo. Emily's laughter filled the air as she playfully pretended not to know where she wanted to throw it.

As she flung it into the crowd, I saw it arc gracefully through the air like a well-tossed lasso, landing in someone's hands. Sandy. My pulse quickened. If catching a bouquet could be graceful, she managed it—her smile so modest you'd think she'd done nothin' at all.

But my focus kept swinging back to Emily. My little sister grinning from ear to ear, her joy practically radiating off her. Hell, I couldn't remember the last time I saw her this lit up, this... complete. Made me proud and a touch sad all at once. Proud because she'd found what we're all lookin' for—true love or something like it. Sad 'cause, well, here I was, the eldest Brooks and my love story read like a cautionary tale.

I clinked my beer bottle with a buddy who sidled up to me, but my thoughts were miles and years away. Happy as I was for Em, I wondered when it'd be my turn to stand in her shoes—figuratively, of course. Or if I'd even recognize the moment if it stared me down.

Clay, my other younger brother, sauntered over, a whiskey in hand, and Dusty rejoined us. Seemed like a good moment for a Brooks sibling powwow.

"Y'all see who caught the bouquet?" Clay asked, nudging me with his elbow.

"Sandy," I said, feeling the words roll off my tongue a little too naturally. "Good catch."

Clay raised an eyebrow. "Never heard you talk about an employee like that before."

I sighed, lookin' over where Sandy was laughing with some of Emily's friends. "I find her attractive, sure. Who wouldn't? But you know me—keep it professional, always."

"Until it's not," Dusty chimed in, clearly enjoying this a bit too much.

"Speaking of which," I said, shifting the topic. "Signed the papers yesterday. I'm officially divorced from Rebecca."

Silence hung heavy for a moment before Clay broke it. "Sorry, man. That's tough."

"Yeah, especially since she's back with that jackass Sam," I added. I tried to keep the bitterness out of my voice, but we were brothers—they'd hear it anyway.

Dusty shook his head. "You sure know how to pick 'em."

"I'm not picking anyone for a while," I said, takin' a long gulp of my beer. "Got other ambitions to think about."

The three of us clinked our drinks together. Each lost in his own thoughts for a second. I had a re-election to focus on, a family to keep together, and maybe a spark of something with Sandy. But one thing at a time.

Dusty glanced around as the three of us stood there, and then his gaze returned to mine. "Conner couldn't even make it, huh?"

"Nah," I said, letting out a frustrated sigh. "Busy with... hell, who knows what."

"And Sarah?" Clay chimed in, his tone edged with concern. The youngest of us Brooks siblings, always the unpredictable one, hadn't been seen in years.

I shook my head. "No clue. Been off the grid. Wouldn't be surprised if she's rafting in South America or something. She'll resurface when she's good and ready."

"Damn shame," Dusty muttered. "It's Emily's and Jack's day."

"Yeah," I said, my jaw tightening. "Would've been nice to have the whole family together. But some people have their own ways, don't they?"

We each took a sip of our drinks, letting the reality of our fractured family sink in. Em was starting her new chapter with Jack. And the rest of us? Well, we were each writing our own messy, unpredictable stories.

Changing gears, I spotted Chloe, Big Red, and TJ across the lawn. A trio of young go-getters, part of my expanding circle of contacts. They caught sight of me, gave a nod, and made their way over.

"Hey, Mark," Chloe greeted, her voice energetic as always.

"Evening, Chloe," I replied, then turned to my brothers. "Clay, Dusty, meet Chloe, Big Red, and TJ. They're the future, gentlemen."

Big Red tipped his hat, and TJ just offered a quick, shy smile.

"What brings y'all to this neck of the woods?" Clay asked.

"Well," I began, a grin spreading across my face, "they just got hired. The Wyoming Land Preservation Stewardship Initiative isn't going to let them

leave Wyoming.”

"No kidding?" Dusty said, genuinely impressed. "That's a big deal."

"Yessir," Big Red chimed in. "We're lookin' to make some real changes, environmentally speaking. Got plans to keep Wyoming pristine for the next generation."

"Thinking ahead. I like it," I said, clapping Big Red on the shoulder. "I've got high hopes for them when I'm back in Cheyenne, assuming I snag that re-election."

The mood lightened, the future lookin' not too shabby from where I stood. I took a sip of my beer, my mind racing ahead to plans, strategies, and wheelin' and dealin'.

My eyes scanned the crowd again, restless, and I caught Big Red leading Maggie onto the dance floor. Now, Maggie had been a friend of the family for years, and seeing them two dancing had me making some assumptions.

