



ROUGHNECK

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

STASIA BLACK

Roughneck

Stasia Black

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Hunter

Hunter
Roughneck #1

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Mirror mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?

Chapter One

ISOBEL

VANESSA TO JASON: *Did you break up with her yet?*
VANESSA TO JASON: *I know her dad just died but thats not yr fault. We deserve to be :)*

Jason's cum was still inside Isobel when she read the messages on his phone. He was showering after they'd had sex.

They'd been dating for three years. Long distance for the past year since Isobel had come back to the city to be close to her dad after he got the diagnosis. Pancreatic cancer. The doctor gave him six months to live. He made it eleven, only passing away early last week.

Jason came for the funeral. They hadn't been intimate for almost two months before that, but Isobel had wanted the comfort of being in his arms tonight. After everything with her father, and God, her stepmom, it had all been just too much.

So Isobel went to the guest bedroom and slipped into Jason's bed without turning on the lights. It seemed like the one thing that might make her feel like a whole, sane person again.

Jason was hesitant to touch her at first. Which only stoked all her worst fears. She'd gotten fat. He wasn't attracted to her anymore.

So she'd redoubled her efforts. Touching him the way she remembered he liked best. Going down on him until he was hard and thrusting in her throat.

Then crawling up the bed and getting on her hands and knees so he could push into her from behind. He liked to grab her hips and pump her hard. She also suspected he liked to watch his big cock disappear between her ass cheeks.

But she wouldn't let him turn on the light when he tried. He had no idea what bravery it took for her to let him touch her naked body at all. With no clothes to obscure her problem areas, he could feel all her flaws if he brushed down her thigh, or even worse, if he moved his hands up from her hips to her waist.

In the end, though, it barely mattered. It was over so quickly. And the part she'd been looking forward to the most—the cuddling afterwards—was nonexistent. Almost the second he grunted and spilled in her, he started muttering about needing to get cleaned up. Then he was climbing off the bed and heading for the shower.

His cum was still dripping down the inside of her leg when the ensuite bathroom door closed and his phone on the nightstand buzzed with an incoming text.

Which was when she read Vanessa's words.

Vanessa, her best friend back at Cornell.

Vanessa.

With Jason.

Vanessa and Jason.

Isobel blinked in the dark. Her mind tried to reject the idea even as the evidence glowed on the screen right in front of her.

The screen went dark but then buzzed in her hand again, lighting up with another text alert.

VANESSA TO JASON: *to get you thru the lonely nite til you come home*

The phone buzzed again with a shirtless selfie of Vanessa squeezing one of her bared breasts and making a sexy face at the camera.

Son of a *bitch*! Isobel threw his phone against the wall, only feeling marginally better when she heard the screen crack.

And then she yanked the bedsheet around her and stormed into the bathroom. Because *enough*. She'd had enough. Hadn't life thrown enough shit-bombs her way lately?

"You cheating bastard!" She jerked the shower curtain back, revealing a startled Jason, foamy shampoo thick in his hair.

"Baby," he looked at her, his hands going up in a defensive posture.

“What are you—”

Baby? Fury like she'd never felt before lit her up inside.

“Get out!” She leaned down and slammed the shower knob, shutting off the water. God, she couldn't even stand looking at him. Had he been comparing her to Vanessa the whole time he'd been having sex with her? Even the thought of it made her want to scream. So she did. “Get out. Now!”

“Stop. Isobel, I don't even know what you're talking ab—”

“What, you tripped and your dick just accidentally fell into Vanessa? I saw your fucking texts, asshole.”

Jason pulled back, finally dropping silent.

“Get the *fuck* out of my *fucking* house!” she screamed right in his face.

“Okay, okay,” he said. He reached for the shower knob. “Just let me finish washing my hair and I'll be—”

“Did you not hear me? I said get the fuck out *now!*” She grabbed his bicep and jerked him toward the tub's edge.

He slipped and fell, landing hard on his ass.

“Christ! What the fuck, Iz?” he cried as he scrambled to his feet, slipping one more time before he finally managed to get out of the tub, his hands moving to cover his crotch. Was he afraid she'd want to get a kick in? Not a bad idea.

But he was already backing out of the bathroom and hurrying toward his suitcase. He dressed faster than she would have thought possible. When he sat on the bed to put on his tennis shoes, she just shouted, “Out!” again. He obviously got the picture because he grabbed the shoes, his suitcase, and his phone from the floor and then he ran out of the room.

In another few seconds, she heard the front door slam. Good fucking riddance. She hoped more than just his screen was broken so he couldn't call an Uber.

She walked back to her bedroom, almost in a daze.

But after several more seconds, everything that had just happened sank in. Jason had cheated on her.

Jason didn't love her anymore.

Dad was gone.

She was all alone.

Right as the gut-wrenching realization hit, she happened to look over and catch sight of herself in her full-length mirror.

She dropped the sheet she'd been carrying around, just to torture herself.

She squeezed her eyes shut. *Body dysmorphic disorder*. When she looked in mirrors, she never saw what was really there. Even if she weighed only ninety-five pounds, she still saw a fat pig. She *had* weighed ninety-five pounds—very briefly—right before she'd gone into the treatment facility at sixteen, surrounded by a ton of other skeletal girls all convinced they were fat too.

For a while when she'd been away at college, she thought she could change things—that she could change herself. Just like she'd thought she could finally fix her relationship with Dad by coming home and spending time with him before the end.

But if the last week had taught her anything, it was that things never changed. Dad died believing her stepmother's side of the story. And she was always going to be ugly, screwed up Isobel. She avoided scales like she tried to avoid mirrors, but barely any of the pants she'd brought home from Cornell fit anymore.

Without the anger that had been animating her for the past ten minutes, she felt completely empty. She wanted to drop to the floor right there and just...*stop*. It was all too hard. She couldn't do this anymore.

Instead, her feet started moving.

First to her dresser. She put on her underwear and pajamas mechanically. The bedrooms were on the third floor of the Upper East Side brownstone and she clutched the banister as she hurried downstairs. She knew where she was going even as she hated herself for it. Nothing ever changed—so why fight fate?

Like a magnet, she was drawn quickly toward the kitchen. It was a pristine room with white marble countertops and dark espresso colored cabinets. Isobel pulled out the ice cream from the double refrigerator. She never bought it but it was always here. She shook her head, knowing it was her stepmother trying to sabotage her and hating that she was giving in. But seriously, what was the fucking point, anyway? She was a sucker for ice cream. Sugary, addictive, with a high calorie count? Sign her up.

She grabbed a wooden stirring spoon and ate the chocolate chip cookie dough straight out of the container.

She finished one pint and was halfway through another before disgust with herself sent her running to the trash can underneath the sink. Opening the cabinet, she yanked out the can. She knelt on the dark hardwood floor and then her finger was down the back of her throat before she could even think

all the way through what she was doing. She retched and retched into the trashcan until all the ice cream came back up. Then she sat back against the cabinet, shoving the trashcan away in disgust, wiping her mouth with her forearm.

“Goddammit!” she screamed in frustration, furious at herself. She hadn’t binged and purged for four years before coming home to be with her dad. And now this was the second time this week since the funeral.

She pulled her knees to her chest, tears streaming down her cheeks.

She was about to give into a good sob fest—not unusual for her lately, she would go on random crying jags what felt like every half hour, even before her dad died—when she saw something strange.

The cabinet door under the sink was still open from when she’d grabbed the trashcan. And tucked in the back of the cabinet behind the Ajax, Windex, and dish soap was a tall container of... was that...?

Isobel blinked back her tears and leaned in, pushing aside the other cleaners to better see the big plastic bottle.

What the—?

Why was there a container of *protein powder* hidden at the back of the sink?

Isobel stared at the bottle in bewilderment. Was it Dad’s from before he got sick? But why on earth...? It wasn’t like Dad was into pumping iron. He’d go jogging occasionally, but she thought this kind of stuff was usually for guys trying to build up huge muscles.

She tugged out the bottle and unscrewed the cap. It was more than half empty.

She glanced back inside the cabinet and froze. Right beside where the protein powder had been was a bottle of the special cognac her stepmother drank—the shit cost six hundred bucks a bottle and Catrina was always paranoid and accusing Isobel of drinking it when she wasn’t looking.

The truth was Isobel had tried it once but then never again because it tasted like donkey piss.

But looking back and forth between the cognac and the protein powder, she froze, her teeth grinding.

That *bitch*.

“So he cheated on you.”

Speak of the devil.

Isobel’s back went stiff at her stepmother’s voice. She got to her feet, not

wanting Catrina to have her at a disadvantage by towering over her.

“Why am I not surprised?” Catrina sounded almost bored as she stood in the kitchen doorway. It was ten o’clock at night but Catrina was still perfectly made up, her thin former model’s frame standing erect, elegant and dignified in a pale green silk robe. Even in her early fifties, Catrina was still an undeniably beautiful woman. A fact that she’d never let Isobel forget ever since she’d married her father. Isobel had only been ten at the time.

“You’ve become such a fat pig lately. Did you really think he’d stick around?”

Isobel’s jaw locked and she looked back down at the open container of protein powder, the realization of what Catrina had done lighting her blood on fire.

“You’ve gained, what, thirty pounds since you came home to be with your father?” Catrina asked, voice needling. “He was worried about you, you know. He talked about you so much at the end. All he wanted was his beautiful little girl back.” Catrina let out an incredulous little huff and Isobel’s hands balled into fists. She would *not* be goaded into reacting.

“Of course a father is blind to his daughter’s flaws. You were a little porky pie back then too, weren’t you? But even he couldn’t deny what was in front of his face when you visited him every day. Who will love my Isobel when I’m gone, he’d ask me, looking like she does?”

“Shut up!” Isobel glared at her stepmother and then she reached down and grabbed the protein powder container. “You’ve been adding this to my morning smoothies, haven’t you?” She’d realized it right before Catrina walked in the room. It was the only thing that made sense.

Upset at her unexplained weight gain since coming home, Isobel had gone back to her old habits of counting her calories religiously. She hadn’t struggled with her eating disorder for years. Being away at college, out of this toxic environment, it had been so much easier to establish healthy eating and exercise habits.

But as soon as she got back here and Catrina’s constant verbal digs started up again, along with the unexplained weight gain, plus the emotional stress of everything with Dad, the old obsessions had started coming back.

She *hated* that she could still be so weak. She’d assumed that she’d overcome all this shit for good when she kicked it the first time.

So as a part of trying to get it all under control again, she made a green veggie and fruit smoothie each night so she could just grab it and go the next

morning on her way to the hospital.

But if Catrina had been adding protein powder to her smoothies, that would explain the weight gain.

Catrina's eyes widened at seeing the container in Isobel's hands, but then her features settled back into a calm mask of superiority. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Sounds to me like you're looking to blame everyone else for your lack of self-control, just like always."

"Then again, you always were just looking for attention. What was it Dr. Rubenstein used to say? Poor little Isobel acts out and tells elaborate lies so people will notice her because she got addicted to the attention people paid her after her mommy killed herself. Though," she sighed, "by the end, even he admitted crazy might just be in your DNA. But still, isn't part of your therapy program taking responsibility for your own problems?"

How dare she— To bring up Dr. *fucking* Rubenstein—

Isobel screamed and threw the container to the ground, ignoring the powder that flew out of it as it fell.

It wasn't enough, though. Not nearly enough.

She wanted to grab the pots that hung from hooks on the ceiling and fling them at the walls. She wanted to smash the coffee maker to the tile floor. Break it all. Tear it all *fucking* down—

Catrina tutted, then shook her head at Isobel. "Oh darling, I promised Richard I'd take care of you after he was gone. He worried you might slip back into your..." she leaned in and whispered, "*old habits*."

She mimed sticking her finger down her throat and Isobel's hands squeezed into fists so tight her nails cut into her palms. She needed to leave. To get the hell out of here before she did something she regretted. She turned to go but Catrina's voice echoed across the kitchen.

"Is poor Isobel going to run away now? You think you can just escape your problems like that? By running?" Catrina made a tutting noise. "That's a coward's way of coping. Then again, your mom took the easy way out too. Hanging herself from the ceiling fan like she did." She shook her head. "And she was what, thirty years old?"

"You're almost twenty-five now, aren't you? Everyone always said you're so much like her. It's cute you try to fight it but eventually you're going to have to give into the inevitable. Frankly, I think Richard was glad to go before he had to see you institutionalized again."

"Shut the fuck up!" Isobel spun back around and flew at her stepmother.

Her hands wrapped around Catrina's throat. She slammed the older woman down against the counter. "Shut up, shut up!" Rage like she'd never known burned so hot, Isobel could barely breathe.

Poison. The woman was poison.

Every day her insults chipped away at Isobel. First when she was just a little girl. All throughout adolescence. Even when her father was *dying*. Still every single day, Catrina never let up. And now to find out she was actively undermining her recovery, *trying* to trigger her old demons—!

Isobel screamed and squeezed harder.

Catrina smiled at her at first, even while she was choking. Like she was laughing at Isobel, even in this.

But as Isobel kept squeezing, finally fear came into Catrina's eyes. Catrina's hands flailed, trying to latch onto Isobel's wrists and pull her off.

Isobel was stronger, though. She felt fucking triumphant. Catrina would never torment her again.

But then she blinked.

What was she—

She looked down in horror at her hands.

Her hands that were around another person's throat.

Choking the life out of her.

Isobel let go of Catrina and stumbled backwards.

Catrina fell to the floor, hoarsely gasping in huge gulps of air between coughing fits.

Holy Jesus, what had she just done?

Isobel looked at her hands in disbelief. Had she really almost just... Oh God. Oh God oh God *oh God*.

"They'll put you away for this," Catrina gasped, still clutching her throat.

Isobel turned and ran out of the kitchen.

Run.

She had to get out of here.

Run.

Right now.

Catrina would call the police any minute. *They'll put you away*. Catrina hated her. And Isobel had just given her stepmother the perfect opportunity to get rid of her for good.

An attempted murder charge.

Isobel felt sick as she fled upstairs to get her purse and car keys.

She was about to pick up her phone to toss it in her purse when she stopped at the last second. It was easy for people to track phones, right?

Shit, was she really thinking like that? Like a fugitive?

She looked toward the ceiling. How had everything gotten fucked sideways so quickly? She shook her head and took a quick breath in, trying to steady herself. There was no time. No time for thinking. No time for anything.

She jammed some clothes and shoes in a bag, grabbed her keys, and was almost out her door when she stopped.

“Shit.”

She turned around and ran back into the bathroom. She’d almost forgotten her anti-depressants. She grabbed the pill bottle from the medicine cabinet. Had she even taken them today? With as fucked up as her moods had been lately, the last thing she needed was to be screwing with her medication.

She unscrewed the lid and poured one of the small pills into her hand. Not that it was helping much. She’d been so stable for *years* and then for it to all go down the shitter so drastically—

She reached for a glass of water and as she did, she knocked the bottle of pills over, spilling them out on the counter.

“Fuck!” She did *not* have time for this. Had Catrina already called the cops?

But as she started scooping the little pills back into the bottle, she paused. Some of them didn’t look right.

A bunch of the tablets had a little line down the middle where you could split them in half if you needed to. But about half of them didn’t have the line.

“What the hell?”

She reached down and flipped one of the non-lined pills over, thinking maybe they were just lined on one side.

But nope, the lined ones were lined on both sides and others were smooth on both sides.

Isobel’s eyes flipped back and forth between the two pills, nothing making sense for a long moment.

But like downstairs, it eventually dawned on her and she swung in the direction of her door. The same killing fury as earlier made her fists shake all over again.

“Bitch!” she screamed.

It would have served Catrina right if Isobel hadn't stopped earlier. She'd been fucking with Isobel's medication in addition to adding the protein powder to her smoothies?

Isobel's hand shook as she swept all the pills back into the bottle. Had Catrina switched out half her meds with sugar pills so she'd only be taking half her regular dosage? Or were they something worse? Something meant to make her moods more volatile?

Catrina was a vicious hell-whore, that was all Isobel knew.

She stared at the pill bottle.

It was evidence.

For once she had evidence. It wasn't just Catrina's word against hers.

Then she started laughing hysterically.

Because no, that wasn't true. This wasn't any different than it had ever been. What did Isobel have? A bottle of some unknown pills? With her luck, Catrina would get her booked on assault *and* possession for whatever the hell was in this bottle. After all, there was nothing tying the pills to Catrina. Did Isobel think she'd find Catrina's fingerprints on the bottle or something?

Even if she did, that was hardly a smoking gun. Catrina could just say that she'd picked up the bottle from the pharmacy for her stepdaughter, so of course her fingerprints were on it.

Isobel was well and truly fucked. She hiccupped, something between a laugh and a sob. Her hands shook as she pushed her hair out of her face.

Back to the original plan. Get the hell out of here.

And go where, exactly?

Fuck knew. She'd figure that part out later.

She ran to the other room and picked up the bag she'd haphazardly stuffed full of clothes and her purse. On a whim, she also grabbed her riding boots from her closet since the time she'd been happiest in her life was when she'd worked in the stables near their house in New Hampshire. She clutched it all to her chest as she ran down the stairs and out the back door.

Catrina hadn't been anywhere in sight, thank God.

Isobel ran toward her little Toyota parked in their narrow garage. Her hands were trembling so badly, it took her three tries to get her key in the lock. She finally managed. She jumped in the car. A few seconds later, she had it in reverse and was peeling out onto the street.

"Okay," she whispered to herself as she wove through Manhattan's night traffic. "Okay, you're okay. You're okay."

So what if she had no clue where she was going? Starting from the shit show she'd just left behind, things could only be looking up from here, right? Right?

Chapter Two

HUNTER

“It’s good to see you out and about, Hunter,” Bubba said, looking Hunter over as he sat his beer in front of him.

Hunter just nodded without comment. He hated coming out to town for just this reason—that look of pity on everyone’s faces when they talked to him. Even after more than a year. Drinking at home alone was even more depressing, though, so here he was.

Last week was the one year anniversary of Janine leaving him. What was the quote from that movie he loved—*get busy living or get busy dying*? It was from the Shawshank Redemption, a movie about being in prison. Which was what his house had felt like lately. He’d had enough of holing up there by himself. He was sick of the silence. He used to find the quiet of country living calming. Peaceful.

But for the past year all he heard was the absence of her voice. Man, she’d always been complaining about something. The hot water ran out too quickly. She hated the mosquitos in the spring. The gravel driveway meant her car was perpetually dirty. Not that she had anywhere to go where a nice car would be noticed.

It was funny how the things that drove you nuts about a person ended up being the things you missed most.

Or maybe he was just a damn fool. Sentimental. Nostalgic.

What he probably really missed was her body warm beside his in the bed at night. The way he could roll over and kiss the nape of her neck, and, no matter how ornery she'd been that day, her body would go all soft. How she'd open her legs and grasp his ass and pull him into her.

Even when they were both furious with each other, they could still communicate that way. By the end, it seemed like the only thing they had left. Stony silences all evening would give way to furious lovemaking at night. Biting and clawing as she brought him to the brink. Clinging to him for the briefest moment of their mutual climax like there was some hope, some future for them.

And then pulling away the second it was done, sometimes going to sleep on the couch like she couldn't stand his touch a second longer.

He'd never understood her. But he hadn't been able to ask her why she did it—why she kept coming to bed each night only to wrench herself away right afterwards. At first he thought it was because she loved him. But eventually he realized it was to punish him. Yet another reminder that he might have his ring on her finger but she'd never truly be his.

Hunter's phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out to check who was calling. There was never a night off when you were the only large animal veterinarian within two counties.

Mom flashed across the screen. Hunter's face soured. Jesus, if there was anyone worse than people in town staring at him with pity it was Mom with her cheer-Hunter-up routine. She meant well. He knew she did. But he could only handle so much enforced cheer a week and he'd already spent most of Sunday at her and Pops' house. He let the call ring out since she'd know being sent to voicemail after a couple rings meant he'd rejected her call.

When it finally stopped buzzing, he shook his head. Jesus, coming out tonight wasn't helping anything. He'd still been fixating on Janine as much as he ever did at home. And these bar stools were damn uncomfortable.

He set his beer back on the bar and turned sideways on his stool so he could reach into his back pocket to grab his wallet when he saw the door to the bar open.

And in walked the most stunning woman. She had long black hair that was pulled back in a slick ponytail. Her face was flawless. Porcelain skin, big blue eyes. Heart-shaped face, pink lips.

Unlike most of the women in the bar, she wasn't dressed like she was looking to get noticed. She was wearing a dark t-shirt and jeans—not too

tight but just enough to show she had curves in all the right places. Also unlike everyone else in the bar, Hunter didn't recognize her. Unusual in a town the size of Hawthorne, which was barely a blip on the map.

Apparently everyone else found her just as interesting because half the bar had turned to stare at her.

Shit. Hunter knew that feeling. Hunter hated that feeling.

He turned back to the bar and took another sip of his abandoned beer. He was just about to reach for his wallet again when the woman sat down on the barstool beside him.

He froze, hands on his mug of beer. Had she seen him and come down to sit by *him* specifically or had she just randomly chosen an empty seat at the bar?

He watched her out of his periphery and she didn't so much as glance his way. Yeah, wishful thinking, jackass.

Still, he didn't go for his wallet again.

The woman glanced up and down the bar. Bubba was bartending tonight, along with Jeff. Jeff was at the other end of the bar, making an ass of himself like usual while Cherry and Lacey hung on his every word. Cherry was leaned half over the bar top, her cleavage so low he bet Jeff could see her belly button.

The newcomer smiled and shook her head a little at the scene, like it amused her in some way. Bubba finally finished mixing drinks and handing them off to Mary who was waitressing tonight and then came over to the woman.

Bubba was as much an institution as his bar. A big man with a belly to match, he had a long gray beard and a ride or die tattoo on his knuckles that pretty much said it all.

The woman didn't look intimidated by him though. She just smiled back at him when he turned to her and asked, "What can I get you, beautiful?"

She hesitated a moment, like she was about to order something but then reconsidered. She tilted her head sideways, showing off the long curve of her neck. "What do you have on tap?"

Bubba listed off several beers and she chose a dark IPA.

Hunter sipped at his beer and pretended to be minding his own business while Bubba served her up a big glass of dark beer. She took a long sip, licking the foam off her lips at the end.

Hunter swallowed hard and averted his eyes.

“Ah, that hits the spot,” she said after another long sip. “Is the kitchen still open?”

“Till ten,” Bubba answered. “What can I get for ya?”

She was quiet a moment, then blurted, “I’d kill for a burger,” like it was a confession she was admitting to a priest.

“My kind of lady. Beer and burgers. Coming right up.” Bubba turned and walked to the end of the bar where it connected to the kitchen to put in her order. Hunter couldn’t help his eyes seeking her out again as she sank back on her stool, taking another long sip from her beer.

But then his vision was blocked by Larry leaning on the bar between Hunter and the woman. Larry was in his late forties and had been a teacher at the high school before he got fired for showing up to school drunk.

“I agree with Bubba,” Larry slurred, obviously drunk. He smelled like a damn brewery. “It’s sexy seeing a woman who knows how she likes her beer. With plenty of head.”

Son of a—

“I’m Lawrence.”

There was no response from the woman. Hunter imagined her giving Larry a cold, “fuck off, I’m not interested” face.

“So you’re new in town,” Larry persisted, shouldering between Hunter and the woman even more.

“This is a small town. Everyone knows everyone. So when a bombshell like you walks in...” Larry paused, “...well, it’s hard not to notice. Hard being the operative word, if you get what I mean.”

All right, that was enough.

But the woman seemed fully capable of standing up for herself.

“Whoa whoa whoa,” Hunter heard her say. He still couldn’t see because of Larry blocking his vision, but from the way Larry was leaning in, he had to be crowding the woman.

Her firm voice was clear. “I’m not interested. You need to back up. Now.”

Larry’s body moved sharply like she might have shoved him, but he had a firm grip on the bar top and he barely budged.

“What?” Larry said, a nasty tone entering his voice. “I’m just being friendly, don’t be a—”

Hunter had had it.

“She said she’s not interested.” Hunter yanked the back of Larry’s collar,

choking him and knocking him off balance until he stumbled backward and landed on his ass.

Hunter was already on his feet, standing between the red-faced Larry and the woman still sitting on the stool behind him.

“Get the hell out of here before I call Marie,” Hunter threatened.

Larry blanched and struggled to get to his feet.

“And call a cab or I’ll call her anyway.”

Larry nodded and stumbled off toward his table.

Larry was mostly harmless but there was nothing Hunter hated more than men who disrespected women.

He turned around to apologize to the woman and her eyes jerked up almost guiltily. Had she been checking out his ass? Hunter bit back a smile.

“Sorry about him.”

She just waved a hand and took a long pull of her beer. Too big a swig, it turned out, because she was immediately choking and spraying beer all over the bar top.

Hunter jumped forward and pounded her back several times. “Are you okay?”

She coughed again but nodded, grabbing a napkin to wipe her mouth and then, discretely, the bar top.

“I’m fine,” she gasped when she could finally breathe through her windpipe again. She took another sip of beer to soothe the last of her coughing fit. Then she winced. “I don’t suppose you could ignore the part where I was just the bar’s own personal beer geyser? I haven’t been let out in polite society for a while and apparently I’m rusty at it.” She smiled self-deprecatingly and Hunter couldn’t think of the last time he’d seen anyone more charming or lovely.

“So,” she said when the silence had gone on long enough to be awkward. Shit. Talking. He was supposed to be talking here. He should say something witty. Engaging.

He had nothing.

“Is Marie his wife?” she asked.

It took him a second to realize what she was asking and he finally shook his head with a smirk. “Larry wishes. No, she’s the sheriff.”

“Oh.” She looked a little surprised. “I take it Lawrence has had a few run ins with the law?”

Hunter gave an eye roll. “I think he spent more nights in the drunk tank

last year than he did at home. Marie got so tired of hauling his ass in she started playing death metal all night on full blast at the station, which, from what I understand, is hell when you've got a hangover." He smiled. "Most nights Larry gets himself home now before getting too sloppy."

"I'm Hunter, by the way. Hunter Dawkins." He held out his hand but then pulled it back at the last second. "Shit, I don't want you to think I'm just another asshole at the bar trying to hit on you. Sorry," he pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "I can just leave you to your beer."

He started to grab his drink, ready to get up and leave.

"No," she put a hand on his forearm briefly before jerking it away again. His arm tingled where she'd touched him. When was the last time a woman had touched him? He'd thought about trying for a fling a few times since Janine, but in such a small town, it hadn't seemed worth the effort. Hawthorne wasn't exactly the kind of place you could pull off an anonymous one night stand.

"It's fine," she smiled. "I don't mind the company. With someone who knows how to respect personal space, that is," she clarified with a smile. "I'm Isobel."

"You want another, Hunter?" Bubba asked, pointing to Hunter's now mostly empty beer mug.

"I'll just have a Coke this time. Thanks, Bubba." He had to drive home.

Hunter looked at Isobel quizzically. "So what does bring you to our little town? It's true we don't get too many new faces around here."

"I'll be working at Mel's Horse Rescue for the summer."

Of course. "I should have guessed," Hunter nodded. "The few new faces we do get around here are usually the ones who cycle through there. You should have a good time. Mel and Xavier are great people."

"You know them?" Her interest was obviously piqued. Then she shook her head, "I guess everyone knows everyone around here."

"True enough," Hunter chuckled in agreement. "But I'm actually godfather to their second son. He's two and a half."

"Really? Wow, that's awesome. So you *know them*, know them."

Hunter nodded. Mel and Xavier had been nothing but supportive, both when he and Janine were together and... after. He tried to get out to the ranch to hang out with them whenever he could. It was impossible to be too sad with two rambunctious little boys running around, asking you questions a mile a minute.

“They’re good people,” he repeated.

Isobel propped her elbows on the bar top, her head tipped slightly sideways as she watched him. Her blue eyes were bright but there were slight shadows underneath them.

What was her story, he wondered? She’d done nothing but smile since he’d been talking to her, but it was like he could sense a sadness layered just underneath the surface. It was hard to describe, but it made her even prettier. She was obviously a strong woman not afraid to stand up for herself, but there was a fragile quality to her at the same time.

“It’s amazing work they do,” she said. “I heard about their horse rescue from a horse trainer I know back in New Hampshire. He couldn’t stop singing their praises. Is it true they’ve got twenty-five horses at the ranch that they’ve rescued now?”

“More than that,” Hunter said. “Some of the horses they’re able to rehab and get adopted but there are usually a steady stable of at least thirty horses out there now.”

Her eyes were wide with admiration.

“So that’s how you heard about the rescue,” Hunter asked. “From your trainer friend?”

“Yeah. He told me about it a while ago. I always thought working out here sounded like an amazing opportunity, just something I’d never have time for.” Her eyes clouded over for a moment and she looked down before pasting on a bright smile and shrugging. “Well, I finally have some time and it seemed like a perfect fit.”

Hunter’s eyes narrowed, wondering what was going on in that lovely head of hers. “New Hampshire, you said? Is that where you’re from?”

But before she could answer, Jake came up and interrupted, beer in hand. “Hey Hunter,” he gestured toward the pool table. “Connor’s leaving if you want in on the next round.”

“Oh.” Hunter shot a quick glance at Isobel, then looked back at Jake, trying to communicate telepathically. *Come on, Jake, move the fuck on.* Hunter wanted to smack the guy upside the head. Couldn’t he see he was talking to a beautiful woman?

But Jake just kept standing there so Hunter finally said, “I’m good. You guys can keep playing.”

“Ohhhhh,” Jake said, looking over at Isobel like he finally understood. And was being totally fucking obvious about it.

Hunter felt the back of his neck heat up as Jake winked at him and turned around, finally walking off. But when he looked back at Isobel, she was just smiling into her beer.

“Here ya are, darlin.’ Char-grilled just like the good Lord intended.” Bubba set down Isobel’s burger in front of her.

She thanked Bubba and picked up her burger but then paused, looking over at Hunter. “Sorry, is it rude if I just dig in right in front of you?”

Hunter waved his hand. “By all means. I already ate.”

“Oh thank God, I’m starving.”

He laughed and she took a huge bite of the juicy burger. Apparently it tasted good because her head fell back in bliss as she chewed.

Annnnnnd now his jeans were tight because, *fuck*. That was the hottest thing he’d seen in a long while.

Her eyes had dropped closed, she was so lost in the sensual experience of eating the burger. Hunter watched the delicate column of her throat as she chewed and swallowed. His eyes traced down her throat, past the collar of her t-shirt, down to the round swells of her—

Shit.

He jerked his eyes back to her face, only to find her watching him ogle her. Well, fuck.

He felt his neck heat and he looked away, back behind the bar. Only to see Isobel’s reflection in the mirror, two spots of color high on her cheeks as she watched him surreptitiously over the top of her burger like she was amused by his embarrassment.

Everything he was feeling right now—God, he hadn’t felt it in so long he barely recognized it. Attraction. This was what attraction felt like. He almost couldn’t believe he was actually sitting here, talking and flirting with this beautiful woman.

She finished swallowing her bite. “So this bar is like Cheers. Where everybody knows your name?” She took another bite and Hunter couldn’t help smiling sheepishly.

“Yeah. Well. Small towns.” He couldn’t help his thoughts turning back to Janine. “You either love ‘em or you hate ‘em.”

“I’ve always liked them,” Isobel said, leaning in like she’d detected his suddenly soured mood and was trying to jostle him back into the moment with her. “My best memories are of the small town where I lived in New Hampshire.”

Right.

Because she wasn't Janine. This girl grew up in a small town in New Hampshire, not an expensive neighborhood in Manhattan. Janine used to brag about being from Soho like it was an exotic foreign country. Hunter shook himself and loosened back up.

They chatted easily as she ate her burger. He learned she loved working with horses and all about the personalities of the horses at the stable where she'd worked in New Hampshire. She was so animated as she talked about each one, Hunter couldn't take his eyes off her. She mentioned she was taking some time off from college but she'd gotten a far away look in her eye and seemed uncomfortable so he hadn't pressed anymore.

"I feel like I've been talking non-stop," she said, taking a sip of her beer. She'd only drunk about half of it, and eaten a little more than half her burger before setting it down on the plate and ignoring it. "Tell me about you."

Hunter shrugged, feeling embarrassed. What could he say? He was the town vet who spent his days armpit deep up the back end of cows and horses, struggling every month to pay his bills and keep the lights on? He knew all too well exactly how unimpressive he was.

Besides, really, what was the point? It wasn't like he could have a relationship with this woman, even if she was as perfect as she seemed. He wasn't sure he was ready, if he would ever be. And she was only going to be here for the summer. The last thing he needed was to get involved with another woman who couldn't wait to be rid of him.

But at the same time, the thought of saying goodbye to her and going back to his empty house... The thought of spending another night alone in his cold, empty bed...

God, it felt like it might kill him, especially after spending the evening talking with this bright, lovely creature and remembering what it felt like to be a real, live man.

And just as he was thinking all this, he realized Isobel's eyes were locked on his lips. Like she was thinking about what it would be like to kiss him. His blood heated at the very thought.

Fuck it. He threw caution and rational thought to the wind.

"Isobel?"

"Hmm?" She jerked her gaze away from his lips.

Her eyes were heated when he met them.

Here went nothing. Either she'd slap him in the face and tell him to go to

hell. Or not. But nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?

Hunter leaned in and dropped his voice to a whisper. “Look, I don’t usually do this and feel free to tell me to take a hike…” His hand went to the back of his neck and he trailed off, wincing. “Jesus, that sounds like such a line.” Maybe he couldn’t go through with it after all.

But just then, Isobel’s hand reached out to his thigh. “No, keep talking.”

Her intense blue eyes met his again, and the spark in them gave him the confidence to say the rest quickly. “I’m lonely. And you’re gorgeous and funny and perfect and I’d like to take you home tonight.”

Her breath hitched at his words. Dammit, he’d fucked up. No doubt here came the hand lashing out toward his face—nothing less than he deserved—in three, two, one—

“Okay.” It was barely a breath, and then her hand on his thigh gave a quick squeeze.

He blinked. Wait, what? Really?

He searched back and forth in her bright blue eyes but she wasn’t flinching away from his gaze. He sat frozen for another short moment before finally pulling his foot out of his ass and jumping into action. He stood up and yanked out his wallet, dropping a couple twenties on the table. “My treat.”

When Isobel tried to protest that she could pay for her own meal, he just grabbed her hand and pulled her behind him out of the bar.

She laughed. “Okay, okay, so the caveman act is a little bit sexy. But I can walk on my own.” She wiggled out of his grasp.

But then she froze and planted her feet. When Hunter looked back to see what was the matter, she grabbed his left hand and jerked it up between them.

What was she—

She pointed at his fourth finger where there was a clear wedding ring tan line. “Did you accidentally forget dropping your wedding ring in your glove box on the way into the bar?”

Hunter jerked backwards and all the people sitting at the table closest to them immediately stopped talking.

Shit. He hadn’t thought how that would look. He’d only just recently taken it off, but he was used to everyone already knowing his business.

“She left me last year.”

Now it felt like the entire bar had gone silent. Everyone staring at them. At Hunter. Giving him *that face*. Jesus, he could feel their pity like a heavy

blanket suffocating him.

“Shit.” Isobel’s hand jerked to her mouth. “I’m sorry.” He took a step back at seeing the pity on her face too.

She winced at his reaction. “I’m sorry,” she repeated. “It’s just my last boyfriend and my...” She looked down, took a deep breath, then pasted on a bright smile. “Forget about it. It was nice meeting you.”

Then she pushed past Hunter out the door.

Wait, what? No, he hadn’t meant—

“What are you still standin’ there for?” Bubba called. “Go after her, you dumbass.”

Right. Hunter rushed out the door to run after Isobel.

The night air was chilly as he stood on the street looking for her. She was nowhere to be seen. “Shit,” he swore, jogging around to the back parking lot.

He breathed out in relief when he saw her leaning over the car door of a Toyota Carola, banging her head on the window and whispering, “Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

“Isobel?”

She screeched a little as she swung around to look at him. “Jesus Christ, you scared me.”

“Sorry.” He held his hands up. “I’m the one that’s sorry. Of course that was a logical assumption for you to make back there.” He hiked a thumb behind him toward the bar. “You don’t know me from Adam.”

“No, I’m sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have assumed—”

“Stop apologizing,” he said. And then, because he couldn’t stand another second not touching her, he leaned over, caging her in with his hands on both sides of the car, and kissed her.

Chapter Three

ISOBEL

God, he was a good kisser. Isobel's toes immediately curled at the soft pressure of his lips on hers. And when his tongue teased at the seam of her lips, she couldn't help groaning and immediately opening to him.

That was all the invitation he needed, apparently, because he deepened the kiss and then started to absolutely devour her. One of his hands dropped, curving down the line of her back to her waist, and then around to her ass.

Before she could obsess or wonder if he thought her butt was too big, he grabbed a handful and squeezed, kissing her even more furiously.

And all of it felt amazing. She moaned so loudly that she was immediately embarrassed. But God, she couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so turned on. Things with Jason certainly hadn't been like that for a long time. Sex was more of a chore than anything else, even before they were long distance. Jason had been a football star in high school and he had a big dick. Those two things combined had convinced him that he was a sex god.

All it really meant was that he had absolutely zero clue about getting women off. Isobel had tried to work with him on it but he just wasn't that interested. He pointed out that Isobel got off a lot of the time.

And while at first, yes, that was true—in the initial blush of their relationship, sex had been exciting. If Isobel worked and angled herself just right on that big dick of his, she could get friction on her clit. But by the end

she'd gotten so pissed that he didn't even want to try she didn't bother. Then she'd gone home to be with Dad and with them being long distance... well, apparently Jason had found other places to stick that big dick of his.

"Jesus, sorry, I got carried away there," Hunter pulled back and leaned his forehead against hers. "We should move this party some place more private."

He was panting heavily and one of his hands fisted in the bottom of her shirt like he was barely holding himself back from ravaging her again.

Isobel was breathing heavily too. All of this was so reckless. So *not* like her. But hadn't that been the point of tonight?

Everything in her life had fallen apart. All the worst case scenarios she could have imagined had actually *happened*.

Her father had died.

Jason cheated.

Her eating disorder had relapsed.

Her step-mother's manipulation had driven her to violence.

Isobel had seen the absolute worst in herself.

She spent the first day driving out west wallowing in all of it. But then, somewhere around the Mississippi River, she just started laughing. Because what the fuck did she have to lose at this point?

Nothing. She had nothing to lose. The worst had happened.

And she was still here.

She was free.

Free to start over.

Free to be anyone she wanted to be.

With no past history or future expectations.

She could just *be*.

That realization made her chest feel so full, so sun-burstingly bright that she felt almost light-headed as she walked into Bubba's Bar, the only place open in the tiny town of Hawthorne, Wyoming at 9:00 at night on a Wednesday.

And didn't they say the best way to get over someone was to get under someone else? It hadn't been her intention heading into the bar, but Hunter was so sweet and handsome and when he'd made his indecent proposition, she'd wanted to drag him out to her car and jump him right there.

"You want to ride with me or take your own car?" Hunter asked, pulling back after another long kiss. It looked like it took effort to yank himself away.

He was such a good-looking guy. He had a square jaw with a few days growth of beard that gave him a rugged, sexy look. His brown hair was thick and curly and he was obviously overdue for a cut. It was the kind of hair that made you want to dig your fingers in. Add to that a strong brow line over blue eyes that were bright with lust. For *her*.

“I’ll follow.” Isobel felt equally breathless. She was reasonably certain Hunter was an okay guy since everyone in the bar seemed to know him, but she didn’t want to be without her car.

“Okay,” he said. But instead of going to his car, he leaned down and kissed her again. His body pinned her to her car and almost unconsciously, her leg lifted to wrap around his hip.

Which was when she felt just how hard he was. It didn’t scare her, though. With the freedom of her new lease on life still loosening her inhibitions, she let out a desperate breathy moan and rubbed her core against his hardness.

He ground into her several times before swearing and pulling away. His nostrils flared as he looked down at her. With only the light of the lamplight, his brow shadowed his eyes, making him look dark and dangerous. And sexy as fuck when he leaned over and growled in her ear, “I might break a few traffic laws to get to my house because I need that sexy as hell body wrapped around me this second.”

Isobel’s sex clenched at his words but then he was already turning and striding away with purposeful steps.

“I’m parked out front but I’ll pull around so you can follow me,” he called over his shoulder.

She opened her car and slid into the front seat, closing her eyes and pressing her forehead to the steering wheel.

“Holy shit.” She drummed her feet against the floorboard in a spastic little happy dance and then she turned on the engine and watched out for Hunter’s car.

She didn’t have to wait long. It only took a minute before he pulled up beside her in a rugged blue truck that looked like it had seen better days. At the same time, the masculine vehicle perfectly fit the man. She backed up and then headed out down the main street and into the dark roads, always keeping Hunter’s rear truck lights in view.

In spite of his ‘break traffic laws’ comment, he actually kept to the speed limit and drove very responsibly. Which both impressed and annoyed Isobel

because the pulsing between her legs only got worse with every passing mile.

It was fifteen minutes before they finally turned into a long gravel drive. Isobel bit her lip, apprehension snaking in when she realized just how remote Hunter's place was. Any other time, she would have said that following a strange man back to his house in the middle of nowhere was a really *stupid* idea. But everyone in town knew this guy. And they saw them leave together.

Then again, if he was the town's darling, he'd be the last one they would suspect of being a serial killer. What if his nice guy act was just how he lured women in? Then if anybody asked, he could just say Isobel had been passing through if she didn't turn up tomorrow. It's not like anyone at the horse rescue was actually expecting her. There hadn't been a way to call ahead since she'd left her phone behind. Plus, the way Rick—the stablemaster where she kept her horse Buttons at their summer house in New Hampshire—had described the rescue, they were always short on help. It was in a remote location and the pay wasn't much more than room and board. She was planning to apply for the job in person tomorrow.

And hadn't she just been thinking about how the worst-case scenarios always seemed to happen to her? It would just be her luck if the nice guy from the bar was actually a psychopath with a penchant for chopping up dark-haired girls into little itty-bitty pieces and—

The porch light turned on and she could see Hunter standing by the front door to his house, the door slightly ajar. He was obviously waiting for her, but it was like he could tell she was second guessing her decision in coming out here. And he wasn't pressing the issue. He just stood there waiting. Letting her choose to come in or back out and drive away.

She took a deep breath. Okay, maybe her paranoid brain was getting a little imaginative.

She grabbed her purse and got out of the car, then walked toward his house.

"Just so you know," she said when she got closer, "I called a girlfriend and told her your address and to call the cops if I don't check in with her tomorrow morning." No need for him to know she was bluffing.

Hunter inclined his head. "That's good. I want you to be as comfortable as possible."

He gestured toward the front door and after she passed, his hand came to the small of her back. He followed her into the house. As soon as he closed the door behind them, he nuzzled his nose into the back of her neck where

her hair touched her shoulders. Goosebumps immediately shot up and down her arms.

“You have a lovely house,” she barely managed to say, her breath hitching as he slowly pushed her hair away and began dropping light kisses across the base of her neck. He was being so gentle, his lips so achingly soft that they barely made any contact at all.

She wasn’t just saying it about the house, either. It was a large cabin with an open living room and kitchen. The ceiling was tall with a pitched A-line roof and there was a second floor loft where she assumed the bedrooms were. It was a simple but classic space that, like his truck, seemed well-suited to its owner.

Speaking of whom... Hunter withdrew his lips and had moved on to massaging her with those big, glorious hands of his. She sank back against him as he released knots in her shoulders she hadn’t even realized she was carrying around.

“God, that feels amazing,” she groaned.

“I need to touch your skin.”

A shudder wracked her body at his whisper.

She started moving toward the staircase at the other side of the cabin—they’d come in the back door and the staircase was by the front entryway—but Hunter’s hands on her shoulders stopped her.

“Lift.” He urged her arms over her head. Like he meant to take her shirt off right here in the middle of the brightly lit living room.

She clutched her arms to her sides.

“The bedroom,” she said, trying to move that direction again. Where she would make sure the lights were *off*.

But he just shook his head and lifted the bottom of her cotton T-shirt. She expected him to jerk it off quickly. His kiss had been so urgent back at the bar by her car.

But he only lifted her shirt slowly, his fingers tracing her stomach inch by treacherous inch as he glided her shirt up. By the time he reached her breasts, her breaths were coming in panting gasps.

Her mind was a mess of conflicting thoughts: did he feel how soft and squishy her stomach was? And: oh God, that felt so good, oh, oh, yes—

“Slowly,” he whispered in her ear from behind. “Slow down your breathing. I want to wring every ounce of pleasure possible from your body tonight.” His thumbs brushed the tips of her nipples through her bra and her

breath hitched.

“Ah ah ah,” he chastised. “Deep breath in,” he demonstrated at her back, her shirt still just barely lifted over her breasts. She licked her lips and tried to humor him, though, because his every touch told her that this man knew what he was doing.

She took a deep breath in and tried to shut out all worries about her body. He obviously liked what he was touching if the hardness against her ass was any indication.

That’s only because he hasn’t gotten a good look at you. He’s standing behind you right now. If he saw how ugly and bloated your stomach was from eating that burger, he’d run—

No. She shut down the voice in her head that sounded so much like her stepmother’s. She wasn’t that Isobel anymore. She’d left *that* Isobel behind in New York.

“Good, and now breathe out.”

Her breath rushed out before he’d finished the words. He instructed her through several more rounds of breathing and then, once she had the hang of it, he ever so slowly pulled her shirt up and over her head.

When he gently lifted her shirt off her arms, she didn’t resist this time. His thumbs caressed up and down her forearms as he drew her arms back down, her shirt falling to the floor. No one had ever paid so much attention to every detail of her body.

“Your skin,” he whispered reverently, his thumb rubbing the inner pulse point on her wrist. “It’s so soft.”

God, he was driving her insane. She couldn’t take it anymore. She turned in his arms so that they were chest to chest. It felt dangerous doing it—he could actually *see* her now—but she needed to look into his eyes.

She could tell she’d startled him but his quick smile let her know it wasn’t unwelcome. She threw her arms around his neck and drew herself up on tiptoe to kiss him.

Strong arms encircled her waist and he lifted her up even as their mouths met. His tongue tangled with hers. Unlike at the car, though, he delved in only slightly. When the very tip of his tongue connected with the tip of hers, she’d swear it was like a thousand volts of electricity shot straight to her sex.

He must have felt it too because the next thing Isobel knew, he had her slammed against a wall. She felt all of him—his strong arms wrapped around her, his seeking tongue, his hardness pressing into her through his blue jeans.

She moaned into his mouth and lifted first one leg up and around his waist, then the other, until she was all but riding him. He dropped an arm underneath her thigh, hiking her up even further.

She locked her ankles around his back and moved her pelvis back and forth against his hardness. He thrust up and into her as she moved on him.

She broke their kiss and threw her head back because oh God, yes. Right there. Holy shit. She rubbed herself back and forth even more shamelessly.

Hunter's mouth latched on to her neck, lavishing open mouthed kisses all over. She couldn't even care if he was giving her a hickie because he was taking her so high, it was so good—

His hands had been holding her under her thighs but as he leaned in to pin her against the wall with his body, his rock hard cock thrusting against the place where she needed it most, he reached and grabbed a handful of her ass.

Oh shit, that was so hot. Especially considering how he buried his face in her chest, his teeth nipping at her already hardened nipples. But he couldn't get very good access to them and it must have frustrated him because the next thing she knew, he pulled her away from the wall.

Then he was carrying her. She let out a squeak of surprise, her pleasure popping like a bubble as she clutched onto him. He must feel *exactly* how heavy she was.

“Let me down, I can walk.”

He ignored her and carried her to the center of the living room. Finally her feet touched the floor and he immediately pulled her down to the soft rug with him.

Hunter pushed her backward so that she was lying down and he started peeling off her jeans. She covered her face with her hands. Like a little kid, if she couldn't see him, then he wouldn't be able to see her. Or her cellulite.

She couldn't help her whole body going tense as he finished pulling her jeans off her legs. Oh God, this was a bad idea.

She wasn't a new Isobel.

She was the old Isobel. She always would be. Miserable and insecure and fat and—

“Hey, you okay up here?” Hunter's big hand gently peeled one of hers away from her face. His handsome features were creased in concern.

“Fine,” she squeaked.

Oh God, the super-hot guy was seeing exactly what a disastrous freak she was. Not that he knew the *half* of it. There was probably an arrest warrant out

for her in New York at this very moment.

“We can stop.” His hand cradled her cheek. “There’s no pressure here. We can do whatever you want.”

His eyebrows had dropped low in concern. “Do you want to stop?”

He moved to withdraw his hand but she grabbed it and held it to her face, turning her head and dropping a kiss on his palm. This was the first thing that had felt good, that had felt *right*, in months. “I don’t want to stop.”

It only came out as a whisper. That was all she could manage at the moment. But she didn’t want to stop. She didn’t *want* to be the old Isobel.

She lifted up from the ground and pulled his face down to hers. As soon as his lips touched down she felt the spark that had been doused by her obsessions fire back to life. She closed her eyes and lost herself in the kiss.

“Christ, you’re beautiful,” he whispered in between kissing her lips and up her neck to her ear. “So fucking beautiful.”

Isobel automatically frowned. He sounded earnest. For a moment, though—just a *moment*—she could almost believe him. His words were perfect. *He* was perfect.

Her eyes still closed, she took his other hand and pushed it past her belly and down to her sex. As soon as his fingers made contact, immediately circling and teasing her clit through the thin fabric of her panties, she gasped and arched into his touch.

After just a few moments, he pulled away. Isobel dared to open her eyes and was rewarded by seeing Hunter pull his own shirt off over his head. Her breath hitched. He was muscular in a normal-guy way, not like he hit the gym for hours a day. Like those were the kind he got by doing regular hard work. Isobel imagined him lifting bales of hay and carrying heavy equipment around all day.

She didn’t have long to just stop and stare, though, because almost immediately, he dropped and his mouth was back at work kissing his way down her stomach from just underneath her bra all the way to— Her breath hitched when he got to the top of her panties.

Oh God, he wasn’t going to...?

“Wait,” she squeaked, pulling her legs together and to the side when his tongue darted out along the top seam of her underwear. “You don’t have to do that.”

But when Hunter looked up at her, there was a devilish grin on his face. “I want to.” He leaned in and buried his nose in her crotch. “Fuck, do you

know how good you smell?”

Isobel felt her cheeks flood with heat. Did he *really* think— Was he serious or just trying to—

He pushed her legs open wide and lowered his head between them. She was about to object again, but then that wicked tongue of his was back at work, right where her thigh met her sex. She squirmed and her legs started to draw back together but he easily pushed them apart again.

One of his fingers teased underneath the seam of her underwear, running along her swollen vulva and dipping ever so slightly inside her. She cried out at the sensation.

Somewhere in the back of her head she imagined herself like a beached whale, flopped out in the middle of Hunter’s living room floor like this, her flabby legs spread so wantonly. But every other part of her brain was consumed with firing neurons of pleasure.

He pushed aside her underwear and his tongue teased along the path his finger had just traced. But then he pulled back again. He was driving her so freaking insane. She didn’t recognize her voice as she reached down and buried her hands in his dark brown curls. “Hunter, please,” she begged. “*Please.*”

“Please, what?” he asked, and she could feel the warmth of his breath through her damp panties. As close as his face was, he had to be drenched in the smell of her arousal.

“Touch me.” She couldn’t help the whining quality to her voice. But she couldn’t stand any more teasing either.

His hands grabbed her inner thighs just above her knees and he started massaging up toward where his tongue continued its torture. “I am touching you,” he said.

Her hands fisted in his thick hair. “Touch my...” She swallowed. God, was he really going to make her say it? “Touch my cunt. Lick my cunt.”

His hands squeezed her thighs and he buried his face in her sex at her words, breathing her in and biting at her pussy.

She cried out, almost coming on the spot at the contact after so much teasing. He dragged her underwear down over her hips. She lifted her butt off the ground to help him and he had her panties halfway down her thighs the next moment.

And then, oh God finally, he was diving face first into her most intimate area. He ate with abandon, like he wanted his mouth everywhere at once. He

was licking between her folds and sucking on her clit one moment, then thrusting his tongue deep into her passage the next, then just burying his face as deep as he could in her cunt like he couldn't get enough of her.

She couldn't help the unintelligible high-pitched squeaking noises that came out of her throat. She'd never— Jason had never— He always said it wasn't hygienic. That she smelled like fish down there. She'd been paranoid about it when she was with him, using all kinds of products to make sure she smelled fresh and clean whenever she knew they'd be spending the night together.

But she hadn't showered in a couple days and here Hunter was lapping at her like he'd never tasted anything as sweet. And having his mouth there, his tongue, doing such—

She cried out and shamelessly thrust her pelvis up and into his face. “Oh God, yes,” she cried. “Eat me out. Eat me out so fucking good!”

She'd never in her life been so vocal during sex, but she'd also never had sex in a cabin in the middle of the woods before. It was freeing to shout her dirtiest desires at the top of her lungs. She slammed her hands to the soft rug underneath them, clawing into the carpet fibers as the pleasure ramped higher and higher. White spots burst as— Oh God, how could it feel so—

“It's coming, it's coming!”

He pulled away from his meal only long enough to say, “let me hear it,” before wrapping his arms underneath her ass and pulling her even more roughly into his face.

Her breasts arched into the air and she did. She let him hear every moment of her increasing pleasure as she got closer and closer to the edge.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God—”

But it wasn't until she felt one of his fingers pressing at her back entrance that she really went wild. No one had ever touched her there. The pressure felt so forbidden and wrong and— oh!

“Hunter,” she screamed his name, as his finger made it past the ring of muscles and slid into her ass. He fucked her with his tongue at the same time, right before licking up and latching onto her clit, sucking for all he was worth. She grabbed his head and shoved his face in her pussy as she came so hard she thought she might black out.

Ohhhhhhhhhhh, fuck, it just kept going and going and—

She thrust her pelvis into Hunter's face over and over and—

Oh shit, could he breathe? She let go of his hair and dropped back to the

floor, completely mortified. She expected him to pull away gasping and pissed, but he just followed her down, still sucking mercilessly at her pulsing clit.

Aftershocks spasmed down her legs and she cried out again. When he finally pulled away and wiped his mouth on his forearm, his eyes were heated as he looked her up and down. Any other time a man perusing her naked like that would have sent her insecurities into overdrive, but after that orgasm, God, she could only watch Hunter with a lazy, distracted pleasure.

And damn, was he something to watch. Especially since he was busy pulling off his jeans and boxer briefs, revealing a truly beautiful cock. It was a little shorter than Jason's, but thicker. Her sex clenched in anticipation just by looking.

She wanted to touch it.

She wanted to lick it.

She lifted up, reaching for it but Hunter moved out of her grasp, groaning. "Don't move." He looked at her and held out a finger while he got to his feet. "I'm serious. Don't move that gorgeous ass one inch."