"Would ya look at that," I said, nodding toward the dancing pair. "Seems Big Red's got more on his mind than just land conservation."

Clay chuckled. "They do look good together, don't they?"

"Guess it wouldn't be a Wyoming social without a little bit of matchmaking," Dusty added.

I couldn't help but agree. "If Big Red keeps this up, I might have to start calling him Cupid - but not to his face, you know."

Shifting my attention, I found Chloe and TJ sipping on some cocktails near the bar. They'd recently moved into a loft in Cody, just a stone's throw away from my local office for meetings with constituents.

"You know, TJ and Chloe are sharing a place in Cody now," I told my brothers. "Could be some good allies for the next campaign. Clay, you ought to get to know 'em. You'll be hearing their names a lot more, I wager."

"I'll make it a point," Clay said, already piquing his interest.

Yeah, it was all unfolding just right. New connections, potential lovebirds, and a family gathering that almost felt whole. If I played my cards right, the pieces would fall into place just like I envisioned.

The music dwindled, and the chatter softened as I stood, a glass of champagne in hand. No room for nerves; I was the big brother, after all. I raised the glass high and cleared my throat.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention," I began, feeling a rush of emotion surge through me. "I've seen my little sister, Emily, go through many chapters in her life. Some brought tears, some joy, but today's

something else entirely. Today's the first day of her best chapter."

The room erupted in applause, and I took a moment to catch Emily's eye. She was tearing up, and that almost broke me. Almost.

"I couldn't be happier for Em and Jack. You two deserve all the love and happiness this world's got to offer," I continued, my voice steady but tinged with a hint of something—regret? "To the bride and groom!"

Glasses clinked, people cheered, and Emily and Jack shared another kiss. I smiled, swigging down my champagne, but for a moment, I couldn't shake the bittersweet mood sneaking up on me. Guess celebrating love hits a little different when you've just signed divorce papers.

The champagne was workin' its magic, loosenin' up muscles I hadn't even realized were tense. Sandy was over by the edge of the dance floor, lookin' like a dream with her hair pulled back, her dress clinging to her in all the right places—her ample cleavage bouncing deliciously with the music. It was a dangerous thought, and I had a habit of playin' with fire.

So I did what any red-blooded man in a country song would do. I walked over, extending my hand. "May I have this dance?"

Her eyes met mine, and for a heartbeat, I thought I saw something—a flicker of yearnin', maybe? "Of course," she said, placing her hand in mine.

As we stepped onto the dance floor, I pulled her in closer than we'd ever been—professional boundaries be damned for just one song. Her scent wrapped around me, sweet and intoxicating, making me think of long nights and whispered secrets. As her head rested against my chest, it was as if something inside me clicked into place. A man could get used to this.

But right when my hands started thinking about wandering, my brain stepped in. She's your assistant, Mark. Off-limits. We were toein' a line we hadn't crossed, but the universe had a funny way of blurring lines when you least expected it. As the song wound down, I took a step back, missing her warmth immediately.

"Thank you for the dance, Sandy," I managed, hoping she didn't hear the regret in my voice.

"You're welcome, Senator," she said softly, her eyes searching mine for something I couldn't quite place.

The photographer started herding folks for group shots. Emily grabbed my arm, pulling me away from my brief escape into temptation. "C'mon, big brother, picture time," she said, her eyes twinkling.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, Sis," I grinned, positioning myself next to

her as the camera flashed. It was almost surreal, these snap-happy moments capturing the essence of a day that had already given me a rollercoaster of emotions. My own love life might be one for the books, but damn, it felt good to see Emily so radiant.

Between shots, I caught Sandy's eye from across the lawn. She held her camera phone up, snapping a candid shot of me. Caught in the act, she winked. Lord, that woman would be the death of me—or at least my self-control.

"Another shot with the bride!" the photographer called out, and I gave Emily a twirl before pulling her into a bear hug. One for the family album and the countless memories still to be made.

As Emily and Jack hit the gas, toilet paper flowed behind Jack's new red F-150 like it was Halloween or something. I lifted my beer for a farewell toast. Couldn't help but feel a bit lonesome as they sped down that driveway of the Yellowstone Creek Ranch, kicking up hopes and dreams.