"What are—"

"I'll be right back. Not one inch." His eyes dropped down her body and he shook his head and let out a low whistle like he couldn't believe he was lucky enough to have her there with him.

Which was ridiculous.

But then he jogged to the other side of the room toward the stairs, his tight ass providing an excellent view as he went. He disappeared around the corner up the stairs.

Isobel flopped back against the rug, her whole body limp. The next second, though, her thighs were rubbing together. She wanted more. Which was insane. She barely knew Hunter and God knew she was the last person on earth she would have thought of as sex-starved. But damn, that was the best orgasm she'd had in a *long* time. But her sex clenched, feeling empty.

When she heard Hunter's feet pounding on the stairs as he came back down, she went up on her elbows and bit her lip in anticipation. Especially when she saw that he was holding not just one condom packet, but a whole strip of them.

Her mouth broke into a wide grin. Both because of how many he'd brought and the fact that he hadn't just pulled one out of his wallet, like he'd gone to the bar intending to score. She arched an eyebrow. "Somebody's

feeling ambitious.”

“Not at all,” he grinned. “Just inspired.

He was also holding a plush dark blue blanket. Isobel snatched it from him when he got close enough, quickly draping it over her nakedness. She’d been brave, not flinching the whole time he walked back toward her while she was completely exposed. But she felt immediately better having the cover.

Hunter just looked at her with his brows furrowed. “Are you cold?” He flashed a crooked smile. “Because I’m happy to warm you up.” He dropped down beside her and immediately captured her mouth in a deep kiss.

He reached beneath the blanket and lifted her by her waist like she weighed nothing. She yelped as he settled her on his thighs, her legs straddling his waist. His thick cock lay erect and hard between them. She couldn’t take her eyes off it and Hunter flexed it so that it jumped.

She bit her lip and looked up into his eyes as she reached down with her right hand to stroke him up and down.

He hissed out the second she made contact and his whole body went tense as her small hand wrapped around him.

“Jesus, Isobel,” he bent over and nipped at her shoulder. “I want to be inside you. Can I be inside you?”

When he looked up at her, his cock still in her hand, he looked so vulnerable it made her heart stutter. Like he was asking for more than to just have sex with her.

She didn’t trust her voice so she just nodded. He didn’t break her gaze as he reached beside him for the condoms. She ran her thumb over the bulbous head of his cock and his neck tensed, the vein straining. A drop of pre-cum dripped out and she rubbed it all around his cock. His hands fumbled as he ripped a condom packet open and then he had it at his cock.

Isobel bit her lip as she took it from his hands and rolled it down over his length. Then before she could second-guess herself, she shifted up his thighs and positioned him at her entrance.

His hands went to her waist, guiding her as she sank onto his cock. He held her from going too quickly. Instead, she dropped by increments, the head of his shaft pressing through her folds. He moved so slow she was aware of every sensation as he spread her open and stretched her.

She gasped a sharp inhale at his size. She’d been right—he was thicker than Jason. But the feeling was such a delicious fullness. She adjusted her

legs so she was spread even wider to accommodate him.

He groaned low as his cock slid along her inner walls. But then he paused. “Isobel, open your eyes.”

Her eyes popped open. She hadn’t even realized she’d closed them.

She wasn’t prepared for the sight of him, his mouth slightly dropped open, nostrils flared, his eyes dark with lust. And all his focus zeroed in on her at the same time he plunged *inside* her.

“Eyes on me,” he breathed out.

It was so intense she couldn’t handle it after a few seconds and her eyes dropped. She dipped to kiss his neck but he ducked out of the way and, with his hand, he directed her chin back up.

“Look at me,” he repeated, thrusting up at the same time pulling her down by her waist. His face strained with pleasure as he fully seated himself inside her.

He stilled again, wrapping one hand around her waist and the other up underneath her shoulder, pulling his chest to her breasts until there was no space at all between them. Isobel had literally never been this close to another person in her life. Jason never held her so close when they’d made love. God, even when she breathed in, Hunter’s chest moved with her.

His eyes were so bright. Cornflower blue. They searched back and forth as he watched her. His face was so earnest, brows slightly scrunched, like he was trying to figure her out.

She kept waiting for him to start moving. Then again, she was on top so maybe that was her job? She’d never had sex sitting up like this, but just because he’d been directing her so far didn’t mean he should be expected to do all the work. When she tried to lift up off his shaft, though, his grip on her waist only got tighter to hold her in place.

She cocked her head sideways in confusion but he just said, “Shhh. Just keep looking at me.”

She looked at him.

And it was awkward.

When did people just sit around and stare into each other’s eyes for more than five seconds? Apart from when she was a kid and they played that game where you tried not to blink. Speaking of, when did she last blink?

She blinked. And then blinked again. Shit, now all she could think about was blinking.

Okay, this was getting really awkward.

In fact, being naked with this stranger's cock up inside her and just *staring* at each other—without the frantic kissing and tugging and touching and imminent orgasm to distract her... God, how long had they just been staring at each other now? A minute? Five?

Was her body being so close like this making him sweat? Did she smell? She'd given herself a sponge bath at a gas station in Colorado but that was earlier this morning.

What was he thinking while he looked at her? Was *he* thinking about blinking?

She started watching for him to blink.

But he just seemed to blink at regular intervals. Like a normal person. Because he wasn't a weird freakazoid who obsessed about how often they blinked while screwing someone.

As the seconds dragged on, and he just kept looking at her, she'd never felt more naked in her life—even though it was just her eyes he was staring into. Somehow that was even more scary than him seeing her cellulite. Because there was nowhere to hide. It felt as intimate or more than his cock penetrating her body.

They said the eyes were the window to the soul. If that was true, could he tell what a fucking mess she was?

"It's been so long since..." She almost jumped when he finally spoke even though his voice was soft. And then he was quiet so long she thought he might not continue. Finally, he did, still never breaking eye contact. "I've missed being intimate with another person. You go through life alone long enough and part of you just starts to feel dead inside. Without this kind of connection..."

His cock stirred inside her but he also lifted their hands, palm to palm, interweaving their fingers. He shook his head. "...it's like being thirsty and there's nothing to drink. Months and months and maybe years, you can be surrounded by people, you can walk around all day long, but you're dead. The spark's gone out."

"So then you need some good sex to recharge your battery?"

His cock jumped at her words and he chuckled, his eyes lighting with his smile. "Something like that."

She was glad she could make him smile. He was a little intense. But she liked it. What he was saying—it did feel amazing to truly connect to another person. Not just in a bullshit way. But to experience true intimacy... God, she

couldn't remember the last time she felt that.

Things with Jason were never really... They just weren't— They hadn't been like that. There were so many red flags that she'd refused to see for what they were. And Dad— She swallowed hard. They'd been close when she was little, but ever since Catrina moved in, Catrina had forced him to choose sides.

And he'd never chosen Isobel's. He'd never believed her when she told him the horrible things Catrina said to her. Not after they sent her to Dr. Rubenstein and he told her father it was normal for kids to 'act out' when significant changes were introduced in a household.

She was just a child and no one ever took what kids said seriously—that was what she told herself over the years so she could forgive her dad and have any sort of relationship at all with him. But God, it still hurt. She was his *daughter*. His flesh and blood.

Before she even realized what was happening, a tear slipped down her cheek. She only became aware of it when Hunter reached out with his thumb and wiped it away. And then she was horrified because his cock was inside her and they were—

Her cheeks heated and she turned her head, trying to pull off of his lap. But his arms held her tighter than ever.

"Don't. You don't have to be afraid of anything you feel here," he murmured, pulling her so close that they were cemented, torso to chest, their noses only inches away from each other. When he breathed out, she inhaled it.

"What are you—?"

"Let it happen." His eyes searched hers. "It's okay. To feel sad. To feel happy. Everything is okay here. Christ, do you know how long I wished there was just one place I could be fucking honest? Where I could feel something *real*?" Then he started to kiss her again, light feathery kisses on the side of her face, on her temple, up to the crown of her forehead.

And then finally, finally, his lips came to hers. They weren't soft or explorative this time. No, he kissed her deeply, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her into him like he was desperate for her. If they were sharing one breath earlier, now it was like they were trying to share one body.

His tongue tangled with hers, thrusting and demanding. She felt it now—that thirst he was talking about. He was drinking from her like he was demanding to be quenched.

Her legs wrapped around the small of his back and he hiked her up by her ass so that she was better positioned in his lap. Then he guided her up and down his hard cock. Once. Twice.

She groaned into his mouth. His hands grasped at her waist before sliding up her ribcage and to her breasts and then down again. She couldn't help crying out at the briefest graze of his thumbs on her nipples, arching toward him and throwing her head back.

God, oh God, that felt—

Before she could even finish the thought, his hands were behind her back, unfastening her bra. She helped pull it off and his mouth immediately latched on her left breast, his tongue flicking back and forth over the hardened nipple. She couldn't help the high-pitched squeal that came out of her throat—because if she thought it felt good a second ago with the barest touch of his thumbs, God, she had no idea—

She ground down on him restlessly as he switched to the other breast. She needed him to move again.

He wanted real?

Well, what she really wanted was for him to fuck her. To fuck her rough and hard.

She bent over his head buried at her breast and gripped his hair. “Fuck me, Hunter,” she growled in his ear. “I need you to fuck me. Fuck me dirty.”

His teeth bit down on her nipple in response. She cried out and arched into him. Oh God, yes. He reacted every time she told him the things she wanted him to do to her. He was driving her absolutely crazy. Time to see if she could do the same to him.

“Stop teasing. Don't you feel how slick I am around your cock? I need you to fuck me.” She had no idea where the confidence was coming from to demand these things out loud. But the more she said them, the bolder she got. “I need it hard, Hunter. Fuck me hard, please—”

With a roar, Hunter flipped them so that her back was on the soft rug. His cock had slipped out while he moved them, but he quickly realigned and then shoved back home, hitting a spot so good, oh God, it was sooooo good.

He was inside her. Inside. Oh God, yes.

“Look at me.” His demand was growled as he pulled out and then thrust back in again, so hard he speared her to the floor.

“Oh God. Hunter. Yes. Harder.”

His nostrils flared and he pulled his pelvis back and then slammed in

again. Every time hitting that place inside her that— She'd never— She didn't know it could feel—

“More!”

He gave her more, fucking her rough and dirty, his balls slapping with every thrust. Their bodies grew slick with sweat and her moans echoed off the cabin walls. She clenched as hard as she could around him. Clenched. Released. Clenched.

He swore, his rhythm getting faster and more frenzied. With every thrust, his groin rubbed against her clit, his cock also hitting that place deep up inside her with each plunge. Pleasure lit up every nerve below her waist and she squeezed hard around his cock as her cries came out higher and higher pitched.

She howled as the orgasm ripped through her.

He dropped to his elbow so he could wrap both arms around her. He clutched her to him and thrust into her more deeply than ever. She was still riding her high when he roared through gritted teeth and shoved himself to the hilt inside her.

She reached down and grabbed his flexed buttocks, not wanting to miss a moment of the shared experience. He jerked back and then thrust in again, his face knotted with agonized pleasure.

For a precious second, they peaked together.

And then his body went slack over hers. Where his entire body had been strung taut as a bow only moments before, now he crumpled almost completely limp, sliding out of her and rolling to her side. He didn't let go of her, though. He just dragged her with him so that she was captured against his chest, her body cemented to his side.

She didn't mind. She was glad, in fact. After such an intense experience—holy shit, that was just—

“Wow,” she whispered.

He squeezed her close and laughed. She could hear it rumbling through his chest where her head was propped.

“Yeah, you can say that again.” He sounded just as in awe as she was.

Her own body relaxed at his words. She'd thought maybe this was how sex always was for him. All his moves were so smooth, she couldn't help wondering if he was just some sex god who took home a different woman every other night to quench his 'thirst.' Women probably a lot prettier and skinnier than her.

Then she clenched her eyes shut. God, she did *not* need to be worrying about that. She could just enjoy this for what it was without analyzing it to death.

All she'd wanted was one night to let go.

To celebrate her new freedom. Her new life.

Besides, she was far from ready to dive into another relationship right after ending things with Jason. As if a one-night stand would lead to a relationship anyway. She internally rolled her eyes and sank against Hunter's warm, muscled chest. She wrapped her arm around his broad body. After the year she'd had, she deserved tonight and enjoying the little slice of heaven that was Hunter Dawkins.

They laid there in silence. She would have thought he'd fallen asleep except for his hand tracing patterns up and down her back. He seemed content to simply lie there, snuggled against her.

Like the intense sex they'd just had, his tenderness threatened to crack the determination she'd just come to that this was just a casual one-night stand.

And she couldn't have that. She was all too aware of how fragile she was at the moment.

Before leaving New York, she'd stopped at the pharmacy and gotten a refill of her prescription—pills she could trust to be her real medication and a ninety day supply so she wouldn't have to worry for awhile—and already she'd been feeling more evened out over the past few days. But still. It usually took a couple weeks to a month whenever she had a medication change and who knew what the hell Catrina had been dosing her with that she still had to get out of her system?

All of which meant she couldn't trust any of her emotions right now—no matter how intensely she might be feeling for the man she was currently snuggled against.

So, determined to keep it light, she turned into him and nipped at his chest, grinning up at him when he jerked in surprise and looked down at her.

She arched an eyebrow. "Don't tell me you're done with me already." She nodded toward the rest of the condoms he'd brought. "You came so prepared, after all. It'd be a shame to put it to waste.

His nostrils flared and his mouth hitched up on one side. "I was an Eagle Scout."

"Ooo. Impressive."

"I live to impress." He was all out grinning now.

She sat up and pulled back from him, drawing the blanket up with her, leaving him bare. She put her fist underneath her chin and looked him up and down, evaluating him in an overexaggerated fashion. “Well, Eagle Scout Hunter, I give you a ten for presentation and let’s say a…” She pursed her lips, “...an eight point five for performance.”

His eyebrows shot to his hairline. “Only an eight point five?”

She smiled at him. “There’s always room for improvement.” Then she added magnanimously, “The judge is open to another demonstration if you’d like to try upping your score.”

“Oh she would, would she?” He crawled toward her like a stalking predator. She jumped to her feet, shrieking, and running for the stairs. She didn’t make it two steps before his arms wrapped around her from behind. He lifted her up off her feet. She squealed and giggled as he carried her over to the couch.

But her laughter quickly died down as he got down to the business of showing her just how skilled he was in the performance department.

Chapter Four

ISOBEL

Every limb was sore as she climbed out of bed the next morning. Yes, they finally made it up to Hunter's bed—just before dawn, on round number four. She never knew a man could have that much stamina. But then again, she'd never met Hunter Dawkins before.

She smiled, clutching the spare blanket she had wrapped around her body to her chest. For only having one night with him, he definitely made sure it was one hell of an experience.

But it was over now.

The smile dropped from her face as she watched Hunter sleeping peacefully, the morning light streaming in on his gorgeous face and exposed back. The sheet was pulled up to the bottom of his spine, but the tantalizing curve of his ass was visible right at the top of the fabric's fold.

She bit her lip. He'd had a couple hours of sleep. Maybe they could fit in just *one more*—

No. She cut the thought off at the root.

It was daylight. The clock had more than struck midnight. It was time to go back to the real world.

There was no way she was going to tarnish the perfection of last night with awkward morning after BS and false promises that they'd call one another—or worse, him *not* even asking for her number. No, she'd just

quietly exit stage left before he even woke up.

With effort, she pulled her eyes away from the gorgeous specimen on the bed and turned toward the stairs. She winced at the loud creak of the second stair as she started heading down. Whipping around to see if the noise woke Hunter, she saw that other than him shifting slightly, he didn't stir.

She let out a deep breath and then tested each step before putting weight on it. It seemed to take forever, but she finally got to the bottom of the stairs. She gathered her clothes from where they'd been tossed off the night before and dressed in record time.

Then she grabbed her purse and was out the door, biting her lip as she closed it gingerly behind her.

She ran to her car and pulled away from Hunter's house with only a quick wistful glance in her rearview mirror. The cabin looked like something out of a fairytale, a cabin in the woods with trees shading it.

She shook her head like she could clear it from the spell of sex and pheromones that she'd been lost in for the last fourteen hours.

Hunter's gravel driveway was longer than she remembered it. It wound through the woods almost like a little road. Isobel glanced down at her rumpled clothes and then pulled over just long enough to change into a summer dress she'd thrown in her bag at the last minute. First impressions could be everything. The dress gave the message that she was friendly and approachable.

She got going again as soon as she could though, glancing over her shoulder every few seconds. But Hunter's truck never appeared and in another minute she finally pulled out onto the paved county road. With a press on the screen, she pulled up the directions she'd already input into her GPS for Mel's Horse Rescue.

It was half an hour away and she scanned radio stations to distract herself from thoughts of Hunter while she drove. Unfortunately, the only station that wasn't full of static was a modern pop country station blaring crap she couldn't stand. After a few minutes, she gave up and turned off the radio all together.

And in the silence that followed, she couldn't help her thoughts turning to the man she'd left back in bed.

What would he think when he woke up and found her gone? Would he just be glad she'd left with no awkward fuss? Or did last night end up meaning more than just a one-night stand after all...

Her hands tightened around the steering wheel and she shook her head. No. She wasn't a stupid girl.

But try as she might, she couldn't get the sexy man with his gorgeous body and intense eyes out of her head. Suffice it to say, it was a *long* thirty minutes.

When she finally saw the sign for Mel's Horse Rescue, she was more than relieved. She couldn't believe after all the shit she was running away from it was thoughts of a *man* that had her so distracted.

Maybe it was just easier to focus on Hunter than her real problems. Either that, she sighed, or Hunter was just a man worthy of distraction.

She drove past the gate into a gravel driveway leading to the ranch. As she pulled up, she saw a large three-story building in the distance.

It was time to move on. Several vehicles were parked in a small parking area off to the left of the main building. A few trucks of various sizes. One dirt-spattered SUV. Isobel's little Toyota was dwarfed by the others when she pulled in and parked beside a huge Dodge 4x4. That wasn't intimidating or anything.

She took a deep breath and then stepped out of her car.

No more thoughts of the past.

No more thoughts about Hunter or last night.

Time to *really* start this new chapter of her life.

She squared her shoulders and walked up to the front porch. The outside of the large building and wraparound porch were bright white, like they'd been freshly painted. Several rocking chairs were set up, along with a porch swing, looking out on the gently rolling hills that surrounded the property. It was so idyllic and different from the chic brownstone where she'd grown up in Manhattan that it almost felt like a different planet. But she'd done it. She was really here.

She looked around, trying to take everything in as she rang the doorbell.

Then the front door jerked open and a tall, tan, good-looking guy in his twenties stood there. He was wearing a linen shirt and pants, his dirty blond hair in dread-locks that were then pulled up in a man-bun.

She paused. Um. Maybe it was cliché, but this guy looked more like he belonged at a hippie commune than a horse ranch.

And you're standing here and staring, Isobel. Not awkward at all.

"Hi," she blurted, about to hold out her hand and introduce herself.

"Whatever you're selling, we don't want any." Hippie Guy crossed large

muscled arms over his chest, a dour look on his face.

“Oh. No, I—” She stumbled over her words. Shit. She’d already made a bad impression and she’d only been here thirty seconds. “That’s not what I—I’m here for—”

“Stop being an asshole, Reece,” a man’s voice with an Irish accent called out. Then a second guy clapped the first on the back and dragged him away from the door.

But not before Hippy Guy—Reece, did the other one say his name was?—broke into a wide smile and winked at Isobel.

God, he was just joking? She’d about had a hard attack over making a bad first impression.

“What can we do you for, lovely lady?” asked the man with the accent, equally as handsome as Reece, though his hair was dark and his skin pale instead of tan.

He held out his hand and smiled at Isobel, a dimple appearing. “I’m Liam. Ignore my asshole friend. With only the horses and other blokes except for Mel for company, we all start going a bit feral.”

“I was just kidding with her,” Reece said, shoving his friend out of the way and taking up the whole frame with his body again. He flashed Isobel a bright, dazzling smile. “Everybody needs to loosen up around here.”

Liam pulled the door open wider so she could see both of them. “I’ll show you loose.” He grabbed Reece in a headlock.

“Doorbell! Doorbell!” screeched a little kid voice. Except the child must be small and not good with pronouncing his ‘r’s yet, because it came out sounding more like, “Dow bewl, dow bewl!”

Then a toddler ran full speed into Reece’s legs, asking. “Who at da dow, Wyeece?”

Liam let Reece go and the little boy almost bounced off Reece’s legs due to his momentum. Reece leaned down just in time and swooped the boy off his feet and up into the air. This made the little boy squeal in delight and kick his feet. Isobel didn’t know much about little kids but guessed he was between two and three years old.

Reece settled the kid on his hip and it was bar none the cutest damn thing Isobel had ever seen. Her heart did a little *squish* in her chest.

“Ah hell, I’ve lost her afore I even had a chance,” Liam shook his head. “They all go gooey when they see him with the baby.”

“Swing,” demanded the child, grabbing fistfuls of Reece’s linen shirt.

“Aaround. Aaround!”

Reece rolled his eyes like it was a chore and he was completely put out by the child’s demands—it was similar to the face he’d made when he first greeted Isobel so rudely at the door. But then his eyebrows jumped up and he shouted, “Boo!” right before turning left, then right, swinging the now-giggling little boy around and around with him.

“Swing!” the boy cried when Reece stopped.

“What?” Reece said, his face going sober again. He leaned down and looked the little boy in the eye. “Do you think I’m your personal swinging jungle gym or something?”

“Yes!” the boy said ecstatically.

Reece shrugged. “Fair enough.” Then he swung the boy around even faster.

“I’ll go get Mel and tell her she’s got a visitor.” Liam said, shaking his head as Reece spun even faster with the boy.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you when you end up with his breakfast all over you.”

Reece ignored him. Or maybe not. He got too dizzy—or at least pretended to—and collapsed on the floor, the little boy landing on his chest. Then he pretended to play dead while the toddler poked at his face and called out for him to wake up. It was obviously a game they’d played before.

Reece pretended to rouse a little bit but then his head fell back and he started to snore loudly, eliciting a fresh round of giggles from the boy. Isobel couldn’t help smiling at their antics.

“Brenton Samuel Kent, what are you doing to poor Reece now?”

“Mommy!” the toddler abandoned Reece on the floor and ran to the very pregnant woman walking into the wide entry area. He flung himself with as much energy into her legs as he had into Reece’s.

“Oof,” she said, reaching for the wall to keep her balance in spite of the bundle of energy that just barreled into her. She was a beautiful woman who didn’t look more than thirty, if that, with long brown hair. She smiled, bemused, down at her little boy. Brenton. Isobel repeated it to herself, trying to keep track of all the names. Brenton and Liam and Reece. Brenton was busy tugging on the leg of his mom’s jeans. “Come, Mommy, we haf to wake up Wyeece.”

For his part, Reece stayed completely still, splayed out on the floor without moving.

The woman pried her son's hand from her jeans. "I'll let you do the honors, Brent honey. I need to talk to this nice lady."

Brent looked up at Isobel like it was the first time he'd realized there was someone else in the room. And then he ran around behind his mom's legs like he was suddenly shy.

Only then did Reece jump to his feet. "Hey bud, it's about time for lunch. Why don't we see if we can go find your brother and rustle up some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches?"

"Can we have gwape jewy?" The boy's head peeked around his mom's legs.

"You bet." Reece reached down and scooped Brent up. Then they headed off into the big room that the entryway opened to on the left.

"Hi," Isobel jumped forward to introduce herself to the pregnant woman. Liam said he was getting Mel. Was this her? As in, Mel of Mel's Horse Ranch and Rescue? "I'm Isobel Snow. So nice to meet you."

She smiled at Isobel warmly. "Hi. Melanie Kent. You can call me Mel. Everybody does. How can we help you?" Her other hand rested on her large belly.

Now that Isobel was standing here in front of her, nerves assaulted her. "I stable my horse with Rick at Northingham Stables in New Hampshire."

Isobel's summers riding Buttons and training with Rick had been a rare bright spot in her teenage years. The summer after her senior year she even spent the summer with him and his family working at the stables in an unofficial internship.

That was when everything had first started getting better. She'd already been accepted into Cornell, but it was during her summer at Northingham that she decided to focus her studies in biology with an emphasis in veterinary sciences so she could continue on to get her doctorate of veterinary medicine degree. Nothing helped her get her mind and focus off of herself and her problems like working with animals, especially horses.

Mel nodded at Rick's name—obviously she knew him; Rick had told her as much.

"Well, Rick told me that every summer you look for helpers for your rescue. He said that you never have enough." Isobel smiled and held up her hands, feeling more than a little awkward. "So here I am."

But Mel wasn't smiling anymore. Her face had fallen, in fact, her features scrunching in remorse. "Oh no, I'm so sorry. I wish you would have called

ahead. You didn't come all this way just for this, did you? From the East Coast?"

Isobel's stomach dropped to the floor. "Um..." Rick made it sound like such a sure thing. Granted, it had been a while ago. Maybe a year. Or two? But he said they were always looking for help. Isobel daydreamed about spending the summer here, never thinking in a million years she'd actually do it.

Until she had suddenly needed a place off the map to disappear to where no one in the world would think to look for her.

"Usually it's completely true that we don't have enough help." Mel's face was apologetic. "But this summer we have more horses than ever since my husband's taking in and training several wild horses. And with another baby coming—" She put a hand to her stomach. "So we advertised for the positions and actually have more than enough help for a change. I'm sorry." She reached out and put a hand on Isobel's forearm.

"Oh don't be," Isobel said, trying to speak through her suddenly strangled throat. "It's my fault for not calling."

Now that she thought about it, it was completely ridiculous how much faith she'd put on the fact that this place would be waiting for her—the position didn't pay much but it provided room and board. And it had been her safe harbor. A place to hide. To stop running and find herself, if there was a *her* to find that wasn't the fucked-up girl she'd been.

And now?

Now there was nothing.

Her father was dead. She had nothing but her car and the few clothes she'd grabbed. She didn't dare use her credit or debit cards after she left New York. She'd withdrawn the maximum three hundred bucks allowed from an ATM at the pharmacy where she'd picked up her meds, and she'd already spent over a hundred of it on gas and the toiletries she'd forgotten to grab from home. She'd have to stay on the run except now she had no idea where to run *to*. She couldn't just keep sleeping in her car forever.

Calm down, Isobel. Think.

She could go to a public library and look online at jobsites, then surf Craigslist for roommates—but she'd need a paycheck to be coming in first for a deposit on any apartment—and what, sleep out of her car for two months while she waited for all that? No. God. There had to be a way to make this work. There just *had* to be.

“Maybe you have all the stable hands you need, but you’re a rescue farm, right?” Isobel asked. *Please God don’t let her hear the desperation in my voice.* Panic made blood rush in Isobel’s ears. “I’m three years into my Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree from Cornell in New York—they’re the top veterinary school in the country—and my focus is actually on rehabbing injured horses. I could—”

Mel’s eyes brightened. “Veterinary degree?” she cut into Isobel’s rush of words. “Oh my gosh, that’s perfect.”

“It is?” Isobel’s heart was in her throat.

“We don’t have work here, but I know someone who *is* looking for help. He was just complaining about being too busy to handle things all on his own. And we’d be happy to provide room and board for the summer if it works out. We’ve done that in the past for his interns.”

Isobel’s heart leapt even as she told herself not to be stupid and get her hopes back up. “Who? What do you mean?”

The front door was still open and Mel grinned, her eyes looking beyond Isobel. She gestured out the door. “Look, there he is now. This is total kismet. Our local vet has been looking for an intern—the one he had lined up for the summer just fell through. I bet he’d be ecstatic to have someone from Cornell. Come on, let’s go work out everything right now.”

Isobel pivoted to see where Mel was pointing and her stomach, so recently pulled off the floor by the hope of everything working out after all, plunged right back to the ground.

Because the man stepping out of the dusty truck parked beside her little Toyota was none other than Hunter Dawkins.

Chapter Five

HUNTER

She was gone when Hunter woke up.

For the first time in a year, the first thing he felt when he opened his eyes wasn't the crushing weight of loss. He was actually smiling when he turned over in bed and reached for Isobel.

But she was gone.

Just like Janine.

That wasn't fair, he tried to tell himself as he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, rubbing his hands brusquely over his face.

Isobel hadn't made any commitment to him. They barely knew each other.

Except... last night, when he'd been so deep inside her, when she'd cried out his name like he was the only god in her world—

But all thought was put on hold when he'd looked at the clock and saw that it was already ten. He was due at the Kent's ranch for a round of vaccinations and he was already late. He was never late.

He couldn't believe he'd slept through Isobel waking up and leaving, actually. Usually he was a light sleeper. That woman had woven a spell around him, that was for damn sure. From the moment she'd stepped into that bar, swaying those luscious hips.

And the possibility that he might see her again at the Kent's? Well yeah,

he couldn't say that wasn't part of what lit a fire under his ass to shower and burn rubber to get out to the Kent's ranch as fast as humanly possible.

Now here he was. And there she was. As soon as he'd pulled his truck in beside her petite little Toyota, his heart had started beating double time.

Like he was back in high school and it was the first time he'd had a crush on a girl. Fucking pathetic.

It got even worse when he saw her standing in the doorway behind Mel. Mel was waddling down the porch to greet him, broad smile on her face like always, but Isobel stood frozen, her wide eyes locked on him.

Shit. He'd just wanted to hurry to get here. But he hadn't thought through what he'd actually say when he ran into her again.

Hi there. So, last night's multi-orgasmic marathon...that was pretty great, yeah? Wanna go for pizza and a movie sometime? Or let me fuck your brains out some more in the back of my truck?

But Jesus, last night had been about more than just the sex. Sure, it had started out that way. At the bar, he hadn't been thinking beyond the moment and the urge to have a woman again. That on its own had been a novel and refreshing impulse after a year of feeling pretty dead as a man, apart from the occasional mindless stress relief session with his hand in the shower.

But then she'd come so alive under his touch. She was so responsive. And then he couldn't bear for it to be like it had been with Janine—impersonal sessions where they'd just used each other until it was only the pretense of a connection between them.

No, he'd wanted Isobel to see him. To really see him. To know who it was she was having sex with.

When he and Janine had been going through their roughest patch yet, Hunter had researched techniques and ways to make the one thing that seemed to be still working for them—sex—more meaningful.

He read books and learned everything he could. But then when he'd approached Janine about trying out some of what he'd learned, she'd taken it as an insult. She thought he was implying she was bad in bed and who was he to think he could teach her anything and—

The whole thing had been a disaster. It blew up into a huge fight. That was when she'd started sleeping on the couch after sex. Using it as a weapon and never talking to him when all he'd been trying to do in the first place was just open the lines of communication. But she just wouldn't—

He breathed out heavily, stopping his thoughts in their tracks. Going over

and over all the things that had been broken in his relationship with Janine wouldn't do anyone any good.

But then last night, when he'd tried out some of the same techniques with Isobel, she'd been so open to it. In some traditions, you used sex as a way to worship God.

The other person became your church. If you opened yourself up to them, you could connect in a way so much deeper than just at the physical level. Both to the other person and to the divine.

And it had worked. Isobel had felt it too, even if she didn't know why he was doing everything he was doing. He could see it on her face—he watched barrier after barrier come down until she'd bared herself to him. While he was hard, deep *inside* her.

It was one of the most raw, intense, and spiritual moments of his life.

And then they'd just let loose—no holds barred. They'd fucked like animals. Or at least like two people with no inhibitions, who were truly naked and vulnerable to each other. He'd always heard the phrase 'two become one' but had never felt it so deeply until that moment. Not even with his wife. And with this virtual stranger. He knew he'd feel guilty about it later but in that second he hadn't cared.

When he came inside her that first time, her body squeezed around him like a vice and his seed had shot from him like a geyser. Goddammit, he'd almost passed out or touched heaven or some kind of crazy shit because he'd never come so fucking hard in his entire life.

"Hunter," Mel called, jerking his thoughts back from last night—just in time too because his jeans were starting to get tight and that was the last thing he needed in front of his best friend's pregnant wife. "Good to see you." She leaned in for a hug.

"You too, Mel." He could barely get his arms around her with her giant stomach between them.

"Whoa." He looked down. "I think I felt junior there knee me in the ribs. I don't think he likes anyone but Xavier near Mom. Is it going to be another boy?"

Melanie's hands went to her stomach even as her eyes looked heavenward. "Only if God hates me. And you don't, do you, God? Please not another ten pounder?"

"You guys didn't want to find out ahead of time?" Hunter asked, doing everything in his power to focus on Mel and not look behind her to see where

Isobel was. Would she come out and talk to him? Or did she want to avoid him for some reason? Had last night not affected her like it did him?

Christ, listen to him. Carrying on like he was a school girl biting her nails while a note was passed to the boy she liked, *does he like me, check yes or no*. He shook his head at himself.

“Oh we tried, are you kidding?” Mel said. “I hate surprises. But the kid got all shy when we did the ultrasound so the ultrasound tech couldn’t tell.”

Oh right. The baby. Hunter forgot what he’d asked her for a second.

Mel shook her head. “I’ve never been religious but I’ve taken to saying hail Marys every night that it’s going to be a six-pound girl.” She patted her belly. “You hear that, Penelope? You’re going to be a petite little baby girl for mommy, aren’t you?”

Then Mel looked sharply up at Hunter. “Of course if it’s a boy, his name will be Peter, and we never had this conversation.” She arched an eyebrow in warning and Hunter held his hands up.

“Conversation? What conversation?”

Mel patted him on the shoulder. “Good. Oh,” she looked over her shoulder and Hunter finally permitted himself to look too. And there was Isobel. She’d changed into a little cotton dress that hugged her curves and perfectly showcased her round breasts and shapely hips. Her dark hair flew all around her in the wind. One of their sessions last night had been in the shower and he’d luxuriated in burying his hands in all that hair while he shampooed it. And then held fistfuls of it when she dropped to her knees and swallowed him deep—

“I’m being so rude,” Mel laughed. “I forgot why I ran out here in the first place. Hunter, this is Isobel, from New York.”

“New York?” Hunter echoed. And it was like a bucket of ice water was just dumped on his head. Isobel said she was from New Hampshire, he was certain. A *small town* in New Hampshire. She sure as hell hadn’t mentioned New York.

“And this is Hunter Dawkins.” Melanie beamed, missing the sudden chill in Hunter’s tone. “Hunter, Isobel is getting her veterinary degree from Cornell. Isn’t that impressive?”

She was studying to be a vet? How had it not come up last night that she was studying the same thing as he did for his job? This was too much shit coming at him at once. Hunter stared at her. “So do you just go to school in New York or do you live there too?”

Isobel swallowed, looking suddenly nervous. “Well, I just took a semester off from school and have been at home in the city for a little while.”

“New York City?” he clarified.

She nodded, quickly glancing away from him.

So she’d been lying to him last night.

There hadn’t been anything real between them at all.

No soul-searing connection.

Her leaving this morning with no goodbye should have been enough of a red flag.

But Jesus, he was such a fucking cliché. As if the first woman he slept with since Janine was going to be his soul mate or some bullshit. He was such a goddamn sap. Come to think about it, didn’t he think he’d fallen for Janine after a few nights together too?

He had a bad habit of letting his dick do all his thinking when it came to relationships. Look where that had gotten him last time.

He clenched his teeth and extended his hand toward Isobel, but only because it was what Mel seemed to expect. If he never saw the woman again it wouldn’t be soon enough.

“Nice to meet you.” He didn’t bother making it sound sincere. As quickly as he took her hand to shake it, he dropped it.

“You too,” she said. Was it just him, or did she sound sort of breathless? Jesus, was he still at it? He wanted to sock himself upside the head.

He just needed to make his excuses and then get the hell out of here. Go to work. Vaccinations were monotonous but he’d take anything over the torture of standing here trying not to look at Isobel. Even her scent was getting to him. Which was ridiculous because she’d showered with *his* soap and shampoo, yet he’d still swear there was a scent that was distinctly *her*.

Was she aroused? Was that what he smelled? Did seeing him after their sizzling night together have her soaking her panties? Everything else might have been a lie, but she hadn’t faked those orgasms. Hunter had felt them around his cock when she came. He lost count of how many times.

“Hunter,” Mel went on, completely ignorant of the growing tension between him and Isobel, “I was just telling Isobel about how you were looking for a summer intern.”

Hunter’s attention jerked back to Mel at the words. *No*. If she was going where he thought she was going—hell no.

“She was hoping for a position on the ranch but we’re all full up on

workers at the moment,” Mel went on. “But I thought maybe we could do an arrangement like we did with Murray last year and Carlos a few years back. She could board here and drive out to the clinic—”

Hunter shook his head vigorously. “I doubt that’s how she’d want to spend her summer.” He looked at Isobel finally. She had a deer caught in headlights look. “Giving cows and pigs vaccines hardly has the glamour of feeding and riding horses all day long.”

“Did you forget about the mucking out stalls part?” Mel scoffed. “Your job is easy compared to shoveling shit two to three hours every day. Plus, she’s in school for veterinary medicine. Interning with you would be far more interesting.”

Hunter crossed his arms over his chest. “I run a very small-town practice. I’m sure she’s used to a much faster pace of life. And Cornell is one of the top veterinary programs in the country. She could get an internship wherever she wanted. So if she’s got another option, she should go—”

“*She*,” Isobel broke in, eyes flashing like something Hunter said had pissed her off, “would be happy for any work, no matter how hard, if it comes with room and board.”

She stepped right in front of Hunter and his spine became even more rigid. Fuck but she was sexy when she was angry. Her blue eyes flashed, her cheeks went pink against the rest of her pale, smooth skin, and her full lips went all pouty. And it pissed Hunter off that he was noticing any of it.

He took a deep breath as he regained his senses. He had to put a stop to this idea before it got a foothold. He loved Mel but apart from Janine, he’d never met a more stubborn female.

“Interning with me means long, irregular hours. Sometimes ranchers will call in the middle of the night with an emergency and my interns are on call with me. Seven days a week. Twenty-four hours a day. That’s what it means to be a rural, small-town vet. You don’t get a pristine little office somewhere with people bringing in their pets who have breathing problems because they’re overweight. These animals have real troubles. And I spend half my day with my arm up their back ends.”

Isobel crossed her arms over her chest and her lips pursed. Thank God, maybe he was getting through.

He continued piling higher and deeper. “Not to mention the mess of record keeping and office work that needs to be sorted. My last intern made a total jumble out of everything and it will probably take weeks to get it all

organized again.”

Then Isobel dropped her arms and gave Hunter a saccharine smile. “That does all sound challenging.”

He nodded. Good. His shoulders relaxed. “So you’re going to head back east, then? That’s probably for the b—”

“I love a challenge,” she cut him off. “I’m not afraid of hard work. I’ll be happy to get all your records back in order and I’ve been needing more field training. On *all* kinds of animals. Not just *pets*.” She still had that oh so sweet smile on her face.

Hunter could only stand and stare at her. She wasn’t meeting his gaze. No, her eyes seemed locked further south, somewhere in the vicinity of his mouth. Or rather, his lips. When he licked them to get some moisture, her eyes flared slightly. Which made his pants start to get tight again.

Like she had some internal sensor about his arousal, her eyes finally flicked up. Their gazes locked. And for a second, just the merest moment, Hunter felt the same electric connection he had the night before.

Guess she was pulling out all the stops to get this job. Hunter jerked his eyes away.

“Wonderful,” Melanie broke in. “So that’s settled. Right, Hunter?”

Well fuck. Way to back him into a corner, Mel.

He offered Isobel his most insincere smile. “Of course. If she wants the job, it’s hers.”

“I want the job,” Isobel said quickly. Too quickly. What was her deal? He wasn’t joking about a student from Cornell having their pick of internships. Why the hell was she out here anyway?

Melanie smiled wide but Hunter just kept looking at Isobel suspiciously. His only solace was that whatever she was here for, she wouldn’t stay long. That was for damn sure. City princesses like her never did. And anything he could do to shorten the trip, well, he’d be happy to do his part.

“Welcome aboard,” he said, smiling for the first time since Mel brought up the ridiculous idea.

“When do I start?” Isobel asked, a smile that was wide but slightly frantic on her face.

Hunter looked to Melanie. “Are all the horses ready?”

Mel nodded. “The guys spent the morning prepping them. They’re washed down and in the stable.”

Hunter’s attention turned back to Isobel. “No time like the present. If

you're up for it, that is." He looked her up and down. He stared probably a tad longer than was appropriate but damn, she looked good in that dress. He finally pulled his eyes back up to her face. "If you've got a change of clothes." He nodded down at the strappy sandals on her feet. "I don't think those will do too well for dirty stable work."

The bright pink blush that rose on the apples of her cheeks only made her prettier. "Of course I have work clothes. And riding boots."

"Not work boots?" he questioned.

Hunter didn't think her blush could get any redder but she proved him wrong. She squared her jaw and glared at him. "I thought I'd be working here with the horses."

He waved a hand. "Better than sandals. I'll grab the vaccination kit. You change. But hurry up about it. I have several other calls I need to make today."

He started walking around the house toward the stables without another look back.

He could handle her working for him. She'd be no different than any other intern. He could keep entirely professional about this. Clinical even.

And he'd finally learned his lesson. Maybe the one Janine had been trying to teach him all along. Sex was just that—sex. Biological impulses seeking release. He'd been deluding himself trying to find some deeper, spiritual meaning in it.

By no means would he make the mistake of letting Isobel or any other woman anywhere near his heart again.

Chapter Six

ISOBEL

Isobel ran to the trunk of her car and popped it, grabbing some leggings and a t-shirt as quickly as she could, along with her riding boots.

God. Riding boots. She knew she'd look ridiculous wearing riding boots all day doing veterinary work. But she'd been in such a rush when she left New York, it was a miracle she'd even grabbed the boots.

She flinched, thinking of how Hunter had sneered at what she was wearing. The entire encounter had been cringeworthy.

Yeah, sneaking out this morning had been a coward move, but she hadn't expected... God, Hunter had been so nice last night. Turned out in the light of day he was a real asshole.

Ugh, she didn't have time to think about it. She had to get her butt in gear. She grabbed her toiletries bag with her deodorant and toothbrush and then hurried back toward the house where Mel was waiting for her on the porch. She directed Isobel upstairs to a room at the end of a long hallway.

"Once upon a time, aka, about fifteen years ago, this place was a resort," Mel said. "Sort of a dude ranch where tourist could come stay and pretend to be cowboys. Good for us because it means every room is already set up." She opened the door and gestured for Isobel to go first.

She immediately saw what Mel meant. It was like a hotel room, complete with its own attached bathroom. Though at the moment it looked more like a

storage space.

“I’ll have one of the guys get this stuff cleared out and sheets on the bed before tonight.” Mel gestured toward the cardboard boxes stacked up along one wall and the bare mattress.

“Oh, don’t go to any trouble,” Isobel said. “I’m happy to do it. Just leave the sheets on the bed and I can—”

“Don’t be silly,” Mel waved her away. “I’ll let you get changed.”

Mel closed the door behind her as she left. Isobel only took one more moment to look around the little room. Hardwood floors. Wooden paneling that went up half the wall, painted a soft eggshell that matched the rest of the wall. Otherwise, the walls were bare.

She glanced at the mountain of boxes. She hated to inconvenience them, but she was too happy to have a place to stay to balk too much.

Speaking of—her having a place to stay depended on her working for Hunter, so she better get her butt in gear. She hurried over to the restroom and set her bag of toiletries down on the counter. She brushed her teeth and changed clothes in record time and then jogged back downstairs.

In her rush, she almost collided with Mel at the bottom of the stairs.

“Oh,” Isobel exclaimed, stopping just short of plowing into her. “Sorry!”

“Common hazard of living here with so many people coming and going. Come on,” Mel waved Isobel to follow her. “It’s easiest to get to the stables from the back door.”

She led Isobel through a big common area that had a couple of long tables, a few leather couches, a fireplace, and a huge flatscreen TV. The lodge was all wood and decorated very simply with a few large oil paintings of landscapes and a huge antler chandelier overhead.

At the end of the room were double pocket doors that led into a restaurant-style kitchen. A couple of men sat at a table set up in a small dining area off to the side beside a large bay window.

“Nicholas. Mack,” Melanie said. “I’m glad we caught you. This is Isobel, she’s going to be staying here while she’s Hunter’s intern for the summer.”

One of the men stood up when Mel and Isobel entered. He was a huge guy with a barrel chest and shoulders so large he looked like he could bench press an ox. “Nice to meet you, ma’am.” He had kind eyes and light brown skin. “I’m Nicholas.”

“They raise them right in Alabama,” Melanie said, grinning at him. He looked embarrassed at her praise and sat down, even as Mel’s eyes narrowed

at the other man. “You hear that, Mack? It’s called manners.”

Mack was wearing a Black Sabbath T-Shirt and had tattoos covering his arms, all the way down to his hands and fingers. He was muscular too but in a smaller, more compact way. Then again, anyone would look small next to Nicholas. Though if the way Mack was scarfing down his sandwich was any indication, the man was starved.

“Yeah, yeah,” Mack mumbled with his mouth full of sandwich, not even looking their direction.

Mel scoffed. “Are you even going to say hi to our newest arrival?”

After shoving the last bit of sandwich in his mouth, Mack grabbed a full glass of orange juice and started chugging it. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. And swallowed. And swallowed some more. He finished the whole glass before wiping his mouth with his forearm and standing up.

He finally looked at Mel and his eyes briefly flicked in Isobel’s direction. They paused and he looked her up and down, not even trying to hide the fact that he was checking her out. “Hey.” The single word came out in a low, grumbling bass.

Damn. This one had bad boy written all over him.

If Isobel hadn’t met Hunter last night, she might have been tempted to try rebounding with this guy instead.

As it was, she just said, “Hey,” back and fought a shy smile even as Mel shook her head.

“He’s hopeless.”

Mack didn’t respond. He’d already moved on from the conversation anyway. He was out the door, grabbing a baseball cap from a hanging rack right before slamming it behind him.

Isobel jumped from the loud noise.

Mel breathed out in a huff. “Well someone’s in a mood today.”

“More like every day,” Nicholas said, gathering both his and Mack’s plates. He carried them to the sink.

Mel’s eyes softened as she watched Nicholas. “Don’t worry about the dishes. I’ll get those later.”

“It’s no trouble, ma’am,” he said, rinsing the plates and grabbing the sponge.

Mel watched on like a proud mama. She leaned in to Isobel and whispered. “The woman who gets that man will be a lucky lady.”

Then she linked her arm in Isobel’s. “Now let’s get you to your first day

on the job.” Her smile was infectious.

Isobel wondered what kind of man was lucky enough to win *her* heart because she seemed like a pretty awesome chick.

They exited out the same door Mack had slammed earlier and right out back was a three-sided shed with a chicken coop and several chickens walking around.

Mel saw Isobel looking at it. “I like fresh eggs. It used to be where they kept the pigs but we tore down one of the walls and repurposed it.” She ran her hand along the wood of the shed and smiled like she was laughing about some inside joke.

Beyond the chicken coop were big fenced off pastures with a few horses in them. It wasn’t until they rounded the side of the house that Isobel’s breath caught, though.

It was a real horse ranch.

There were two big stables and beyond them, fenced off horse paddocks as far as the eye could see. They were mostly empty at the moment, except for one in the near distance where a man was standing in the center, running a horse in a circle with a lunge line. Even from this distance, Isobel could tell the man was huge—similar in size to Nicholas.

A boy stood outside the paddock, leaning with his arms on the fence. Mel’s other son?

Isobel looked back to the man guiding the horse. “Wow, is there something in the water here that makes the men come in extra large?”

Mel laughed at that. “But Nicholas is from Bama, remember? That’s my husband, Xavier. The little one is our son, Dean.” She pointed at the boy on the fence. “And I thought shopping for groceries was bad when it was just me, Xavier, and the boys. Ever since we expanded the rescue and brought in the guys last year, I have to buy everything in bulk and I still go shopping once a week!”

Isobel laughed. “I can imagine.”

“Come on, the rest of the horses are stabled in preparation for getting vaccinated.” She gestured toward the closest stable.

Isobel was immediately hit by the familiar smells of hay and horses as they entered through the wide double doors. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say the summer she’d spent with Rick and his family working at Northingham stables had saved her life. Seeing a functional family, feeling accepted for who she was—whatever her shape or size—and working every day with the

animals had given her stability and sanity at a time when she was barely hanging on by a thread.

She hadn't been in a proper stable in almost a year and the scent memories were so strong, it was like she was that sixteen-year-old girl again. The sense of *at homeness* that washed over her was almost dizzying after being so desperate for a lifeline. For a ridiculous moment, she had to swallow against tears.

"Isobel?" Mel questioned when she saw Isobel had stopped.

Isobel blinked and hurried to join Mel's side.

Hunter was set up in the center of the stable with Reece, who held the reins of a brown mare. Reece rubbed down the horse's nose, murmuring to her while Hunter leaned over and opened up a tool box. Instead of tools, though, there were medical supplies inside.

Isobel's eyes were stuck on Reece, though. In the short time since she'd last seen him, he'd changed clothes. He'd exchanged his linen hippie duds for jeans, a sleeveless shirt, and cowboy boots. And wait—his hair. She did a double take. Hadn't he had dread locks? Now his blond hair was cropped close to his head.

"Who's this?" Reece asked Mel as she and Isobel arrived at the men's side.

"Um," Isobel laughed a little, confused. "It's me, Isobel. You met me up at the house just a little bit ago?"

Mack walked by carrying a water bucket. "Didn't your last girlfriend have trouble telling you two apart, too?"

Oh. Duh, now it made sense. "Twins."

"Reece will tell you he's the better half, but it's all lies. I'm Jeremiah." He dipped his head in a nod. He couldn't exactly shake her hand since he was holding the horse's reins.

"If you're done with pleasantries, I've got a job to do," Hunter interrupted.

Jeremiah's eyebrows went up as he looked Hunter's way, but he didn't say anything else.

"I'll be upstairs in the office if you need anything." Mel squeezed Isobel's hand. "I'll probably see you later but in case I don't, I'll leave a set of keys and the wifi password by your bedside."

"Thanks so much. For everything." Isobel flashed her a warm smile that she returned before turning to go.

Leaving Isobel with the surly vet. At least Jeremiah was still here. He seemed as nice as his brother.

“How can I help?” Isobel asked.

Hunter didn't look her way, he just opened a sealed syringe packet. “You're familiar with giving equine vaccinations?”

His brusque manner was such a one-eighty from the man she'd met in the bar she would have thought *this* was the man with a twin, but nope. Apparently this was all him.

“Yes. I've done it before.” Once. She'd done it once before, at least on a horse, when she was at Rick's stables. Her only other experience was the semester she'd volunteered at a veterinary clinic near Cornell, but it had been a strictly small animal operation. She'd given tons of vaccinations to dogs, cats, and several guinea pigs. Since she'd been in her first year, the doctor hadn't let her get much more hands on than that.

She'd been more of a glorified animal wrangler, holding disgruntled cats and dogs down while the vet looked them over. But she'd die before admitting that to Hunter, especially after his intimidation tactics earlier when he'd been trying to talk her out of taking the position.

He seemed to sense her hesitation anyway. “You'll humor me if I want to keep up on my teaching skills?”

He didn't sound like he was being an ass about it. Isobel got the feeling that apart from whatever feelings he might have about her, when it came to his work, his first priority was for the animals in his care.

“The best place to give a horse an injection is this triangular area on the neck.” He indicated the upper area of the horse's neck and explained how there were bones above and major vessels below the area he indicated. She nodded along. It was nothing she hadn't learned, but she appreciated the refresher.

“Then before you inject, you pinch the horse's skin, like this,” he pinched a small flap of the horse's skin, “so they know you're coming and aren't startled.”

He went on to demonstrate giving the injection safely, making sure to hit muscle and not a blood vessel.

“Is there a place I can wash up?” Isobel looked around and saw a deep sink at the back of the stable right as Jeremiah pointed it out. She went and scrubbed her hands with soap, trying not to let her nerves get the better of her at the thought of Hunter watching her. Was he looking at her right now?

Just think about the horses.

They could sense unease and it was important to be as calm as possible when dealing with the intuitive animals. She took a deep breath in and then let it out again—trying *not* to think about how Hunter had instructed her to do the very same thing last night while he was buried deep inside—

She twirled on her heel and walked back to where Jeremiah was leading another horse out of its stall. In the distance, she saw Mack leading the gelding who had just gotten his shot out of the stables. She knew it was important to let a horse move and exercise lightly after getting their shots to ease any achiness in the muscles.

Jeremiah brought a dark brown mare toward them. The horse's mane was glossy but she walked hesitantly. A clear indicator that she was in pain. Isobel's brows furrowed as Jeremiah brought the mare to a halt.

This place was a rescue. When Rick had first mentioned it, he told her some of the horses' stories. How they were abandoned racehorses that were considered useless after they were no longer in their prime. Or how other horses came here after it was discovered they were mistreated by their owners. If Isobel thought about it too much she'd want to break something. Not exactly the attitude she needed to have when dealing with this big, beautiful creature.

"Good morning, gorgeous." Isobel held out her hand to the horse's nose. Then, with her other hand she began to gently stroke along her wither, the equivalent of a horse's shoulder.

The mare turned her head toward Isobel, blowing out a puff of air through her nose, investigating her.

"What's her name?" Isobel asked, smiling and continuing to pat the horse.

"This is Bright Beauty," Jeremiah said.

"Bright Beauty. You *are* a beautiful girl, aren't you?" She leaned a little closer and blew lightly into the mare's nose to let her start getting acquainted with her scent. It was how horses in the wild introduced themselves to one another. Made offers of friendship, as it were.

Bright Beauty knickered in response and nudged Isobel's face, blowing back. Friendship accepted.

Isobel laughed and leaned her forehead against the horse. "I'm going to take real good care of you, Beauty. We've got to give you some medicine. It might sting for a second, but it will keep you healthy." Isobel patted down

her neck, stroking along the grain of her coat.

“How’s the rehab with her going?” Hunter asked Jeremiah, running his hand along Beauty’s flank and down to her back leg.

Isobel stepped back to watch. The horse shifted and her head dropped. More indicators that she was in pain.

Isobel winced, her heart squeezing at the thought of the beautiful mare hurting. “What’s wrong with her?”

“She was a show horse. Barrel jumping,” Jeremiah said. “She got hurt and her owner didn’t give her enough time to heal before jumping her again and reinjuring her even worse.”

“Tore her suspensory ligaments in her hind legs,” Hunter said, feeling along the horse’s leg. “It takes between eight to twelve months for an injury like that to fully heal.”

Jeremiah nodded. “The owners were real bastards. They were just going to put her down, but a friend of Mr. Kent’s let him and Mel know about it. Mr. Kent drove two days straight to pick her up and bring her home.”

“How long has she been here?”

“Just a little over a month.”