"Here's to you, sis," I muttered, takin' a swig. "You snagged yourself love and happiness—now ain't that the American dream?" I glanced at the divorce papers in my coat, still crisp and new like a scar you don't wanna acknowledge but can't ignore. Yeah, I had ambition to spare, but tonight made me reckon maybe it's high time I shoot for a different kinda goalpost.

Stars were popping out one by one, like nature's own paparazzi against the dusky Wyoming canvas. Hell, if the celestial bodies could keep their fire burning for eons, who's to say ol' Mark Brooks can't find a second wind, a second chance?

I took another gulp of beer, thinking 'bout the lingering touch of Sandy's hand, the promising banter with Clay, Big Red's potential to be more than just a friend—I mean a political ally.

Yeah, the future seemed like uncharted territory, but I reckon that's where the thrill lies. Ya'know what they say: 'It ain't about the destination; it's the journey that counts.'

I walked back to the crowd, their laughter and merriment pulling me in like gravity—a gravity I was willing to surrender to, at least for tonight. As I stepped back into that social swirl, my smile broke free, as wide and endless as the Wyoming Plains.

A Special Note from the Author

Hey there, awesome reader!

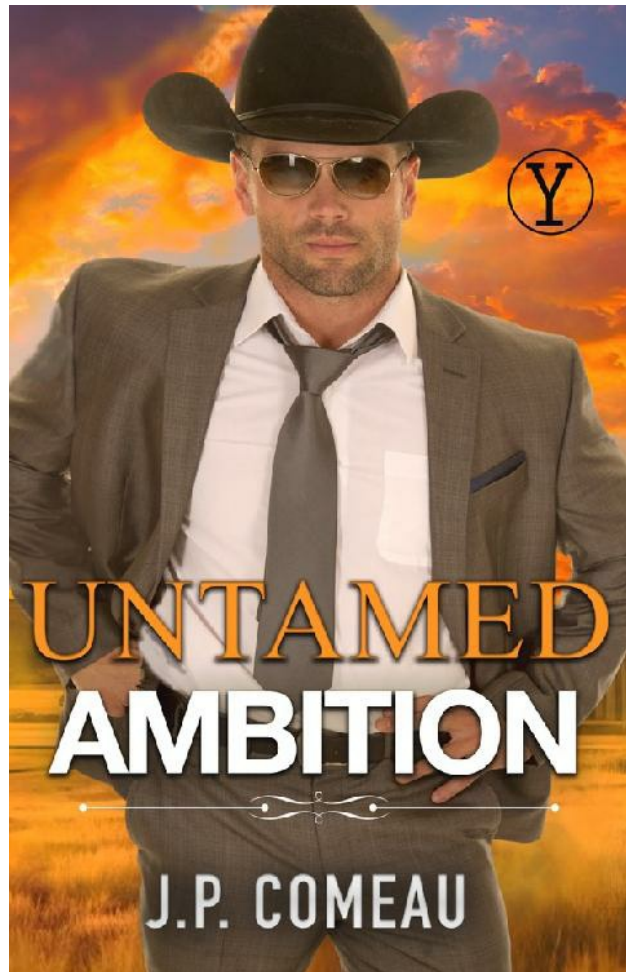
First of all, a huge THANK YOU for taking a ride with me through the wild terrains and burning passions of "Riding into Fire: A Second Chance Romance." I hope you had as much fun as I did in crafting this story of love, suspense, and of course, sizzling chemistry.

Can't get enough of Mark and Sandy? Feeling like a moth to a flame, drawn to their love story? Well, you're in luck!

Gear up for the next installment: "Untamed Ambition," a steamy forbidden cowboy romance that picks up where we left off. Oh, y'all, it's gonna be hot! With more secrets to unearth, and fires—literal and metaphorical—to put out, Mark and Sandy's journey to their HEA (Happily Ever After) is anything but smooth.

If you thought "Riding into Fire" had its fair share of ups and downs, just wait until you dive into "Untamed Ambition." The stakes are higher, the love scenes steamier, and the suspense? Let's just say you might want to hold onto your cowboy hats.

Click [here](#) to find Unbridled Ambition on Amazon. Trust me, you don't want to miss this rollercoaster of love, ambition, and a good ol' cowboy charm.



Warmest regards,
J.P. Comeau

P.S. For exclusive updates and behind-the-scenes content, don't forget to join my newsletter by grabbing a FREE copy [here](#) of the prequel to the Wild Hearts of Yellowstone Creek Series, “The Ties That Bind: A Historical Romance.”

Wild Hearts of Yellowstone Creek Series Prequel



The *Ties* That

Bind

J.P. COMEAU