A show horse. Isobel shook her head at the thought of her owners pushing her to the limit for their own selfish desires, even at the risk of her health.

Do you want to be pretty or do you want to be a fat hog everybody makes fun of? Your appearance reflects on your father. Who’s going to trust a man with their business when his own daughter can’t show any self-control? Do you know how embarrassing it would be for your father if I have to take you to the plus size section to shop for you? Everyone would laugh at him. And to think, the name Isobel means beautiful.

Isobel swallowed hard. God, would she ever be free of that woman’s voice in her head?

Hunter finished his inspection of Beauty’s hind legs and stood back up. “The swelling has gone down some. Keep her on stall rest. Just ten minutes of walking a day to work out any soreness.”

“Will do,” Jeremiah said.

“What a beautiful, brave horse you are,” Isobel murmured, stroking down her mane. Then she turned sharply to Jeremiah. “She won’t go back to those people, will she? Even if she gets better?”

It was Hunter who shook his head. “Once you meet Xavier, you’ll understand. He’s not a man who puts up with cruelty to horses.”

“From what I hear, it was a good thing Mel was with him,” Jeremiah said. “Xavier was ready to pound that guy into the ground.”

The more I heard about him, the more I liked Mel’s husband.

“All right, everything looks good.”

Hunter pulled open the package of another syringe. “Do you want to jump right in or would you like another demonstration?”

For a second, her gaze connected with Hunter’s light blue eyes and she felt a flash of the...*whatever* it was that was so strong and overpowering last night. She didn’t even have words to describe it.

He looked away almost instantly, though, and she swallowed against the disappointment.

Not what you need right now.

There. Those were some words to describe it.

She squared her shoulders. “I’m ready.”

Hunter nodded and held out the syringe.

“Here we go, girl,” Isobel said, pinching the skin below her withers. Isobel administered the shot without a hitch. “There we go. That wasn’t so bad.”

Hunter pointed to a small plastic sharps bucket he’d also brought and she deposited the used syringe.

“Beauty’s ready for you, Mack,” Jeremiah called.

Mack came over and, without a word to any of them, took Beauty’s reins.

“Remember no more than ten minutes letting her walk around,” Hunter said. “Then she’s back on stall rest.”

Mack nodded, his face never changing expression. At least until he took ahold of Beauty’s reins. Isobel saw him sneak her a sugar cube and whisper something in the mare’s ear right before they left the barn.

They continued vaccinating the horses in assembly line fashion, Jeremiah bringing the horses out, her preparing the syringe, Hunter looking over the general health of the horse, then Mack taking them out to pasture after the shot was administered. After another few horses, Nicholas joined them in the stable and started the arduous task of mucking out stalls of the horses who had already had their turn.

With so many horses, one of whom had an abscess that needed to be drained, it took several hours before they were finished. While Jeremiah and Hunter had bantered back and forth, Hunter hadn’t spoken to her directly again the entire time. Jeremiah tried to include her in their conversation and

he'd occasionally direct a question her way, but Hunter would just move around the horse and pretend she didn't exist.

After they finished with the last of the horses and Hunter had packed up and was heading for his truck, she went after him. She waited until they were around the front of the house almost to their vehicles before jogging up to him and grabbing his arm. "Hey."

His nostrils flared as he looked down at her hand on his forearm. She yanked her hand back. Just the feel of his skin seemed so intimate after everything they'd shared last night.

He stared down at her stone-faced. "Was there something you needed?"

Her mouth dropped open. "So that's it? We're just not going to say anything about what happened last night? Look, I'm sorry for how I left this morning." She lifted her hands and shrugged. "I figured you were a guy and you know, I was doing you a favor by leaving without any big morning after scene."

His whole body went tense at her words and he let out a short huff of air through his nose. "Consider last night forgotten." His words were clipped. "I'm just your boss and you're just my intern. Nothing more. Nothing less."

He reached in his pocket and pulled out his keys and his wallet. Opening his wallet, he slipped out a white business card that was slightly worn around the edges. It read *Natrona County Veterinary* and then had Hunter's name, phone number, and the clinic's address.

"Come to think of it, the office really does need tidying up," he said. "I can handle the rest of today's calls by myself. Why don't you head in, do some cleaning, and see if you can make heads or tails of the filing system."

"I should be done with Mr. Guzman's steer in a few hours." He searched along his jangling key ring. "Here's a key. There's filing to be done if you run out of things to do."

Isobel nodded and took the key after he unclipped a small carabiner with an attached key ring from the larger set. Their fingers touched for the briefest moment as he passed the key and it was like a spark of static electricity lit between them.

Isobel's breath hitched as she looked up at him. But if he felt it, he gave no indication.

"All right." Isobel's voice came out a little higher pitched than she would have liked. She swallowed and then finished. "I'll see you there."

Hunter nodded and then he opened the door to his truck. He paused

before getting in, though, and turned back toward her. His eyes were focused past her and his jaw was still hard.

“And Isobel?”

“Yes?”

“In the future, don’t do me any favors.”

He flicked his eyes ever so briefly in her direction before he hauled himself into his seat and slammed his truck door behind him.

Chapter Seven

HUNTER

The sun was low near the horizon by the time Hunter pulled open the clinic door. The stop at the Guzman ranch was supposed to just be a pregnancy check. But one of the heifers was calving early and there were complications.

Hunter ended up having to extract a dead calf. Never a nice scene, but at least he was able to save the mother. And before he left, he double checked two other pregnant heifers. Everything looked to be going great with them.

But now he was tired, he stank of cow, and the last thing he wanted to deal with was a certain black-haired beauty on the other side of that door. He should have just told her they'd start tomorrow but he thought he'd make one last attempt to discourage her from staying.

Surely anyone seeing the state of the clinic reception area would be put off the job. He knew it was a disgrace. He and Dr. Roberts—the aging veterinarian he shared the practice with—were strict about keeping the exam rooms clean and disinfected. But their regular cleaning lady had had to take time off to have a baby and they'd had difficulty finding a reliable replacement. Even a couple weeks without a good scrub-down and the waiting room full of animal patients started to stink to high heaven.

But when Hunter stepped into the lobby, instead of the normal sour smell of cat piss, he was hit with the strong scent of lemon and bleach. The lobby

was also bright for once—the flickering fluorescent light that he kept *meaning* to get around to had been replaced.

And best of all, Hunter was greeted with the sight of Isobel’s wiggling backside as she leaned over and scrubbed at the baseboard with a big sponge, a bucket of soapy water beside her. Her ass swung back and forth like she was bobbing to music Hunter couldn’t hear. That was when he noticed she had earbuds in.

For a second, he could only stare in appreciation at her delectable ass in those tight little leggings.

All he wanted to do was drop his bag of instruments, walk over to her, grab her waist with one hand and yank down those leggings. He’d bite that sweet ass of hers and then—

Isobel pulled back to dip the sponge in the soapy water and shrieked, obviously just then noticing him. She almost knocked the bucket over in her surprise.

Hunter took a step back, quickly averting his eyes from her backside.

“Crap, you scared me.” She jerked her earbuds out and wiped her hands down her thighs, standing up.

Hunter grunted in response. Shit. What the hell was he doing? Staring at her ass? Last night was bad enough. He didn’t need to add idiocy on top of stupidity.

“I need to be getting home.” He strode toward the lobby desk. “Let me show you how the system works so you can get familiar with it and start on the records tomorrow.”

“I already figured it out,” Isobel said as Hunter was shaking the mouse to bring the computer to life.

“What?” Hunter turned around, looking at her in spite of himself. Her long black hair was pulled up in a ponytail but wisps escaped all around her face. Jesus, he swore every time he saw her she got prettier. Creamy skin, vibrant blue eyes, cherubic cheeks flushed so prettily—he wasn’t sure if it was because of the work she was doing or because he made her nervous. Why did he stupidly hope it was the latter?

He shook his head in disgust at himself as he looked down at the computer screen. It was already open to the advanced record keeping program that neither Dr. Roberts nor he could ever figure out.

“I saw you have the VAP system installed. I’m familiar with it—they used it at a clinic where I volunteered during my first year in vet school. But

then I saw that you've just been keeping your records in Excel files." Isobel leaned over and took the mouse from Hunter, clicking to a patient roster tab. "So I organized the columns to match the input parameters and then batch uploaded the records into the VAP database."

"Oh," was all Hunter could manage. Damn, she smelled good. Like flowers or some shit. Which only made him more acutely aware of how bad he must reek.

He stood up and took several steps away from the computer. He couldn't believe she'd done all that in the what, four *hours*, since he'd last seen her?

He'd sound like a complete idiot if he told her he and Dr. Roberts had held off using the new system because they'd assumed all the patient records would have to be input individually—a task which would have taken *weeks*. But she apparently did it with the click of a few buttons?

She looked up at Hunter, eyes wide. Like she was waiting for him to say something. When he didn't, her eyes narrowed. "I think the words you're looking for are, *thank you, Isobel.*"

Shit. Hunter lifted a hand to the back of his neck. This woman had him fucking tongue tied. Of course he was—she went to an Ivy League school. And yeah, he'd gone to Purdue, but he'd barely passed his classes because he was busy trying to work and pay the tuition not covered by scholarships at the same time.

But this woman—she was beautiful. Intelligent. Witty. So what the hell was she doing all the way out here?

"You know, what I don't get is why you lied." He stared at her.

She jerked back at his words. "What? I didn't lie."

"You said you grew up in a small town in New Hampshire."

"I did." She averted her eyes like she had something to hide. "Part of the time anyway."

He frowned. "Were your parents divorced?"

"No," she said quickly, then paused before adding with a slight cringe. "We had a summer house there."

Fuck. Him.

Beautiful, intelligent, *and wealthy*. This woman was probably more of a goddamned princess than even Janine.

Janine, the vibrant girl he'd met in college who was so determined to rebel from her rich East Coast roots by dating and then marrying a poor farm boy from the Middle of Nowhere, Wyoming.

Of course, the romance of a working man wore off real quick once she was living the reality of being married to a small town vet just establishing his practice. Almost from the moment they'd unloaded the moving truck, she hated it here.

She couldn't stand the people. The food. The lack of culture. How there was never anything exciting to do or places to go. Hunter had cut his hours as short as he could, he'd found special picnic spots, and he'd saved every penny so they could go spend weekends in the biggest nearby city, Cheyenne. He did everything possible to give her back something of the life she was accustomed to.

But even Cheyenne was horribly provincial to Janine's sophisticated palate. No matter how hard Hunter tried to make up for bringing her here and to please her, it was never enough. *He* was never enough.

"Look," Isobel said, "it doesn't matter where I came from. I'm not afraid of hard work." She jutted out her chin.

But all Hunter saw was another rich city girl, come to rough it for the summer on some lark. He wasn't going to be caught in the cross hairs again.

"I think you missed a spot back there." He gestured at the wall behind her.

Her eyes flashed and it wasn't hard to imagine that she felt like hurling the bucket full of dirty water at his head. Hunter had to turn away because Jesus Christ, she was even more appealing when she was pissed.

He should have just said no earlier when Mel proposed Isobel work for him. But how was he supposed to turn Mel down? Especially with her pregnant?

Plus, he and Dr. Roberts were actually desperate for the help. Dr. Roberts had just turned seventy and hadn't been doing farm calls for a couple years now. He only came in to the clinic three days a week and Hunter knew he wanted to retire. Ever since Janine... well, suffice to say Hunter had been happy to lose himself in his work for the past year. But even he had his limits. Still—why couldn't it have been *anyone* other than her?

"So we're really just not going to talk about last night?" she asked as he was almost to the hallway.

He paused and his eyes dropped closed. Why did she have to keep bringing that up? Images flashed of her underneath him. Her responsive gasps as he licked deep into her cunt. The feel of her perfect breasts and hardened nipples pinched between his fingers and thumb. The way she

clutched his shoulders when he finally thrust—

“Nope,” he said without turning. Then he strode quickly down the hall before he did something really stupid like turn around, kiss the fucking daylights out of her, and beg her for a repeat of last night.

Chapter Eight

ISOBEL

The *nerve* of that guy. Isobel threw the sponge in the bucket after emptying out the dirty, sudsy water in the clinic's bathroom.

She'd busted her ass all afternoon. First with figuring out how to make sense of their absolute *disaster* of a record keeping system—seriously, she could not believe that a modern day veterinary clinic could have such an archaic method of record keeping. Using a basic Excel spreadsheet instead of a database program was little more efficient than just using all paper records! Isobel had to research how to format the records to import them. It had taken her two hours and several botched attempts to figure it all out.

And then she'd taken on the herculean task of cleaning up that lobby that smelled like it hadn't had a deep scrub down in months.

But could Mr. High and Mighty acknowledge any of that?

I think you missed a spot.

She fumed about it the whole drive home.

The nice guy from last night was definitely all mirage.

Isobel mopped her sweaty forehead with her forearm and then wrinkled her nose when she caught sight of herself in the little mirror on the sun visor.

Or maybe he just got a good look at you in the light of day.

Because God, did she look like a wreck.

Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the ugliest of them all?

Her hair was coming out from her ponytail everywhere, except from the very front where sweat had slicked little wisps against her forehead.

She pulled in front of the ranch house and parked. She angled the mirror to take a better look at herself.

Oh God. No wonder Hunter was so eager to rehash last night. Ugh.

She slammed the visor back up and squeezed her eyes shut. She and mirrors had a bad track record and she knew better than to look.

“Enough.” She gritted her teeth, then grabbed her purse and headed inside.

She was looking forward to a long bath and some time to decompress, but the first thing she heard after she walked in the door was her name being called out.

“Isobel!”

Startled, she looked over toward the open room and saw one of the twins jogging toward her. He was the one with the dreadlocks. What was his name again?

“You’re just in time for dinner.”

“Oh.” She glanced around at the meatloaf and mashed potatoes heaped on everyone’s plates. “That’s okay, I’m not—”

“It’s Reece,” he said, pointing at himself. “I don’t know about you, but I always mix up people’s names when I first meet them.” He smiled warmly. “Come on, you can meet everyone properly.” He put his hand to her upper back and started herding her toward the table where they were all sitting.

He was being nice and she didn’t want to come off as a bitch, just running away to her room the first night. She took a deep breath and pasted on a smile. Even though she felt like scuttling and hiding behind the curtains at the way all the eyes in the room were zeroed in on her.

Liam was seated beside Reece’s twin Jeremiah. He gave her a blatant once over and then grinned unabashedly. She tried not to wince when she remembered that she looked like death warmed over. Mack just glanced over his shoulder at her then went back to his food while Nicholas gave her a welcoming head nod.

“Mel and Xavier have already gone up for the night,” Reece explained. “I usually put the boys down before dinner. Bossman likes having the wife to himself in the evenings.”

“To *think*, they actually need a break from our fabulous and magnanimous company,” Liam shook his head.

“Hi again, everyone.” Isobel gave a short, awkward wave.

Reece urged her toward the side table where the food sat steaming in heated chafing dishes. “What’s your pleasure? We’ve got meatloaf tonight. Green beans, along with a vegetable medley over here to the right. Mashed potatoes and gravy. Biscuits. A little bit of everything?”

Isobel’s eyes widened as she took it all in.

Calories.

Fat.

CARBS.

“Um,” she swallowed, glancing from the food to everyone still staring at her. “No, thanks,” she tried again. “That’s okay. I’ll just—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Reece laughed. “There’s plenty.” Then he started heaping food on her plate.

She made a strangled coughing noise but Reece just kept on shoveling food until Jeremiah jumped up from the end of the table.

“Enough already.” He took the plate from his twin. “Sorry for my brother’s enthusiasm,” he apologized to Isobel, offering a warm smile with dimples identical to his Reece’s. Apart from their hair and the way they dressed, they looked exactly alike. “He equates hospitality with feeding people. It’s a Southern thing.”

Isobel couldn’t help but smile gratefully at Jeremiah as he scooped half of what Reece had put on her plate back into the trays.

Nicholas looked up from his food. “Texas barely counts as the South.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Reece said, waving a hand.

“I’ll take more of the vegetables,” she said as Jeremiah reached them.

“Are you vegetarian?” Reece winced. “Sorry, I should have asked.”

“No, no. I just...” She scrambled. “You know. Being on the road. I’ve been eating a lot of junk food. Vegetables would be nice for a change.”

God, that didn’t come off too awkward, did it? Maybe it would have been easier to just say she was a vegetarian. But then she’d be locked into that and she *did* like meat. But rarely and usually only when it was boiled. She’d already cheated this week with the burger last night.

At least her neurotic thoughts weren’t playing across her face, or if they were, the guys were too oblivious to notice. Jeremiah handed her plate back and then Reece tossed an arm around her shoulders, pulling her away from Jeremiah. He flashed a friendly grin down at her, dimples on display. “You’re in for a treat. Nick cooked and the food’s always the best on his nights.”

“Because I grew up in the *actual* south and we do food the right way,” Nicholas said.

“Stop hogging the beautiful woman all to yourself,” Liam jumped up and pulled Reece’s arm off Isobel’s shoulders. He took Isobel’s hand and dropped a kiss to her fingertips. “Will you please do me the honor of sitting beside me?”

“Oh, um,” she looked around at all the guys. Then she shrugged. “Okay?”

“*Excellent*. Let me carry this for you.” Liam took her plate with one hand and hooked his arm in hers. He led her over to the table and then waved at Jeremiah. “Move your books out of the way, ya gobshite.” Liam shoved aside a couple of textbooks that were open beside Jeremiah’s plate.

“Oh, I can just sit over—” Isobel started to gesture at the empty chair at the end of the table but Liam and Jeremiah were both shaking their heads.

“It’s fine.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Jeremiah moved his plate along with his books and sat down. Isobel glanced at the books. One was Statistics and the other was Europe in the Twentieth Century.

“A little light reading?” Isobel lifted her eyebrows.

“My big brother’s a college man,” Reece said, taking a seat across the table from them, between Mack and Nicholas.

“Oh, is there a college around here?” Isobel asked, a little surprised. She hadn’t seen anything except scrub brush and endless rolling hills the last hour of her drive yesterday. “Or do you commute?”

“I’m taking online classes from the U of W,” Jeremiah said. Then he clarified. “The University of Wyoming.”

“Oh, cool. I’ve taken a couple online classes before.” She’d been so far into her advanced degree program at Cornell, she hadn’t been able to take many—most of the upper level courses involved labs of one kind or another, but she’d taken a couple online biology classes during undergrad.

She was about to sit but then hesitated, thinking about her afternoon spent sweating while she scrubbed the reception area at the clinic. “I should really go grab a quick shower. It’ll just take ten minutes and then—”

Everyone at the table laughed.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Liam put a hand on Isobel’s forearm to stop her. “If we all showered before dinner, we wouldn’t eat until ten o’clock.”

“Liam should be especially ripe since he was out raking the compost beds

today.” Mack smirked and crossed his arms behind his head, tattooed biceps flexing.

“Here we go,” Jeremiah muttered under his breath, looking back down at his open Statistics textbook. He ran a finger down the page like he was looking for where he’d left off.

“And you’re so much better coming in from an afternoon mucking out stalls?” Liam asked. “Where do you think the compost comes from, boy-o?”

“Man, we’re trying to eat a meal here,” Nicholas objected.

“That we are, that we are,” Liam said. “Compliments to the chef, I meant no disrespect.” Liam doffed an invisible hat at Nicholas, then angled his body toward Isobel.

“So how was your first day working for our illustrious veterinarian? And how do you come out of it smelling lemon fresh? I thought being a vet meant spending all day armpit deep up a cow’s arse?”

Nicholas’ silverware banged on the table as he slammed them down but Isobel just shook her head with a wry smile on her face. No one could accuse this group of not having personality.

She held up her hands. “No up close and personal encounters with bovines today. But there’s always tomorrow to look forward to.”

She shared a little about what she’d been up to instead, helping with the vaccines and updating the clinic computer records. Everyone seemed interested in what she was saying and as long as she was talking, she didn’t have to worry about what was on her plate, so she told them a little about her road trip too when Reece asked about it. Honestly, she was surprised at how at ease she felt with all of them.

“Feck, you can’t take a night off studying even when you have this vision of female perfection before you?” Liam suddenly asked, reaching across Isobel’s plate to grab Jeremiah’s textbook.

“Hey,” Jeremiah said, reaching for the book. “I have a test next Monday. I need to study.”

Liam rolled his eyes. “That’s what Sunday night is for. It’s Friday, for Jesus’ sake. Take a load off.”

Jeremiah got out of his seat and lurched for the textbook but Liam jerked it out of his grasp right before he could close his fingers around it.

“Christ, can you not take one day off from being an entitled son of a bitch?” Mack asked from across the table. “We don’t all have a daddy who can bail us out if we bomb our classes.”

Liam ignored Mack. He grinned magnanimously at Jeremiah. “But lucky you, you have me and I’m happy to throw away money on your education any time. Just say the word.”

Jeremiah glared at Liam, his jaw locking. Yikes, Isobel could tell that was the wrong thing to say.

“We don’t take charity.” Jeremiah yanked his book back from Liam.

“Fucking rich people,” Mack muttered under his breath, mopping up some gravy on his plate with his biscuit and shoving the rest of it in his mouth.

Liam narrowed his eyes at Mack. “You’ve got a little something.” Liam motioned to his eyebrow. “Just there.”

When Mack lifted his hand to his own eyebrow, Liam launched the rest of the biscuit he was eating straight at Mack’s forehead, smacking him right between the eyes.

Mack shot to his feet, pushing his chair back. “You better watch it, pretty boy. I’d hate to have to rearrange your face.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Reece said, getting up and putting a hand on Mack’s chest. “He was just joking around. He didn’t mean anything by it.”

Mack smacked Reece’s hand away from his chest but Reece just lifted it back, though without touching Mack’s chest this time.

Mack glared at Liam—who was smirking back like he couldn’t be more amused by Mack’s display.

“Hey guys, come on,” Reece looked back and forth between Liam and Mack. “Is this any way to welcome a newcomer to the ranch? Poor Isobel is going to think we’re a bunch of barbarians here. Look, you’re putting her off her dinner.” He pointed down at her plate, where she’d barely touched her food.

Damn it, why did he have to be so observant? She shoved a bite of squash and zucchini in her mouth. She even managed not to cringe when she realized the vegetables weren’t steamed, but had been cooked in what tasted like *butter*.

Mack left his own mostly empty plate behind and stormed off in the direction of the stairs.

“What crawled up his arse?” Liam asked.

Jeremiah leaned behind Isobel to smack Liam on the back of the head.

Reece sat back down at the table, looking at Isobel apologetically. “I’m sorry about all that. I swear we’re not all that bad. We usually get along

great.”

“Reece here is what we call an optimist,” Liam said, shaking his head and stabbing his fork in the direction Mack went. “I’ll get along with that asshole the day hell freezes over.”

“So, Isobel,” Reece said brightly, obviously trying to cover the bad manners of the rest of his tablemates. “You said you drove here from New York?”

Isobel nodded, dabbing a big chunk of cauliflower against the side of her plate to try to drain off the butter that had collected on it.

“Which part?” Reece asked.

She put her fork down, giving up on the cauliflower. It was like a little sponge. There was probably a half a tablespoon of butter in that single bite. “I live in the city. But I go to college upstate in Ithica.”

“So what brings you to our neck of the woods?” Jeremiah asked. He’d closed his books, apparently giving up on studying after all.

Crap. She should have anticipated this question. Why hadn’t she thought up a good answer for it? She swallowed as she tried to think of something to say. God, her throat was dry. She smiled and held up a finger as she reached for the water pitcher in the center of the table and poured herself a glass. After taking a long sip, she still didn’t have any better idea what to say.

“Um, I was just... in the mood for a change of pace.”

“What about you two?” She gestured at Jeremiah and Reece. When in doubt, deflect. “Where are you from? You grew up in Texas, is that right? How’d you end up here?”

“Oh we were just in Texas for a year. We’ve been all over.” Reece leaned back in his chair. “The question is—do you want the long story or the short?”

“Oh no, here we go,” Liam muttered. “Don’t get him going, love,” Liam leaned in, bumping his shoulder against Isobel’s. “Nobody loves telling yarns more than this one.”

Isobel smiled. “Okay, how about something in between the long and short version?”

“Well, you’d have to start at the beginning, back when Jeremiah and I were just eight years old and our mother decided she wanted to join the circus.”

Jeremiah shook his head but Reece ignored him. Isobel nibbled on a piece of celery while she listened.

“Mom decides she wants to join the circus. She was really good at

gymnastics when she was younger, she says, and she's sure she'll be able to get a job. It's something she's always dreamed about doing and *carpe diem!* Seize the day!" Reece jabbed a fist in the air, his face enthusiastic and full of amusement.

"So she packs me and Jeremiah up in the car and we drive through the night and then all the next day. We get to this carnival right at dusk. I've never seen anything like it. There's a giant ferris wheel they set up, all covered in lights." Reece gestures with his hands, his face animated. "A man on stilts juggling. People selling candied apples and cotton candy and popcorn and hot dogs. I mean, to a little boy, this was heaven on earth."

"Mom gave us twenty bucks and Jeremiah and I spent the whole night riding every ride and getting so stuffed on funnel cake I threw up after riding the tilt-a-whirl." He grins nostalgically. "God, it was the best night of my life up to that point."

Reece's enthusiasm was infectious and Isobel couldn't help smiling along. "So what happened then? Did your mom get a job at the circus?"

"What? Oh, God no," Reece barked out a short laugh. "Mom was batshit. Totally nuts. She was lucky someone caught her before she took a flying leap from the trapeze. They called the cops. We didn't know until the carnival was being shut down for the night and went looking for her." He shook his head, still chuckling.

Isobel just stared at him, her mouth dropped open. "I'm so sorry," she finally managed to say. "That's horrible."

Reece waved a hand like it was nothing. "It was fine. We went to live with our Grandma Ruth then."

"So she raised you?"

"Oh, no," Reece laughed again, like the very idea was ludicrous. "Granny Ruth was a raging alcoholic. No, we only lived with her for about six months before we went into foster care."

"Oh." Isobel took another long sip of water.

"Now this is where the story really gets interesting. Jeremiah and I got to see all different ways of life over the next few years. I've never met anyone who had a more colorful childhood than we did."

Jeremiah let out a loud huff. "That's one word for it," he muttered.

Reece ignored him. "I mean, just the number of religions we got to personally witness was amazing. You can't really get to know a religion by just visiting a church or a temple on Sunday, you know. But to get to see a

family living out their faith,” he let out a low whistle, “You can really see where the rubber meets the road.”

“Okaaaay,” Isobel said, drawing out the word.

“Like, we lived with this really strict Baptist family first. Strict being the operative word.” Reece shook his head with a little shudder. Considering how he described his crazy mom and alcoholic grandma with such fondness, Isobel hated to think what would actually make this guy shudder.

He brightened the next second. “But then came the Unitarians, and after them there was a family who wasn’t very religious at all. But then we got to stay with the Hausers, who were Buddhists. They were these old hippies who showed us how to meditate and everything. They were very open souls.”

“Too bad about the pot dealing that landed Mr. Hauser in jail our Junior year,” Jeremiah cut in. He sounded less than amused but Reece just nodded sagely.

“It really was.”

“So what’d you do then?” Isobel ate more of the vegetables and even a little bit of meatloaf, so interested in Reece’s bizarre story that for once she’d stopped obsessing over the calories going in her mouth.

Reece shrugged. “Jeremiah and I figured we’d go it on our own at that point. We worked odd jobs. We were in San Francisco at that point and it’s pretty chill there if you want to do the outdoor alternative living situation thing.”

Alternative outdoor—? Did he mean... *homeless*?

He moved on before Isobel could ask, though. “That got old after a while so we headed east doing different jobs that included room and board. That was when we hit Texas. We worked a ranch there for about a year but then we,” his eyes flicked toward his brother and for the first time in his disastrous tale the slightest shadow entered his eyes, “we wanted a new scene.” It sounded like the vague non-answer Isobel had given about why she’d come here. Hmm.

But then Reece smiled again. “Jeremiah saw the notice online for this place and we hopped on the first bus headed north. And here we are.” He held his arms out.

“And here we are,” Isobel echoed. She looked down at her plate, startled to find she’d eaten almost half of her food. She was full but not stuffed and she didn’t feel guilty or like she’d binged. She felt... well, *normal*.

She looked around the table. “I’m really happy to be here. It’s great to

meet you all.” She hoped they could hear the sincerity in her voice.

She’d come here looking for an escape and if she read between the lines, it sounded like she might not be alone in doing so. She didn’t know anyone else’s story other than the twins, but Liam was obviously rich and not from around here, so what could have tempted him to come live out in the middle of nowhere, Wyoming? Then there was Mack, tattooed from head to toe. He didn’t exactly look like a rural farm setting was his natural habitat. Even Nicholas—why had he abandoned his home down south that he seemed to have so much love for to come here?

Maybe she’d never know why they were all here. But in this one evening she’d felt more at home with them than she had in the last year living with supposed *family*. This place was supposed to just be a rescue for horses, but it seemed like they just might take in lost strays of the human variety too.

Chapter Nine

HUNTER

Hunter scraped the mud off his feet on the side of the concrete step by the back door of the clinic.

Right as he was about to open the door, it was yanked open from the inside and he was face to face with an irate Isobel.

“Where have you been? People have been waiting since I opened the doors at 8:30!”

He paused, taken aback. The whole drive here he’d been trying to tell himself she couldn’t possibly be as lovely or mesmerizing as his memory kept painting her. But here, standing in front of him looking pissed, with two spots of color high on her rosy cheeks, her black hair flying around her like a silky cloud that he just wanted to bury his hands in and—

He grimaced and pushed past her into the clinic’s small break room.

“Clinic doesn’t open ‘til 9:00.” He needed coffee. Now.

“And it’s 9:03.” She emphasized the *oh-three* like he’d committed an unforgiveable crime.

He was a grown man. He didn’t have to explain himself to anyone. Still, he found himself growling, “Had a call out at the Johnson farm that took longer than expected. Had to extract a dead calf.” Second one in two days. Happened like that sometimes. People didn’t call for the vet when everything was going peachy.

“What?” she spat, then paused as if only just then processing what he’d said. “Oh.” She blinked. “I’m sorry. That’s horrible.”

He shrugged as he reached for a mug from beside the sink. “Happens.” He pressed the coffee dispenser pump but only a tiny amount of liquid came out before it sputtered. Damn it. It was office policy to run another pot whenever it ran out. He glared at Isobel as he jerked open the cabinet underneath the coffee maker to pull out a packet of grounds.

So he saw when Isobel’s back went stiff. “If you had a case this morning, why didn’t you call me? This is supposed to be an internship. How am I supposed to learn how to do the job if you don’t let me know about calls?”

He scoffed as he set the new pot of coffee brewing. “Because experience working on heifers at a quarter to six in the morning is going to be so helpful when you end up back in New York City.”

If he thought she’d gone stiff before, it was nothing to how ramrod straight she went at that comment. She took a step forward and pointed a finger into his chest. “You don’t know anything about me.” Her voice was arctic.

He held up his hands. “Fine.”

“Fine,” she snapped back.

Then he realized just how close they were standing. Her face was about six inches away from his.

He had the absurd impulse to shove her back against the door and kiss the living daylights out of her.

Her eyes widened suddenly and she yanked back. “Your first client is waiting in exam room one.” She picked up a file from the counter beside the sink and slapped it in his hand.

He glanced down at the folder. Mr. Buttersworth. He was Mrs. Jones’ overweight, pampered cat. The cat bore a striking resemblance to his owner with his shock of orange hair and overlong whiskers. The woman had a mustache the bearded lady would be jealous of.

“Fine,” he said.

“Fine.” She glared at him for another second and then as if realizing she didn’t have any other reason to still be standing there, she spun on her heel and stomped toward the exam room.

* * *

The morning passed with the regular bevy of cats and dogs cycling through. Hunter did his best to ignore Isobel and focus on his job. A bit difficult when he had her holding his four-legged patients down while he examined them.

Did she wear her hair down today on purpose? To distract him? He'd swear she kept flicking it over her shoulder just so that whatever fruity shampoo she used would waft his direction.

Mr. Buttersworth was only in for shots, a quick and simple enough procedure. Their second patient, a huge St. Bernard named Bernie, however, was a bit more challenging. It took both the dog's owner and Isobel to hold the big dog down so Hunter could pry his mouth open to see what was causing him so much pain. And in spite of the giant, slobbering, whining dog who tried to yank back each time Hunter touched his mouth, half of Hunter's brain was distracted by the warmth of Isobel's thigh against his as they wrestled the dog on the floor together.

He finally got the dog to sit still long enough to see that it was an abscess tooth causing all the trouble. That meant surgery since he needed to get down to the root of the tooth. Hunter gave Bernie a shot of antibiotics and Isobel went out with Bernie's owner, promising her they'd find a way to fit the surgery in the schedule for the next afternoon.

It was just what Hunter would have done, but he was annoyed at her presumption. She should have at least asked him when was the best time to schedule the surgery.

A difficult to diagnose case with a molting parrot distracted him from thinking about her too much for the next hour.

They were down to their last appointment for the morning, a case of mange in an indoor/outdoor family cat when there was a knock on the exam room door.

Hunter set the cat back down in the box her owners had brought her in and called out, "Come in," but Isobel was already halfway to the door. She opened it to Sandra, his receptionist.

Sandra seemed taken aback to find Isobel on the other side of the door. Hunter almost smiled. She had to stop startling people like that.

"What is it, Sandra?" he asked.

Sandra looked past Isobel and smiled at him. He and Sandra had both grown up in Hawthorne, she was just a year behind him in school. She'd been working at the clinic for about six months after Dr. Roberts long-time receptionist had retired. "Doctor, there's a family out here with a dog they

say has a hurt leg. They don't have an appointment."

"I'll put them in exam two," Isobel said, striding confidently past Sandra. Sandra's mouth dropped open and she swung her head back to Hunter.

Hunter nodded. "We'll see them. Give me five."

He turned back to Mrs. Voorhees, explained the treatment regimen, and gave her the medication she'd need.

He washed his hands and went into the next exam room. He was about to order Isobel out to go clean and sterilize exam one when he saw her crouched on the floor cuddling a young Labrador retriever to her chest, stroking his head one moment and gently rotating his back leg to check for injury the next.

The dog whimpered and burrowed into her stomach when she'd only barely moved the leg. Not a good sign. Isobel's eyes leapt to Hunter's as soon as he came in and he could tell she was thinking the same thing.

He glanced around and saw a short, compact woman with three little girls crowded around her. "Hi guys, I'm Dr. Hunter."

Their eyes were all fearful as he came in. The littlest girl was sniffing. Hunter wasn't great with kids' ages but he thought they were all between five and ten, maybe.

"Who do we have here?" Hunter leaned down on his haunches and looked at the dog.

"That's Jupiter," the middle tallest girl said. She had big plastic glasses and frizzy brown hair similar to her mother's. "My dad ran over him."

The mother looked mortified and hurriedly stepped forward. "Hi, I'm Pam. My husband wasn't looking where he was going this morning. He was in a hurry and he backed out of the garage without looking."

The youngest girl burst into tears and the mom stopped and turned to her daughter. "Oh honey, it's going to be okay. The doctor here is going to make Jupiter feel better."

"Let's see what's going on with him. How old is he?"

He reached for Jupiter, keeping his eyes on the dog and off Isobel as she transferred the dog into his arms.

"Just a little over ten months," Isobel answered.

Hunter shifted the dog in his arms and felt down along the problem leg. The dog whined the same way he had when Isobel touched him. Hunter suspected a break but there was only one way to be sure.

"Okay," Hunter stood up, holding the dog to his chest. "I'm gonna take

this handsome guy to x-ray. We'll be right back with some more answers for you."

"Is Jupiter going to be okay?" the girl with glasses asked.

Hunter offered her a gentle smile of assurance. "We'll go get a picture of his bones and then we'll have a better idea of what we need to do to fix him up. Okay?"

She nodded reluctantly. Isobel hurried to open the door for Hunter.

The x-ray room was just a couple doors down and Isobel opened that door for him as well. He kept it clinical as he told her where the lead aprons were and put everything in place to get the images they needed.

He lifted Jupiter off the x-ray table when Isobel said softly, "You were good with the girls back there. It's got to be hard when you can't promise that their dog will be okay."

Hunter didn't say anything as the printer spit out the x-ray film. He silently handed Jupiter off to Isobel. She took the dog and scratched his head, being careful not to jostle his back leg.

"I mean, in college, they try to prepare you for that part of the job. I spent a semester volunteering at a clinic but I still never got used to it."

The room was dark apart from the light box on the wall that Hunter slapped the x-ray films against. The atmosphere was a little too intimate. He didn't want to bond with Isobel about the difficulties of being a vet. Because of course it was hard being part of the worst day in a child's life when they had to say goodbye to a beloved animal. But the truth was, he'd gotten so used to it, it bothered him less and less over the years. Which bothered him even more.

Hunter frowned when he saw the x-ray against the light. "I was afraid of that," he murmured.

Isobel came close. And flipped her hair behind her shoulder. Hunter gritted his teeth but pointed out the break even as she said, "Ouch. His femur. That won't be easy to brace."

She ducked her head down to nuzzle the dog.

"We can't just use a standard cast," he said. It was too high up on his back leg. "But we can try a Thomas brace to put the leg in traction. It'll at least give him a chance."

"Poor baby," she cooed into the dog's ear.

She was sensitive. Not always the best quality in a vet.

Which was a good thing, he tried to remind himself. He was supposed to

be trying to get her to quit. Not be working with her like they made a good team.

Because they didn't. At all.

He turned and abruptly left the room without another word. Her footsteps followed behind him. He ignored her as he stepped back into the room with the family and explained the x-ray and the brace he'd be putting on. He also tried to set their expectations—only time would tell how the dog healed with the brace and lots of rest.

The girls nodded bravely and then they went to wait out in the hall while Hunter pulled out the coil of aluminum tubing he used for this sort of thing. With a small heating element, he started molding a cone-shaped frame.

“Oh.” Isobel sounded startled. “You don't use a pre-made frame? You make it from scratch?”

“All different shapes of animals,” was all he said. Plus, he saw no need for fancy equipment when he could make the same thing for ten bucks with materials from the hardware store. Folks around here could rarely afford the extra expense and sometimes any little cost saving measures he could find meant the difference between a client having to choose to put down a family pet or being able to treat them instead.

Hunter went over and gave the dog a sedative, then fit the round part of the cone he was shaping around Jupiter's hip joint to check the fit. The hoop needed to be a little narrower. He went back to his heating element and rod to shape the aluminum some more.

He ignored Isobel for the next thirty minutes as he set the dog's leg, then fit the Thomas brace into place and taped the leg down to keep it in traction. If Jupiter didn't overexert himself too much, the leg had a good chance of healing up just fine.

He finished the last bit of tape around the frame, then, on a whim, reached into his drawer and pulled out a glittery silver smiley face sticker and placed it on top of the tape right below the hip.

He picked up Jupiter and turned to go take him back to the little girls and their mom. Which was when he caught Isobel watching him. With this little smile and her eyes all soft. It made his neck feel hot.

He frowned and headed for the door. “Clean up in here. It's 12:45. We were due at the Anderson farm fifteen minutes ago.”

Chapter Ten

ISOBEL

Four farm calls and one hundred and thirty miles later, Isobel was ready to pummel Hunter Dawkins' handsome face in.

Had she actually thought he was sweet earlier today taking care of that family dog? Temporary insanity, that was her only defense. And she was definitely cured, that was for damn sure.

He hadn't let her touch another animal all day. She'd been relegated to watching him handle cases from the background. So far in the background, in fact, she'd barely been able to see what he was doing half the time.

I know you city folk think cows are cute and just part of the scenery, but they pack a nasty kick. It's best if you watch from behind the fence.

Hunter had said that right in front of the farmer who'd called them out. If Isobel's face had flamed any hotter she would have spontaneously combusted.

Then there were the endless hours on the road. Hunter was apparently the only large animal vet in two counties. And Wyoming? Yeah. It was a big damn state.

She'd thought he was joking when he told her how few veterinarians there were. Five and a half hours later, she believed it.

But she swore, if she had to spend *one* more minute locked in the cramped cab of Hunter's truck with him, she'd scream.

Did he have to take up so much *space*? He drove with his left hand on the steering wheel and his right arm draped lazily between them, taking up about three-fourths of the entire bench seat. She'd been crammed up against the passenger side door for several hours between all the farms because she didn't want to accidentally touch him and have him thinking that she was trying to play handsy with him.

Not to mention, the *music*. God, if she heard another pop country singer twanging about how all they needed in life was beer, their truck, God, and the USA, she might just throw the door open and leap out of the moving vehicle.

A commercial for Chevy trucks ended and then the twanging steel guitar started up, followed by a man with a deep southern voice singing, "You can take a man's steer but don't you dare take his beer—"

Enough!

She reached over and pushed the off button on the console.

Ah. Blessed silence. Finally. She relaxed back in her seat with a relieved sigh.

Until Hunter flicked the radio back on the next second.

"—take your dreams but you'll never give up Jim Bean."

Isobel's mouth dropped open.

She punched the radio off again, then crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Hunter.

His hand shot out almost before she was even settled. He cranked the volume up and started singing along, picking up right in the middle of the line.

"—ever choke, you can rely on Jack and coke. Whoa-a, they're never gonna steal our pri-ide. We got the Lord on our si-ide."

"Fine," she said, having to all but yell to be heard over Hunter and the God-awful music. "Play your stupid music. Unlike some people, I'm not a *child*." She huffed out so hard some of the shorter hair that framed her face flew up in a little cloud. Arms still crossed, she angled her body resolutely away from Hunter.

The music turned down and Hunter stopped singing.

"You sure throw a hissy fit like one."

It would be bad to punch the driver of a moving car, right? Instead she dug her nails into her arms and clenched her jaw, staring out at the passing countryside and not dignifying his comments with a response.

Thankfully, they arrived ten minutes later. She was out the door almost

the instant the truck came to a stop.

It was a smaller farm unlike some of the bigger operations they'd been by today. They stopped in front of a ranch house with a large barn in the distance. The sun was low on the horizon and Isobel held her hand over her eyes to look out in the direction of the barn. It had a gated area off to the side where she saw several cows meandering.

She felt Hunter come up beside her but she didn't look at him. He passed by and went up to the door, knocking on it with several swift, decisive raps.

They stood waiting for several long moments before it opened, a baby's wailing greeting them. A harried man stood there with an angry, red faced baby in his arms. He bounced her up and down and tried to put a pacifier in her mouth, to no avail.

"Shh, shh," he said, looking over his shoulder. "Brenda, the vet's here."

Something was shouted back but Isobel couldn't make it out over more young children's voices screaming in the background.

The man hiked the baby up to his shoulder and rubbed her back, continuing to bounce, while he looked apologetically at Hunter and Isobel. "Sorry about all this. It's a bit hectic around here. The kids didn't get their naps today."

"Don't worry about it, Jonathan. You said you had a heifer that was giving you some trouble calving?"

Jonathan nodded. "She's out in the yard beside the barn. She's been in labor for a few hours and isn't moving along as quick as I'd like. Got two more that should be freshening any day now. I'd go down and show you but —" The baby on his shoulder let out a particularly ear-piercing wail and they all winced. "She's teething."

Aw, poor kiddo. And poor dad, if the bags underneath the man's eyes were any indication.

"We'll go take a look," Hunter said.

Jonathan nodded gratefully.

Hunter turned and headed back to the truck, where he hopped up and opened the big utility box he had installed at the back. Isobel took note of every instrument he grabbed—calf puller, chains, surgery toolbox, and the lariat.

"Are you going to actually let me within three feet of the animal this time?" she asked when he hopped back down from the truck bed.

"I've assisted with calvings before, you know. *Several* times." Okay, it

had only been twice. And the first time she'd just watched from a distance. But the second time she'd been one of the people with her hands on the calf puller, yanking the baby calf into the world. As part of one of her labs at Cornell, she'd spent a week at a dairy farm in upstate New York.

Hunter didn't respond. He just kept walking out toward the gated off pen beside the barn. What, was he just going to give her the silent treatment now? And he'd called *her* childish!

"Melanie told me you were short-staffed," she had to all but jog to keep up with his long-legged stride, "and you yourself said I'd only be going on these calls with you until I was prepared enough to do them on my own. As a third-year veterinary student, I'm qualified to practice in a clinic part-time. But how will I be able to do any of that if you never let me touch any of the animals?"

He stopped walking, so suddenly it took several steps for Isobel to realize it and stop as well. She paused and looked back at him.

He had a patronizing smile on his face. "Fine. You want to be the veterinarian, working all on her own? Here's your chance. This is now your case." He dropped all the tools he was carrying at his feet and stepped back, his hands up.

She narrowed her eyes at him. What kind of trick was this?

But he just backed away and crossed his arms over his chest, watching her with that same stupid smirk on his stupid face.

She didn't try to hide her annoyance as she reached over and picked up the instruments he'd dropped. It was awkward to carry them all. She kept dropping one thing or other. She didn't dare look up at Hunter, knowing she'd just find him smirking at her.

She only managed to carry everything by tucking the calf puller and lariat underneath her arms, hanging the chains around her shoulders, and picking up the surgery kit. It was all heavier than she expected and the trek to the barn far longer than it initially looked.

But finally they got there. The heifer's plaintive mooing could be heard from the opposite end of the yard. She stood, pawing at the muddy ground, the whites of her eyes showing as she looked around wildly.

Shit. Isobel had forgotten how big cows were in person. She frantically tried to remember everything she'd learned on the couple occasions she'd seen this done.

First, get the cow in a stable position.

Both cows she'd seen give birth had been laid down on their side. But she knew that sometimes cows gave birth standing up.

She bit her lip, setting down her equipment beside the gate as they entered the yard. She felt Hunter's eyes on her as he hopped up to sit on the fence and watch the show. Judging her. But she refused to give him the satisfaction of looking his direction or showing him how much this whole thing unnerved her.

He was such a jerk. She'd just wanted to assist him, not have to do the whole thing by *herself*. Much less with him watching on.

You can't do this. All you'll ever be is a failure. Who are you kidding?

Isobel shut her eyes for a brief second and breathed in a deep breath to clear her stepmother's voice out of her head.

Turned out that wasn't the best move because the side yard didn't smell awesome. She'd forgotten that about her week at the dairy farm too. Animals stank. 'Shit happens' was more than just a saying on a farm.

Okay, time to stop overthinking this and just get it done.

She picked up the lariat and approached the laboring cow. Lassoing a cow couldn't be that big a deal. At least not for a cow about to give birth. Right?

Isobel walked toward the cow, her arms out to the side, the loop of the lariat ready.

"Hi there, Bessie. We're gonna take this nice and easy, okay?" That wasn't a tremble in her voice. Nope. Not at all. She cleared her throat. "I'm here to help." She smiled.

Apparently the cow didn't buy it because when Isobel took another step forward, the cow skittered sideways and then past her, dragging her water bag with her as she went. In humans, women's water just broke. In cows sometimes, like with this cow apparently, it slipped out intact like a giant water balloon hanging out her back end.

Oh the joys of veterinary medicine.

Isobel approached the cow again. She crouched lower and tried to make herself seem as non-threatening as possible. "Nice cow. We're all friends here."

The cow bolted again. When Isobel jolted to run after her, she slipped in the mud—at least she *hoped* it was mud—and fell on her ass.

The loud masculine laughter from behind her did nothing to lighten her mood. She set her jaw, ignored the squelching mud that splattered all over her eight-hundred-dollar riding boots, picked up the lariat, and approached the

cow again.

She finally got the rope around the heifer's neck on the sixth try. Which was good because she didn't think it would be very compassionate of her to start screaming four letter words at a pregnant cow. Hunter on the other hand, now *him* she'd be happy to give an earful. If she was acknowledging his presence, that was.

Which she wasn't.

He did not exist.

It was just her and Bessie.

"Sorry," she said, yanking on the rope to urge the cow back toward the gate, "I'm stereotyping by calling you Bessie, aren't I? I'm sure you are a very unique cow with your own individual spirit. How about you work with me to get this baby born and we'll come up with a name that reflects your incredibly complex and personal style, what do you say?"

The cow let out a plaintive *mooooo*.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"All right. Over here. This way. Atta girl."

Finally, Isobel managed to get the cow to the fence near the eight-foot long swinging gate door. Before the cow could run away or move again, Isobel dropped the lariat and hurried to the gate to pull it toward them to enclose the heifer. Finally the heifer was secure, nose toward the apex of the V created by the side of the fence and the gate. Bessie wasn't going anywhere till her calf was born. The whole close-the-cow-in-with-the-paddock-door thing was another trick she'd learned from the dairy farm.

"Maybe Cassandra?" Isobel offered conversationally while she knelt down to open up the surgical box and grab out a long plastic sleeve. She fit the glove on over her left hand and then pulled the sleeve all the way up her arm to her shoulder. "Or something classic, like Helen?"

Here goes nothing. She squeezed some lubricant on her hand. With her right hand she held onto the gate and with her left, she reached right up into the cow's hoo-ha.

And reached.

And reached.

She was almost shoulder deep before she felt what she was looking for. A little hoof, and further in, a head. She felt around. Nose, jaw, and there it was—the mouth.

She stuck her finger inside and the little mouth started sucking on her

finger. A grin cracked her face.

The baby was alive.

You never knew when labor had gone on for an abnormally long time. Another of the tools in Hunter's truck was a calf-cutter. In the case of dead calves, sometimes you had to cut the calf up in order to pull it out and save the mother's life.

She liked that Hunter had left the calf-cutter in the truck and hadn't just automatically brought it out. It indicated a sort of optimism. Or at least a commitment to trying every other option before going to that extreme.

But this baby was alive, and Isobel was going to keep it that way.

She felt around some more. Okay, there was one front hoof and... yep, there was the second one. The calf was in the right position. It must just be oversized. If she remembered her statistics right, oversized calves were the trouble in ninety percent of problematic calving cases.

Which meant she was going to have to put that calf puller and her own muscles to good use.

She withdrew her arm and breathed through her mouth, trying to ignore all the goo that came out with it.

A glamorous job this was not.

She reached down for another glove and then grabbed the chains of the calf puller. They had little cuffs on the end to attach around the baby calf's front hooves.

Here went nothing. She dove back in, this time with both arms, each hand holding a chain.

The cow bucked forward.

"Oof!" Isobel was knocked off balance, stumbling forward with the cow. There wasn't far for the cow to go—unless she nosed at the gate to push it open. Which she immediately did.

The gate started to swing back, widening the V and making space for the cow to get loose. Isobel yanked her right arm out of the cow and grabbed the gate to pull it back in position.

"Cassandra!" Isobel yelled. "Naughty cow!"

Once the heifer was still, Isobel tried again. But the second she took her hand off the gate to try to attach the first chain around the calf's hoof, Bessie/Cassandra was taking off again.

Isobel grabbed the gate at the last second to stop her, again.

Hair had escaped Isobel's ponytail but she couldn't push it out of her face

because, yeah, cow goo all up and down her arms. She tried to blow it out of the way but it just settled right back in place.

She pursed her lips and huffed out a breath. She needed three hands—two to put the chains on the baby calves hooves and one to hold the gate shut—but obviously, she only had two. And Hunter was just sitting there behind her, probably gloating and laughing at her.

Ugh!

Okay, well maybe she could get the cow to lay down. If she would lay down, that would solve all of Isobel's problems.

“Why don't you take a load off, honey?” Isobel crooned, pushing down on the cow's rump. “Let's have a lie down.”

The cow just started to the side again, knocking into the gate so that Isobel had to grab it before it opened again.

Fine. Isobel would just attach the chain one handed. How hard could it be?

Turned out it was hard. Very hard.

The latch for the little cuff was almost impossible to do one handed. Especially with the plastic glove on. With her hand all the way up inside the cow, she couldn't see what was going on either. She ended up shoving both hands inside the cow and quickly latching one of the chains around the first hoof, then stumbling along behind the cow before yanking out and grabbing the gate to push the cow back into position.

Then she repeated the process with the second cuff.

Finally, *finally*, she had both cuffs in place. She was soaked in sweat and cow muck. A cow's back end was not the most sanitary place, suffice to say. Not to mention, she couldn't tell how many times she'd been smacked in the face by the cow's swatting tail. A tail that was coated in manure.

But she had the chains on, goddammit, and this calf was coming out, come hell or high water. She attached the chains to the calf puller, a long flat metal shelf she braced behind the heifer's hips for traction. It worked similar to a car jack. She started cranking the lever that gave her torque to pull the calf out by the chains on the hooves.

Isobel only got a couple good pumps in before the cow started heading sideways, pushing against the gate again. But dammit, Isobel was done with it. So beyond done. She was getting the damn calf out.

So she didn't stop gripping the calf jack. She dug her feet in and pulled until she felt the veins in her neck straining.

And then was yanked off her feet by the cow starting forward again. She stumbled forward after the cow.

“Dammit, keep still,” Isobel shouted, digging her feet again when the cow came to a standstill. She strained, leaning backward, and thought she felt some give as the calf shifted. She reached forward to massage around the cow’s opening to help ease the calf’s way. The hooves and front nose were peeking out now. Okay, now to just crank it a few more times and—

But before she could get in position, the damn cow darted forward again. Isobel wasn’t about to let go of the calf puller. The heifer was booking it though and—

Shit!

Isobel was yanked off her feet. The heifer started dragging her along behind it. Ugh! Oh. Fuck. Gross. They were halfway across the paddock before Bessie stopped. Meanwhile Isobel had been on a chest-first slip and slide through the mud and shit filled barn yard. Isobel spit out a clod of what she could only pray was mud as she got to her feet and grabbed hold of the calf jack.

“Stop fucking with me, Bessie!” Isobel jammed her heels in the mud, solidified her grip on the handle and then started pulling the lever and maneuvering the jack and then pulling some more.

Out came the calf’s head. The jack’s lever was so taut she could barely get it to move. She managed one more crank and then she just pulled with everything she had. More than everything she had. She gave a primal scream as she yanked and pulled and strained, and then when she had no more to give, she yanked some more.

Oh God, oh God. She couldn’t do it. She didn’t have any more in her.

No, dammit. Just a little more. *A little* more!

She started sliding in the mud as the fucking cow started forward again. But Isobel kept her feet dug in and just kept pulling.

Then the chains she was holding suddenly gave all at once and before she knew what was happening, Isobel was on her ass in the mud and a baby calf was on the ground beside her, afterbirth landing all over both of them.

Isobel started laughing in euphoria. She wanted to hug the little calf. She’d done it. She’d actually done it!

The mother cow turned around and immediately started licking the little calf. It was lifting its little head and nosing back at its mom.

Isobel was still grinning as she shook her head and then undid the chains

around the calf's front hoofs. She crawled and checked underneath. It was a girl. She laughed then sat back on her haunches. But only for a second before scrambling to her feet and reaching back inside the cow to make sure all the afterbirth was cleaned out. It was.

She stepped back, grinning at the mama and baby cow. She'd done it. Her first ever solo calving.

It was only then that she heard the laughing.

She swung around and saw Hunter doubled over, laughing so hard he was actually slapping his knee.

Her mouth dropped open. And then closed, her teeth clenching. She leaned over and grabbed the calving chains and puller, then stalked back toward the gate.

Hunter was still laughing, actually wheezing from laughing so hard as she opened the gate and slammed it behind her.

"I saw a spigot and hose on the back side of the barn," he managed to get out, wiping his eyes with amusement. "Better hose down along with the tools. You're a bit too ripe to get back in my truck like that."

She glared at him. In all likelihood, she had a warrant out on her for attempted murder in one state.

Why not make it two?

She yanked the long muck-covered gloves off her arms and threw them at his feet before grabbing the equipment she'd used and going in search of the spigot he'd mentioned.

She finally found it after walking around almost the whole barn. Because of course Hunter couldn't have been more specific, the bastard. She turned the spigot on and sprayed water at the chains before turning it toward her own boots.

She'd been so caught up in the moment with the calving, she hadn't really been paying attention to just how gross she'd been getting. But now that she had a chance to look down at herself, she almost gagged. She was covered in —

She jerked her head away. *Nope*. Better not to think about what she was covered in. She just turned the hose on herself.

"God!" she yipped, dancing away from the freezing spray for a second before closing her eyes, bracing, and aiming it back at her chest.

She didn't care if she had to ride home drenched, she didn't think she could stand herself smelling like the insides of a cow.

She dared a glance down at herself after spraying for several minutes. Ugh, the water was barely making a dent in all the shit covering her. Because she had no doubt there was plenty of actual manure mixed in there. The water was just turning it all into a brown slurry coating her previously light blue work shirt.

She gagged and threw the hose down, then ripped the shirt off over her head. Nope. Nope. Nope. She was not wearing the poop shirt for another second.

She stripped out of her boots and pants just as quickly. Her boots were dirty even on the inside. When she'd tripped and been dragged by the cow that one time, the mud and manure had caked up inside the top and run down her calves.

Ugh, *God*, could this *get* more disgusting? She put her thumb in the tip of the hose to make it spray high power at her disgusting clothes. Her poor boots. The supple leather would never be the same after this.

"Here, you can change into—"

She shrieked and covered her chest as Hunter came around the side of the barn. He paused, just staring at her while she stood there in nothing but her bra and panties, both of which were soaked through.

"It's not a wet T-shirt contest," she yelled at him. "Stop ogling me!"

His eyes jerked up to her, a lazy smile crossing his face. "If you say so, sweetheart." He tossed her a dark bundle of clothes. "You can change into this. But those boots go in the back of the truck." He hiked a thumb over his shoulder. "Now hurry it up, I wanna make it home before the first inning's over."

It would be justifiable homicide in this case. Surely any jury would agree.

"Get out of here," she cried when he continued just standing there looking at her.

He finally turned and moseyed back the way he came, moving so slowly she could have screamed. The instant he disappeared around the corner she unrolled the blue fabric and saw it was a pair of coveralls. She eagerly stepped into them. They were huge on her but still better than putting on the poop clothes. She pulled up the front zipper. The crotch sagged and she had to roll up the legs so they didn't drag on the ground, but that was fine. She grabbed all the equipment and her boots. Her boots were clean enough to hold underneath her arm, but she held her dirty, wet clothes between her thumb and forefinger as she headed back toward the truck.

She stepped carefully across the field back toward the driveway. It was muddy from recent rains and she had the disconcerting feeling that anything that looked like mud could just as well be more manure. A comforting thought, when she was walking barefoot.

That was it, tomorrow she'd ask Melanie if she'd mind using her Amazon account to order some work boots.

Isobel finally made it back to the truck and threw everything in the back. They'd disinfect the chains and cow puller when they got back to the clinic. In the meantime, she needed to dip her entire body in Purell.

When she rounded the truck, she heard voices.

"A live calf? That's great to hear."

"Yep. A little heifer. She was getting milk and feeding well when I left her."

"You always do a great job, Hunter."

"Not a problem. You have a good night now."

Isobel's hands clenched into fists. Did he actually just take credit when she'd—

Hunter was still smiling when he came around the truck and saw her standing there. If he noticed how furious she was, he didn't let it show.

He just looked down at her bare, dirty feet. "Clean those up before you get in the truck." He opened the driver's side door. Oh," he paused right before climbing up. "And next time," his smirk was fully back in place, "you might want to tie the cow to the gate with the harness so she stays in one place. Though I gotta say, I did enjoy the show."

Chapter Eleven

ISOBEL

Three weeks later, Isobel was still smarting about the mistake she'd made with that first calving. How *dumb* could she get? She couldn't believe she'd made the most basic of mistakes. Not tying up the freaking cow? Facepalm. And then she'd looked like a complete fucking idiot chasing that heifer all around.

She scrubbed shampoo into her hair as she thought about it.

Things hadn't gotten much better in the ensuing weeks. She'd backed off asking to help in cases and Hunter seemed just fine with that. Probably because he assumed she was an imbecile who couldn't even think to tie up a calving heifer.

During the daily in-clinic hours she felt a little more helpful. At least there she could direct the clients and their pets into the exam rooms. It had gotten so busy last Tuesday—one of Dr. Roberts' off days—that there wasn't any other choice except for her to help out. Several emergencies had come in on top of their regular appointments.

Isobel gave shots and dealt with minor complaints while Hunter took care of a collie with a major laceration and a choking llama that a man brought in with a trailer out back.

Then, without asking his permission—because screw him—she just started seeing and diagnosing clients on a regular basis. She was certified,

damn it. So while he was dealing with patients in exam one, she took the next appointment in exam two. There'd only been one case so far that she'd wanted to check with Hunter on before giving treatment.

And he'd been civilized and professional about it. Maybe just because they were in front of the clients. She'd taken scrapings from a cat to check under the microscope, but wasn't positive about what kind of parasite the animal was carrying. Isobel had felt about ninety percent sure what she was dealing with, but she'd wanted to double check.

Hunter had coolly agreed with her assessment and then gone back to his own patient without another word. So he was *aware* she was seeing patients on her own and apparently didn't have anything to say about it. Yesterday, she'd seen him looking over the files of patients she'd seen that day. Since he hadn't said anything, did that mean she was doing a good job?

She closed her eyes and let the shower spray rinse the shampoo out of her hair. She'd been disgustingly filthy again when she'd gotten home today and the shower felt divine.

She sank back against the shower wall, shoulders slumping.

If it was just the clinic work, she'd be flying high. She'd get too busy and focused to obsess about food or anything else. Her ham sandwich was downed on the run between cases without any fanfare. Breakfast was much the same—she was always in a rush to get to the clinic. That in and of itself felt like a miracle.

But then, after the clinic closed each day around 1:00, the farm calls began. And as satisfying as diagnosing a case of worms was or stitching up a laceration after a cat fight, she couldn't help feeling the farm work was more important. Pets might be beloved members of a family household, but the farm animals were people's *livelihood*. Some of the farms they visited were small enough operations that every animal counted.

And she had no confidence in herself with the large animals after the calving fiasco. Hunter wasn't doing anything to help either. He seemed constantly annoyed by her presence. Which was a problem since, you know, they were spending a *lot* of time together.

Hours and hours in the car every afternoon. Sometimes the calls lasted into early evening. She knew Hunter went out in the morning before coming into the clinic. And he'd been called out for an emergency foaling in the middle of the night a couple days ago. But she didn't complain anymore about him not calling her in for these. The endless afternoon trips with him

were bad enough.

Earlier today she'd finally grown the lady-balls to insist he let her help again. After all, the only way he even acknowledged her presence was when she forced him to.

She didn't even know *why* he was being such an ass. She'd thought maybe he had a God complex and he treated all his interns this way. At least until last Monday when one of his former interns dropped by the clinic. He and Hunter had laughed together and sounded like best friends. In fact, with the receptionist, with clients, with everybody else in the universe that Hunter interacted with, he was the friendly, nice guy she'd first met at the bar.

Until it came to her.

She didn't get it. Yeah, so she'd slept with him and okay, she hadn't been one hundred percent transparent about where she was from when she first met him. But so what? Get over it already. They had a professional relationship and it was time he started treating her with the respect she deserved as his assistant.

She wanted to say all that to his face.

She'd been about to.

She really had.

But then they'd arrived at the Newton's farm and she saw the gelding that was in pain from colic.

Colic was scary and life-threatening. It was a build up of gas in a horse's stomach that they had no natural way to get out on their own. Isobel hated seeing the horse suffering. But it was something she felt confident she knew how to treat.

"I'm going to help you with this case," she announced to Hunter as he grabbed the tubing and plunger from the equipment box at the back of his truck.

She was ready for an argument but all he did was toss her a big plastic bucket and say, "Okay."

Infuriating man.

He hadn't thrown her into the deep end on her own again. They'd actually worked together. He'd gloved up and then felt inside the back end of the horse, then gestured for her to do the same. She winced when she felt how much gas had built up inside the poor gelding. It felt like a bunch of balloons pressing against her arm.

Hunter let her feed the tubing up the horse's nose and down into its

stomach. He filled the bucket up with water.

Then she started flushing a mixture of water and mineral oil into the horse's system. She had to hold the plunger and tubing over her head in order to get the leverage she needed since the horse was so tall. She worked until her arms were exhausted from holding them up. Then, without a word, Hunter took over.

They worked and worked while the owner held the horse's reins. The horse was sweaty and his eyes were wide with pain. He stomped where he stood, trying to get relief. No gas was passing, though. One time he looked like he was going to go down and Hunter took over the reins, pulling at the horse until he came back to his feet. They both knew that if a horse went down with colic, chances of recovery diminished dramatically.

After several hours, there was nothing more they could do. They had to leave the horses and farmer behind to wait it out. It was a horrible feeling, driving away, not knowing if the horse would live or die.

Hunter hadn't turned on the radio when they got back in the truck, so the ride had been silent for the hour-long drive home, both of them stinking of horse sweat and their clothes half-soaked with the water and mineral oil solution.

He'd pulled up in front of the clinic where her truck was parked.

She had opened her door and was about to step out when she paused. "Do you think he'll be okay?"

Hunter just kept staring ahead out the windshield. "The horse or his owner?"

"Either. Both."

Hunter shrugged briefly. "It'll be a long night. It's hard to say goodbye to the ones you love."

She frowned. He said that like he had some experience with it.

"You getting out?" He finally turned her way, looking annoyed. "I don't have all night."

Her eyes narrowed and she held up her hands. "I'm gone." She'd gotten out of the truck and slammed the door behind her.

She turned around so the shower spray blasted her face. God, she could use some ice cream. She'd grabbed a plate of steamed vegetables and some brown rice from the fare set up for dinner on her way upstairs and been proud of herself. *Look how good I'm being. These pounds are going to keep flying off.* Her fat pants were finally starting to fit more loosely with all the hard

work and running around she was doing now.

But... ice cream.

She wondered if there was any left or if the boys had demolished it all already like last time. Mel shopped on Thursdays but that was no guarantee there'd be any ice cream left now that it was Friday.

She turned off the water and flipped her hair over to twist a towel around it. She dressed in record time, pulling on leggings and an oversized tee and socks. Then she jogged downstairs and toward the kitchen.

Maybe none would be left. Then there wouldn't be any temptation. She'd already had her allotted sweets for the day. Two sticks of gum earlier. She didn't need ice cream. That would blow all her extra 'cheat' calories for the week... and she'd sorta already spent them on Tuesday with the two Snickers bars she'd shoved in her face after an especially stressful afternoon of farm calls with Hunter.

It was fine, though. She'd just have one scoop of ice cream. *If* there was any. No big deal. Just a little something sweet to kill her craving.

She crept down the stairs, on the lookout for any of the guys. They'd all but tackled her when she'd come in earlier, trying to get her to sit and eat dinner with them.

They seemed especially thick about grasping the concept that she didn't want to sit down with a bunch of fit, attractive men when she smelled like the back end of whatever cow, horse, or pig she'd been spending the afternoon with. Even when she wasn't arm deep in the animal herself, she inevitably ended up walking away from the farms and ranches they visited reeking of animal, mud, and manure.

She got to the bottom of the stairs and heard the guys screaming at the flatscreen. It sounded like a game was on. She bit her lip and stepped even more lightly. The bottom of the staircase was visible from the big open den, but if she was really careful—

She darted from the staircase to the foyer, breathing hard once she got to the wall that hid her from the den. Oh thank God, they hadn't seen her.

She opened the front door, cringing at the small creaking noise it made. But she slipped out and shut it behind her. Whew, she made it. She ran around the house to get to the back door. It was unlocked and she stepped into the kitchen.

Ah, and there it was, the industrial size freezer in all its glory. She threw open the door and then felt a rush of exhilaration when she saw inside.

Ice cream, ice cream, and more ice cream. Mel had really outdone herself this week. There were all different flavors along with three large buckets of vanilla. She grabbed one of the buckets and then looked closer at the individual pints. There was coffee. Cookies and cream. Cookie dough—her favorite. Mint chocolate chip. Gross. She put that one back. Double dutch chocolate. Um, yes please.

Before she could think any better of it, she'd grabbed a spoon and had the tops off of all the containers. Then she was shoving large spoonfuls of ice cream into her mouth.

She would just taste a little bit of each one. She hadn't had ice cream in so long. And didn't she deserve a treat? After what she'd been putting up with from Hunter? But even thinking his name made her cringe and take another spoonful of ice cream.

Wow, the cookie dough was really to die for.

She was smart. You didn't get into Cornell without being smart. She bet Hunter's first few weeks on the job he'd made mistakes too.

Yeah, but he probably knew enough to tie up whatever animal he was treating.

She jammed her spoon into the ice cream. The chocolate mixed with the cookie dough tasted even better.

And why was he so determined to ignore her and treat her like crap, anyway? Was it just that he thought she'd make a bad veterinarian and he didn't see the point in even investing the energy to teach her anything? Or was it because she'd been so bad in bed that even the memory of their one night together was enough to put him off his lunch at the sight of her.

Not that *she* was ever put off her lunch. Just look at her. God, she'd eaten almost all of the cookie dough pint. All by herself.

There was no fucking point trying to fight it. She was useless. She couldn't do anything right.

That horse she'd tried to help tonight would die.

She reached over and shoved another spoonful of chocolate into her mouth. Useless. Ugly. Fat. An embarrassment.

Failure.

Failure.

FAILURE.

She dropped the ice cream and ran to the side of the sink that had a garbage disposal. She leaned over, finger ready to go down her throat.

“Shit!”

She jerked her hand back at the last second as big, fat tears burst out of her eyes.

No. She was better than this, goddammit. She was—

“Fine, I’ll get it this time, you fuckers, but next time’s on you.”

Isobel stood up straight at the voice behind her and swiped at her eyes. Oh God, the last thing she needed right now was one of them to see her like this.

She stood up straight and was ready to make her excuses when a low voice said from behind her, “You doing all right, beautiful?”

She pasted a bright smile on her face and turned around, surprised when she saw it was Mack standing there. No wonder she hadn’t recognized the voice right off. The big, tattooed man rarely had much to say. He seemed to prefer glaring as his main form of communication. She never took offense since he glared at everyone equally and seemed perpetually pissed off with the world.

“I’m fine. I’m just putting these away and then I’ll—”

“You’ve been crying.”

She froze. Didn’t he know it was rude to blurt things like that out? But he just stood there, staring at her and frowning.

“Is there someone’s face I need to go bash in?”

That made her crack a a real smile. She shook her head. She looked past him at the ice cream and felt her face heat with shame. They were all probably melting like crazy. She needed to get them back in the freezer but she didn’t want to do it in front of Mack. Surely he had to wonder why she had so many containers open all at once. It was a freak thing to do. She was a freak.

But before she could decide what to do, he walked over to the containers. “You finished or do you want me to scoop you a bowl?”

Her cheeks were on fire. “I’m done,” she managed to squeak. Then she ran over and tried to push him out of the way with her shoulder. “But I’ll get these. You just go on with whatever it was you came in here for. I didn’t mean to—”

“A couple of us were thinking of going out to Bubba’s. You’re gonna come out with us.” He said it as a statement.

She looked up at him—he was over a foot taller than her. She paused where she was putting the lid on the cookies and cream.

“I am, am I?”

He nodded, his dark eyes alight. Wow, she didn’t know he had an expression other than the glare, but there it was. He seemed amused by her. All he said was, “You are.”

She felt like cocking a hand on her hip but instead she just went back to the ice cream. “And why would I do that?” She grabbed several containers and opened the freezer to put them back.

“Because you need to do something other than work. It’s important. Socializing and shit.”

She laughed again, closing the freezer door and looking at him. Did he realize the irony of him telling her *she* should be socializing? “Socializing and shit?”

He gave a decisive nod. “It’ll be good for you.” He took the last big bucket of ice cream and slid past her, his hand brushing hers as he opened the freezer.

She took a step back. “Is this— Are you trying to flirt with me?”

He laughed, a deep, glorious bass, and she didn’t know whether to be insulted or not. When he closed the freezer, he leaned in, one hand on the cabinet over her head. “Oh honey, if I ever decide to flirt with you, you’ll know it.”

She sucked in a breath. Damn, the man was pure sin and sex when he wanted to be.

He pulled back and nodded. “Now go on upstairs and put on something tight and sexy. We’re leaving in fifteen. You’re gonna drink some tequila, let loose, and have some fuckin’ fun tonight.”

“Doctor’s orders?” She arched an eyebrow.

He grinned that sexy grin of his again. “You bet your ass.”

She just shook her head at him and left the kitchen. The other guys called out to her as she walked through the den and she smiled and waved back.

She considered just going upstairs and tucking herself in bed with her e-reader. But then she thought about how Mack had distracted her from how miserable she’d been feeling moments before he’d come in the kitchen. If she stayed home tonight, she’d just retreat back in her head and get all stupid and self-involved again.

So, with that in mind, she walked to her closet and shoved aside all the practical, farm-worthy clothes and pulled one of the few dresses she’d brought off its hanger. She breathed out and bit her bottom lip as she

undressed and then pulled the slinky black dress over her head.

When she'd ordered her work boots off Mel's Amazon account, she'd also used the opportunity to order all the basics she might need. On impulse, she'd used the last of her money to throw a cute little pair of strappy black pumps into her cart.

She slipped them on and they fit perfectly. She went to the bathroom and tried not to look at herself too closely. She leaned in just long enough to apply some mascara and lipstick. She hesitated only a second before choosing her siren red lipstick. Because why the hell not? She was going to go have fun, dammit.

She rubbed her lips together and then popped them. She stood up, allowing herself one look at the full effect. Her hair was mostly dry and not too much of a disaster. She pulled it up and looked at her face left and right, puckering her mouth.

And for once... the woman reflected back at her actually looked sort of... pretty.

She spun away from the mirror, shaking her head at the strange thought. Grabbing her purse, she opened her door.

Well, here went nothing.

Chapter Twelve

HUNTER

Hunter scrubbed a towel through his damp hair as the microwave beeped. He tossed his towel on one of the chairs at his dining room table as he went to retrieve his food. A real dinner of champions. Microwaved beef lo mein. Oh yeah, he was living the life.

“Ow, shit.” He dropped the steaming hot tray to the counter, then shook out his stinging hand. He grabbed a kitchen towel and used that to hold it still while he peeled back the lid. More steam erupted and he grabbed a fork.

It was pretty tasteless shit but nobody bought Mr. Foo’s Instant Beef Lo Mein if they were looking for an amazing culinary experience. He stood at the counter and wolfed down the food as fast as he could without burning his mouth.

He was done with it all too fast. He looked at the clock. 9:00. He ran a hand through his damp hair and looked around his empty cabin.

Late evening was always the worst time of day.

He tossed his empty food container in the trash, grabbed a cold beer, then headed for the living room. Flipping through the channels was less than inspiring. Red-faced people bitching about politics. Stupid reality TV shit. Who’d be next to be voted off the yacht? Here’s an idea—anybody pretentious enough to be on a show called Hot for the Yacht.

Next. He finally came across a baseball game.

He settled in to watch. He'd already missed half of it and while usually a game was enough to distract him from shit well enough, today he couldn't seem to get his mind off of a certain dark-haired beauty.

Isobel had given it her all today with the colicky horse. He could see how upset she'd been when they'd left without being able to give a positive prognosis. She might be a city girl but she did have a way with animals. He'd peeked in on her at the clinic a few times—just to make sure she wasn't screwing up his practice. But she'd been doing great each time. Treating both the animals and their human owners with compassion, intelligence, and understanding.

He tipped his head back on the couch and took a long swallow of beer.

Truth was, what had seemed so simple—trying to alienate her so she'd leave quicker—was turning out to be much more difficult than he'd bargained for. Not to mention he hadn't counted on feeling like such an asshole about the whole thing.

Which was bullshit. He was the one in the right.

She'd lied to him and then foisted herself on him as his intern when he clearly hadn't wanted it.

But... he couldn't say she hadn't proven herself. Other than that hilarious misstep with not tying up the heifer while pulling the calf, her work had been impeccable. And it wasn't like other interns committed anything more to him than a single summer.

So why was he holding her to some higher standard?

Because you slept with her.

He winced, then stood up and started pacing behind the couch, his hand going to the back of his neck.

Shit. Was he really *that* asshole?

Goddammit, he wished he had someone he could talk to about all this. He'd always been a fuck-up when it came to women. His phone was sitting on the shelf beside the entryway and he stalked over to it. Then, before he could think better of it, he punched in the number he hadn't dialed in months.

It rang.

And rang.

And rang.

Then a long beep sounded.

Hunter sank against the bookshelf, his eyes closing and his head tilting back.

“This is Janine. I’m not around right now. Leave a message and I’ll try to get back to you.” Slight pause. “I’m shit at checking my messages though, so if you don’t hear from me within a couple days, just call back again. Catch you on the flip side.”

Hunter pulled the phone away from his ear and hit end call.

Then he looked around his empty house. Jesus, he couldn’t stand another Friday night alone here, drinking beer and watching a fucking game. He turned and grabbed his keys and boots, stuffing his feet into them as he was already half out the door.

* * *

The parking lot at Bubba’s was packed like always on Friday night. Bubba’s was the only watering hole for twenty miles and Bubba was happy to make a buck off people’s desperation for entertainment and alcohol, not always in that order.

Hunter pulled open the door and would swear the raucous noise that spilled out was a few decibels louder than normal.

The bar had a lot of floor space and people had pushed back tables to clear out an area for a dance floor. They only did that on Fridays and Saturdays. It was being put to good use and when Hunter looked closer, he saw why. Looked like the boys from Mel and Xavier’s had come out for the night. A couple of those boys were genuine hell raisers and the town couldn’t have loved them more for it.

Well, apart from the sheriff, Marie—but even she couldn’t do much more than watch on since they’d never done anything *outright* illegal. Though the bar top striptease down to his boxers Liam had performed a couple months ago might have straddled the line of public indecency. It was certainly an image Hunter didn’t think he’d scrape from his memory any time soon.

Tonight Hunter actually welcomed their shenanigans. Distraction was the name of the game, after all.

Until he saw the object he was trying to distract himself from right in the middle of the crowd, dancing with the manwhore in chief himself—Liam O’Neill. And not just dancing. For Christ’s sake. Talk about public indecency.

Isobel’s back was to Liam’s front and one of his hands was tucked right

below her breast. With the other, he lifted hers high overhead, then he skimmed down her body as they shimmied down, dropping low to the floor. Her black little nothing scrap of a dress rode even higher up her legs when she crouched down low like that. Liam grasped her waist in both hands and they shimmied back up to standing.

The song ended and Isobel jumped up and down, laughing and clapping. She threw her arms sloppily around Liam's neck and Hunter wanted to deck the bastard. Just how much had she had to drink?

None of your damn business. She's nothing more than an employee.

So why couldn't he look away from her? She never smiled like that around him. And he hadn't seen her with her hair down since the first night he'd met her, when she'd pulled it out of her ponytail for the shower. Her eyes were bright too, probably because of the alcohol.

That bastard Liam better not be trying to take advantage of her. They'd had a hard case with the colicky horse and maybe she was upset—

Nope. He turned away from the dance floor. None of his goddamned business. He pushed past people standing around the dance floor to get to the bar.

There was one open stool and he made a beeline for it.

He'd just grab a quick drink, then head back home. It was stupid to come out tonight anyway. What, was he some whiny little bitch who couldn't stand a little silence? So his house was quiet. Boo hoo. So he'd made his wife so miserable she'd left him in the middle of the night. It happened. Who didn't have problems?

Bubba came over to where Hunter was sitting. "What'll you have tonight?"

"Whiskey."

Bubba turned to get his drink.

In spite of himself, Hunter kept looking over to the dance floor. Now she was dancing with Mack. Christ, if there was anyone he'd trust a woman with less than Liam, it was Mack. "How long has that been going on?"

"About an hour." The answer wasn't from Bubba. Hunter swiveled on his stool and saw that Cal was sitting beside him. It would be easy to mistake Cal for a man—she always walked around in oversized men's overalls with big flannel shirts underneath. Her hair was cropped short too, or at least, it usually was. Hunter was startled to realize it was a little longer—there was a small ponytail peeking out the back of the baseball cap she always wore.

“Hey Cal,” Hunter said. He’d known her ever since grade school. She was quiet, but a good sort.

Bubba set Hunter’s drink and must have heard Hunter’s initial question, because he looked out over the dance floor and smiled. “They’ve been livening up the joint for about an hour now.”

“And how many drinks have they poured down her?” Hunter growled

“Hey there.” Bubba braced his hands on the bar and narrowed his eyes at Hunter. “Don’t be disrespecting me in my own bar. You know I don’t put up with shit. That girl’s only been drinking what she’s ordered herself. And having a fine time of it.” Bubba’s eyes tracked back to the dance floor, his ruddy cheeks bright as he smiled. “Sure don’t make ‘em like that round here. ‘Cept for my Dottie, of course, God rest her soul.” Then his eyes flicked over to Cal. “No offense, Cal.”

Cal just waved her beer. “None taken.”

Hunter’s mood soured as he watched Isobel. He swallowed a healthy swig of his whiskey. It was biting, but he got it down without coughing. Soon his throat and belly were warmed by the liquid. His muscles relaxed. He angled his back toward the dance floor.

Maybe coming here wasn’t such a bad idea after all. He’d just ignore Isobel and have a nice little drink, shoot the shit with Bubba and—

Bubba’s eyes were on the dance floor behind him and he let out a low whistle. “Damn that woman’s a firecracker. If I was a young buck, you can bet I’d be—”

“For the love of God don’t finish that sentence,” Cal implored.

The temptation was too great and Hunter looked over his shoulder.

Now Isobel was sandwiched *between* Mack and Liam and their hands—Christ, they were all over her. Mack was chest to chest with her, his knees slung between hers and again, her back was to Liam. They were all dancing so close together, Hunter had no idea how they were managing to stay upright. She was staring into Mack’s eyes, a wide smile on her face as she talked animatedly.

Mack was staring back like he wanted to devour her. Mack’s eyes flicked behind her to Liam and it was as if they were having the same thought.

Hunter’s hands clenched into fists and he was half off his barstool when someone came to stand in front of him. Hunter was about to order them out of the way when he realized it was Sandra, his receptionist.

“Well, it’s just selfish of her to take two of them,” Sandra said, looking

toward the dance floor.

“It’s obscene,” Hunter shot back without really thinking it through.

Sandra’s eyes brightened and Hunter immediately wished he could take it back. The gossip mill could be vicious in Hawthorne, like any small town. Another reason for Isobel not to be making such a spectacle of herself.

“So, I was thinking,” Sandra leaned over Hunter to get her drink at the bar. Hunter frowned and tried to angle around her so he could keep an eye on Isobel. Who knew what those two bastards had up their sleeves. He did *not* like the way they were looking at her.

“We should go out sometime.”

Isobel had flipped around so that now her chest was to Liam’s. His hands were so low on Isobel’s back he was practically grabbing her a—

“Hunter?”

“Huh?” he looked up at Sandra. “Sorry, did you say something?”

She giggled a little and pushed some of her frizzy, over-processed red hair behind her ear. “I said we should go out sometime. Remember how much fun we used to have in high school?”

“Oh.” Shit. Hunter straightened on his barstool. He hated situations like this.

He and Sandra had dated briefly their junior year. Well, if you counted a drunken hook up after Matt Davies’ field party the year they won Homecoming *dating*. He had taken her out to eat a few times afterwards because he’d felt like a major tool once he’d sobered up the next morning. Maybe there was more to her than the vapid cheerleader she portrayed on the surface? You couldn’t judge a book by its cover, right? *He’d* certainly hoped to be more than just a dumb jock all his life.

Three dates and too many hours to count later with an earful of gossip about a ton of shit he didn’t care about, he decided that in some cases, the cover was a perfectly accurate representation of what was inside.

And after ten years, other than a bad dye job and skin that advertised she was averse to sunscreen, Hunter didn’t think much about Sandra had changed.

“Look, Sandra,” Hunter began, backing away from her on his barstool, “I’m really not looking to date anyone right n—”

“Everything with Janine was over a year ago,” Sandra said, leaning over so he could get a peek down her plunging neckline, no doubt. “You’ve got to get back up on the horse again.” God, he could barely breathe with all that

perfume she was wearing. “And cowboy, I’m happy to help break you back in.”

Beside them, Cal choked on her beer as she audibly bit back a laugh. Sandra glared at her.

You’re too late anyway, he wanted to tell Sandra. Another woman already had that privilege. His eyes skirted past Sandra’s shoulder toward where he’d last seen Isobel dancing, sandwiched between Liam and Mack.

Only to find Isobel staring directly at him. The two guys were still on either side of her but she’d stopped dancing. The smile was totally gone from her face. She looked stricken, in fact. Her eyes went from Hunter, then to something right beside him.

Hunter turned his head to see what she was looking at.

And ran right smack into Sandra’s lips. She’d stepped in between his legs and was right there, just fuckin’ landing one on him. He got the brief ashy taste of cigarettes before he yanked back, launching backwards off the barstool.

“Christ, Sandra.” He swiped at his mouth. His hand came away with a smear of her red-orange lipstick.

But she was still coming at him, her eyes lowered in what he assumed was her come-hither look. With all that black make-up around her eyes and her orange middriff baring halter top, she just looked like a dead-eyed hooker.

“Oh come on, Hunter. You don’t have to do that coy cat and mouse bullshit with me.” She put a lacquered orange-nailed finger on the center of his chest. She grinned at him. She had lipstick on her teeth. “Take me home and I’ll make sure you get a very happy ending.”

And a venereal disease, he thought.

Sandra tried to dip forward again but he held out a hand and gave a firm shake of his head. “I’m sorry, Sandra. This is never gonna happen between you and me.”

Suddenly her bottom lip began to tremble. Aw, shit. Was she going to cry? He never knew what to do when women cried.

“But I thought...” she hiccupped. “When you hired me on at the clinic—”

Over her shoulder, Hunter saw Isobel fleeing down the back hallway in the direction of the restrooms. She didn’t stop at the ladies, though. No, she blew past the restrooms and shoved open the back door, then pushed into the night.

Hawthorne was a pretty quiet town but they weren't that far off the interstate. What was she thinking, running out there all alone when she was drunk off her ass?

“—that we had a real connection. You gave me that *look* when we were scheduling the surgery for Mr. Bartlett's poodle. I knew you wanted m—”

“Sorry, if you'll excuse me,” Hunter cut Sandra off midsentence and went to chase after Isobel. What the hell was wrong with her supposed escorts that they abandoned her right when she needed them most? He was going to have words with Xavier. If the man couldn't corral his men to act responsibly when they were out in town, something had to be done.

Hunter shoved people aside on the dance floor when they didn't get out of his way fast enough.

“Whoa, Hunter, why in such a hurry?” more than one person asked him. He ignored them all and just kept moving, finally jogging when he got to the hall corridor.

When he exploded out the back door, he looked left or right. Dammit, which way did she go?

But finally he heard the faint sounds of a woman crying.

Christ, that sound was enough to rip any man apart, but coming from her? What had happened? If one of those assholes had hurt her... His hands clenched into fists.

“Isobel?” he hurried toward the sound and found her crouched down against the wall behind the bar's dumpster, knees to her chest.

“Go away!” she turned her back to him when she saw him.

“What's wrong? Did one of those bastards touch you? I swear, if either of them laid a hand on you, I'll—”

“What?” She sounded both confused and incredulous. She stood up, using the wall for leverage. “God, no. Mack and Liam are great.”

Hunter took a step back. “Then why...” his voice trailed off as she swiped at her cheeks.

“It was nothing. God, I'm just an idiot.” She'd kept her face averted the whole time but suddenly her eyes flashed up to him. “What do you care anyway? Won't your date be mad you left her to chase after another woman? That's kind of an a-hole move.”

“Date?” Hunter's mind was blank before it finally registered. “What, you mean Sandra?” He scoffed. “She's not my date. She just came up to me and —”

“Hey, no need to explain.” Isobel held up her hands. “I’m not trying to get in the way of your next hookup. Your business is your business.”

She took a few steps toward the club door like she was going to head back in.

“Wait,” Hunter put out a hand. “Stop.”

If she’d thought he was with Sandra and nothing had happened with Liam or Mack... was that why she’d been out here crying? He blinked. She’d been crying over *him*?

“It’s not like that with Sandra and me.” It sounded stupid, he knew as soon as he said it, but it seemed important for her to understand.

She shrugged. “Whatever. Like I said. None of my business.”

“What if it was?” He took a step closer. Shit. What was he doing? He didn’t know but his hand was drawn like a magnet to push a stray lock of hair behind her ear. Her breath hitched at the contact.

Her eyes searched his, back and forth. He could see confusion there. And something else. Longing?

Christ, she was beautiful. And more than that. She was kind. Patient. Compassionate. She was beautiful in all the ways that counted.

So it seemed like the most natural thing in the world when he cupped her jaw and drew her face down to his.

When his lips pressed against hers, his blood lit on fire.

She gasped and jerked away. “You’ve been nothing but an asshole to me ever since that first night.” She glared at him.

Fuck. Why had he kissed her? Everything that made him pull away from her in the first place was still true. She was a rich, city girl. She’d be leaving at the end of the summer. She was far too much like Janine for comfort. Not to mention that she was right—he’d been treating her like a class A jerk for weeks now.

He was about to apologize and walk away when she suddenly reached up, dug her hands in his hair, and yanked him back down. Then she started kissing him like he was a feast and she’d been starving for months.

All other thoughts took a flying leap.

There was only Isobel.

Real and warm and alive in his arms. So alive. She tasted like strawberry and lime and tequila. And when she yanked his shirt out of his jeans and her hands caressed up his bare stomach underneath, he’d swear she was so hot she was searing his skin.

“Fuck, Isobel,” he growled, spinning them and pinning her against the brick wall of the bar. All the blood in his body was quickly headed south at her touch and continued frantic kisses.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Goddamn. He hadn't meant it as an invitation but she was sure taking it that way. Her hands scrambled at his waist, undoing his buckle. Aw, fuck. His cock strained against his jeans toward her seeking hands. But shit. She was drunk. She didn't—

He pulled back from her. It took all his willpower. “I can't.”

He shook his head. Her eyes flashed hurt. Christ. He hurried to explain, cupping her face. Her skin was so soft and he couldn't help dipping back down to kiss her moist, berry pink lips. “You've been drinking. I'm not gonna be one of those guys who takes advantage of a woman.”

He went in for another kiss when she laughed. He pulled back, startled.

“Hunter, I had one margarita. I'm not drunk.”

He paused. “But you were so...” He gestured back at the bar. “Smiley.”

Her gaze went in the direction he indicated, a wistful expression on her face. “I guess that's just me,” she shrugged, “when I'm happy.”

She looked back at Hunter and he felt kicked in the guts. He'd never gotten to see her happy. Because he only made her miserable. Fuck.

But he didn't want to think about any of that. He didn't want to think. Period. Full stop.

He pressed her back against the wall. Her legs spread, one thigh hitching up around his waist. It was indecent. If anyone came out here and saw them —

But all Hunter could think about was her hot, wet core, the tiny cotton fabric of her underwear and the denim of his jeans the only barrier to him being buried deep inside her again.

How many nights had he lay in bed tormented by the memory of that sweet little cunt of hers. And here she was, hot and wanting, wrapped around him.

Her hands were back at his buckle again and his cock surged in his pants. Fuck, he was so hard his cock could punch a hole through a brick wall.

The second her tiny hands touched his cock, he was almost done for. He reached down and palmed her juicy ass, giving it a rough squeeze, before jerking her panties down.

His middle finger dipped inside her. “Fuck,” he hissed. Her sweet little

pussy was fucking drenched. His thumb immediately sought out her clit. It was already swollen and he strummed his thumb back and forth before pressing hard on it.

Her hand gripping his cock squeezed and little high-pitched gasps escaped her throat.

“Is this for me?” he asked, his jaw going tight. “Or was it because of them?” He shoved another finger inside, not bothering to be gentle about it.

Her head had been bowed but she jerked her face up at his question, eyes flashing.

“Fuck you,” she whispered. At the same time, her hand on his cock guided him toward the slick lips of her pussy.

Jesus Christ. With one thrust he could be inside her.

“Fuck *me* is what I think you meant to say.” He lined his hips up and reached down, pulling his cock out of her hand and rubbing it up and down her vulva and her clit.

Her mouth dropped open and her head sank back against the brick wall. “Fine. You win. Fuck *me*. Just get the fuck inside me already.”

With the hand not on his cock, he grabbed her chin and pulled her face down so that she was forced to look at him. Her eyes flashed fury and fire and crazy lust.

He dipped just the head of his cock inside her. “You want this? You want me to bury my giant cock deep inside you? You want me to fuck you so hard you come till you can’t see straight?”

With every word, her chest pumped harder, her breaths growing more and more shallow. “Yes. Fuck. Yes.”

He was about to give her exactly what she was begging for before he remembered. *Shit*.

“What?” She’d obviously seen the change in his expression.

He met her gaze. “I don’t have any condoms on me. I didn’t plan on—” he broke off. “I’m clean, but I get it if you don’t want to—”

“Damn it.” She squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them, her blue eyes were bright with want and her pelvis arched toward him like it was an involuntary movement. “I’m clean as far as I know. But my ex was screwing around so I can’t be a hundred percent—”

Fuck it. “Good enough for me.”

He jerked his hips forward, jamming his cock to the hilt inside her with one quick thrust.

Oh Jesus, *yes*. Fuck. So tight. Tighter than he remembered. And she was fucking clenching around him. So good. So fuckin' good.

Her arms wound around him and she clutched his shoulders, digging her fingernails in. Meanwhile she made these little high-pitched whimpers like his cock inside her was the best thing she'd ever felt in the whole damn world.

He grabbed her underneath her thighs, pulled his hips back and then thrust in again, driving her up and against the brick wall.

Her other leg came up and locked behind his back. She squeezed around his dick and he about passed out. He jerked his hips back and then he shoved back in.

Then she let out the hottest fucking moan, arching her breasts toward him. But apparently that wasn't enough because she pulled one arm from around his neck and started tugging at her own nipple.

Fucking hell. His cock lurched inside her. As if this weren't already the hottest fuck of his whole life. She twisted and teased her nipple until the outline was clear through the thin material of her dress. First one and then the other.

He wanted to bite them. Fuck that. He *needed* his goddamned mouth on them. He jerked the neckline down so he could get at her lace covered breast. Fuck. Did she wear that sexy as shit red lace bra just to torment him?

But no. She hadn't known she'd see him tonight. So who had she worn the goddamned bra for? One of those other dumb bastards inside? He'd kill them.

He jerked the lace down and bit the soft flesh of her large breast.

She yelped and yanked at his hair. But she wasn't pulling him away—the opposite in fact. No, she was pulling him harder in to her chest. Smothering him against her gorgeous tits. Fucking hell.

He sucked her nipple into his mouth at the same time he rocked his hips back and then shoved back in deep.

Her surprised gasp was fucking indecent. The parking lot was just around the corner of the building. If anyone heard her, they'd know exactly what was going on here.

The thought made Hunter even harder. Which surprised him. He didn't know he had any exhibitionist tendencies. Maybe he didn't. Maybe it was just Isobel. Hearing those sexy as fuck noises coming out of her throat and knowing he was eliciting them? Fucking hot as sin.

Still, it was a small town. Reputation was important here. He didn't want to be the bastard who ruined anyone, so he held one of his hands over her mouth.

Her eyes widened and she clenched around his cock. Shit. Was she not okay with that? He wasn't trying to—

He started to remove his hand but she shook her head, grabbing his wrist to keep it in place.

Did she find the idea of being gagged sexy? That was so fucking *hot*. His hand flexed on her mouth. His balls slapped loudly against her, he was fucking her so hard and fast. And then all thought flew out the window apart from the basics.

Jesus *fuck*.

Felt so good.

His cock so deep inside her.

Fucking her so deep.

So.

Fucking.

Deep.

No, not deep enough. He bottomed out, his balls against her ass but he just kept shoving further and further inside her. She rolled her hips all around restlessly, wiggling like she needed to feel every inch of his cock.

And the way she fucking clenched on him. Clenched. Released. Then clenched. Holy fucking—

Suddenly she pulled away from the hand he had over her mouth. He started to withdraw but she shook her head and sucked his forefinger into her mouth.

She sucked it so hard. She bobbed up and down on his finger just like she would his cock.

Fuck.

Just when he thought she couldn't get fucking hotter, she went and did something like that.

Turned out he didn't know the half of it.

Because a second later, she let go of his finger with a *pop* of her lips. Then she leaned over and whispered, a lusty desperation in her voice, "Stick your finger in my ass. Please Hunter. Stick it in my ass."

Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck.

Going to blow. Fuck. Her ass. His finger in her ass. His cock in her ass.

He'd fuck her there next. Grab her ass cheeks and bend her over, then plow her like—

No. Christ. Hold it back. Hold it back.

There were an average of three hundred and nineteen bones in a dog's body. The epiphyseal plates were the soft areas of a puppy's bones that—

Fuck, it was no use.

His cock jerked and got harder than it ever had in his fucking life. Then he mashed Isobel against the wall and kissed her until she was gasping for breath. But all he could think about was her puckered, forbidden little asshole.

With one arm underneath her thigh, he supported her weight against the wall. And then with his other, he reached underneath. He teased along the bottom of her slit where his cock was buried.

She squeezed around him. Anticipating.

Fuck she wanted it bad.

"Tell me again," he growled. "Tell me what you want."

She made a restless whining noise. "Stick your finger in my ass. I want you everywhere."

He teased his forefinger around her back hole. His spine tingled and he had to stop fucking her so he didn't blow early. He wanted to fucking savor this.

She trembled as he teased the tip of his finger around her asshole.

"This?" he hissed in her ear. "This is what you want?"

"Yes." She shuddered and started wriggling on his cock again.

He continued teasing around the rim. Fuck. If he'd thought she was hot before... He leaned his chest back, his pelvis still pinning her to the wall. But he wanted to see her face while his finger teased her ass.

"Beg me."

Her eyes flashed with momentary rebellion. But then she bit her lip and looked skyward. She settled her gaze back on his. She didn't look away but kept her eyes leveled on him. She grabbed both of her breasts, plucking at her nipples. She arched and looked at him through a half-lidded gaze. "I want to come with your finger fucking my asshole and your cock in my cunt. I need it now. Give it to me, Hunter. Fucking please."

Well fuck. Again he was about to bust a nut. He gritted his teeth to hold it back as he slowly inched his forefinger up her ass. She squeezed around him like a fucking vise, both his finger and his cock. He should really have some

lube for this but Isobel's little whimpering noises told him she was just fine with everything he was doing.

He dragged his finger back out and pushed it in, back and forth a few times. It was only when he pressed a second finger in with the first that Isobel's eyes popped open and he really started fucking her again.

"Look at me, Isobel," he demanded. "Your climax belongs to me."

She obeyed and he saw the myriad of emotions playing out across her face. Just like the first time they'd made lo—he shook his head, *had sex*—he felt like he was seeing straight into her, like in these moments she was incapable of hiding a single thing she was feeling from him.

He saw her discomfort when he added a third finger and he saw the moment she decided to accept and roll with it. He saw how she abandoned herself to pleasure and how her little gasps grew shorter and shorter as she approached climax.

And he was right there with her when her eyes widened in surprise as it hit. Her hands fisted in his shirt and she clenched everything. Her ass. Her cunt. Her fingers.

She was fucking milking him.

He reared back and then slammed inside her. Once. Twice. He bared his teeth. Every muscle tensed as his cum shot out of his cock, landing deep inside her.

Fucking marking her.

As his.

Fucking *his*.

His.

It was all he could think, over and over as they both gasped for breath in the aftermath.

"Izzy? You out here?"

Shit. Now one of those fuckers decided to check up on her? Isobel's eyes went wide and she started pushing at Hunter's shoulders. He still had her impaled against the wall.

He pulled out and set her as gently as he could back on her feet. When he tried to help smooth her dress down, she slapped his hands away.

He recoiled. What the hell?

"Izzy?" the male voice called again. "It's Reece."

"I'm fine, Reece." Isobel responded, kicking her underwear under the dumpster and running her fingers through her mussed hair. "Just give me a

second.”

Apparently Reece had no seconds to give because he rounded the dumpster right in time to see Hunter zipping up his fly and reaching for his buckle.

Reece’s eyes went wide with surprise and he jerked his head toward Isobel. Her face went immediately red. “We’ve been looking for you everywhere. You had us worried.”

She bit her lip. “I’m fine. I just needed some air.”

“Did this asshole hurt you?” His eyes shot back to Hunter.

“Hey,” Hunter took a step forward but Isobel cut him off.

“I said I’m fine.” She strode toward Reece without a backward glance at Hunter. “Are you guys ready to go?”

What the actual fuck? Hunter’s jaw tensed.

“Isobel.” It was a command to stop as much as a demand for her attention. Her back stiffened but she didn’t turn around.

“Let’s go, Reece.”

“Isobel.” Hunter took another step toward her but Reece stepped in his way.

“You’re gonna want to back up, pal.”

Hunter clenched his jaw and he all but growled at the other man. He could do nothing but stand and watch as behind Reece, Isobel hurried to the back door of the bar, opened it, and disappeared inside.

“Fuck,” Hunter shouted, turning and slamming an open palm on the brick wall.

“You better not have hurt her. If you hurt so much as a hair on her head, I swear we’ll make you regret the day you were born.”

Hunter swung back around toward the other man. He’d had dinner with Xavier’s men a few times out at the ranch. All he remembered about Reece was that he’d seemed like a good-natured guy. He gave zero fucks about the fact now. He wasn’t going to put up with anyone insinuating that he was the kind of guy to hurt women.

The fact that Isobel had left him just as coldly as Janine did after sex might have him feeling dangerous but it was nothing he’d ever take out on a woman.

Reece, however. He was fair fucking game.

“You’re going to want to walk away now.” Hunter’s voice was low. “Without another word.”

Reece kept glaring back. “Isobel’s the sister Jeremiah and I never had. And nothing in the world’s more important to us than family. You keep that in mind.”

With that he turned and headed back inside the bar.

As soon as the door slammed behind him, Hunter yanked his phone out of his pocket. A few taps later, he had the phone against his ear.

He felt punched in the guts all over again when he heard her voice. “This is Janine. I’m not around right now...”

Chapter Thirteen

ISOBEL

I sobel called in sick to work the next day.

Cowardly? Yes. But could she face Hunter after what happened last night? That would be a big fat *no*.

Besides, it was a Saturday and ‘work’ only meant being on call for emergencies so it wasn’t like there were normal clinic hours she was shirking. She just couldn’t handle being closed up in that truck cab with Hunter for hours on end today. Tomorrow was her day off and by Monday she’d have her shit together enough to deal with him again.

God, *why* had she given in to Hunter last night when he’d kissed her? She still didn’t understand what the hell she’d been doing.

She hated him.

He was a jerk.

But the sex was so hot.

She’d heard about hate sex but had certainly never experienced it before. And there was no changing it now. So, yes, they’d had amazing, earth-shattering sex. The kind of sex that changed your entire view on life. Just like that first night.

But so what? And so what if she’d been completely shameless and slutty beyond all imagination while they were at it. Her face fired red when she thought about some of the things she’d asked him to do.

She'd never in her life asked a partner to do those things to her before. Sure, she'd fantasized about them plenty when she got herself off but actually voicing them out loud...

And yet somehow with Hunter, the last person on earth she *should* trust with her deepest, darkest desires, everything had just popped right out of her mouth.

She shoved her face in her pillow and squeezed her legs together.

She'd read that some people were genetically predisposed to addictive behaviors. Maybe she was just exchanging one obsession for another. Instead of a food addict, she'd become a nymphomaniac. Which meant Catrina was right and her DNA was predetermined to screw her over whether it came to food *or* sex...

God, she certainly wasn't thinking about food. No, ever since she'd gotten home last night all she could do was replay every moment of the sweaty, dirty fuck up against the back of the bar. She'd masturbated herself to sleep last night.

Then this morning, she woke up just as horny. Still, touching herself was nothing to the fullness of Hunter's thick cock filling her up. She squeezed her legs together.

She'd go nuts if she laid here in bed obsessing about this all day. She hauled herself to a sitting position and then swung her legs over the side of the bed.

She got dressed and combed her hair back into a ponytail. She'd showered when she got home to get rid of Hunter's scent last night.

Like always, she lingered in front of the mirror no longer than was absolutely necessary after brushing her teeth and making sure her ponytail was straight. She turned and went downstairs.

"Sleeping Beauty awakes," Reece said from the den when she made it to the bottom of the stairs.

"Wrong fairytale, dumbass," Liam said. "She's obviously Snow White. Look at her coloring. Pale, creamy skin. Rose-bud lips. Long black hair."

"Does that make us the seven dwarves?" Reece asked.

"So good to know they teach math skills to the kids these days," Mack said. "By my last count, there's only five of us."

Jeremiah gave him a sarcastic smile. "But you're such a clear ringer for Happy."

Mack flipped him off, then stuffed his scrambled eggs into his mouth.

“Let’s go, little girls. You can gossip and braid each other’s hair another time. Those stalls aren’t going to muck themselves.”

The twins and Liam gave him the one-fingered salute in return. Nicholas just kept eating his breakfast, eyes quietly observing everything like always. Isobel gave him a pat on the back. “Morning Nick.”

“Hey Iz. You off on calls with your Dr. Hunter this morning?”

She looked down at him sharply. “He’s not *my* Dr. Hunter.”

Nicholas didn’t say anything. His eyebrows just went up slightly before he went back to eating.

Crap. She was being a freak. She tried to modulate her voice and sound normal when she said, “Nope, I’m hanging around here. Thought I might go spend some time with Bright Beauty and take one of the others out for a ride.”

She and Beauty had gotten close over the past couple weeks. When Isobel wanted to get away from the noise of the house and the guys’ boisterous heckling of each other, she’d steal away to the barn and spend an hour or two grooming and chatting with Beauty. She was a gentle-natured horse and the strict regimen of rest and massage seemed to be easing her pain as her ligaments healed. She’d never be able to compete again, but there was no reason she couldn’t have a long, healthy life.

Spending time with the horses made her feel calm and collected, just like it always had. Animals were so much simpler than people. You looked in their eyes and you didn’t have to wonder what they were thinking.

Look at me, Isobel. Your climax belongs to me.

She gulped as she put a bagel in the toaster and lifted the lid on the tray of scrambled eggs. She scooped a small spoonful onto her plate.

Yes, she far preferred animals to people.

“So, you and the redhead at the bar seemed to be hitting it off last night,” Liam said. Isobel looked up just in time to see Jeremiah’s face going red.

“I mentioned I was studying history and she said she really loved Game of Thrones. So we got to talking.”

Liam burst out laughing. “She does realize that’s not actual history, right?”

The back of Jeremiah’s neck went a little pink as he picked up his toast. “George R. R. Martin said he based it on the War of the Roses. That’s real history. We talked about that a little.”

Liam winced. “Oh God, tell me you did not bore the hot chick with a

history lesson. She was just trying to get in your pants, mate.”

Jeremiah leveled him with a stare. “That’s not all there is to a woman.”

Liam waved his fork in a *maybe so, maybe not* gesture. “That woman, it’s debatable. The shirt she was wearing barely deserves the title. It was more like an extravagant bikini. And she was all but climbing your leg like a dog in heat while you were boring her with obscure English history.”

Isobel’s bagel popped. She took it and scraped a thin layer of cream cheese over it, then sat down at the table between Nicholas and Jeremiah. Reece and Liam were across the table from them.

Jeremiah was all out glaring now. “She gave me her number.”

Liam laughed. “Of course she did.” Liam leaned back in his chair, his hands behind his head. “The women in this town are all hard up and we’re fresh dick.” Then he winced and looked Isobel’s way. “No offense.”

She laughed and held her hands up. “None taken. Please, do continue with this fascinating argument. I feel it’s my duty to all womankind to hear you out.”

“Well, take a woman like your redhead. There are only so many options in a town this size. She starts out fucking high school boys. She’s what, twenty-two? Twenty-three? If she went to college, she might have gotten a taste for some good sex. Still, for whatever reason, she ended up back here. Or maybe she never went to college and has been here the whole time. Either way, all that sad high school dick is starting to get mighty old by now.”

He grinned wide and held his arms out. “Then we traipse in to town. A bunch of handsome bastards with our shiny new cocks. It’s like when the carnival comes through town. They all want to take a ride.”

“And yet you went home all alone.” Jeremiah tapped his chin, pretending to be puzzled. “Shocking with such foolproof logic like that.”

Liam waved his hand dismissively. “I wasn’t putting any energy into it last night. I was just out to get ossified.”

“Ossi-what?” Reece asked.

Liam looked around the table, and seeing everyone’s bland expression, he clarified. “Ossified. Ya know—pissed. Smashed. Shit-faced. Twisted. Banjo’d.”

“Banjo’d?” Isobel laughed. “Oh my God, that’s my new favorite word for getting drunk.”

Liam just grinned. “See, the accent gets ‘em every time. If I’d wanted to get me hole last night, it wouldn’t a been a problem.”

“Get your *hole*?” Isobel choked, doubling over.

“Some of us are trying to eat a nice meal here,” Nicholas said, glaring over at Liam.

“Hey, I’m just giving my public what they demand,” Liam said.

Nicholas finished his toast and stood up. “Well what you ought to be doing is eating. The Dodgers Yankees game starts at 4:00.”

Liam rolled his eyes. “Whatever will I do if I miss the first quarter of a bunch of fat-arsed men standing around waiting for a ball to be thrown at them.”

Nicholas was not amused. “They’re innings. And I’d like to see you say that to Clayton Kershaw’s face while he pitches a ninety-five mile per hour fastball at you.”

“Why would I do that,” Liam pushed his chair back and stood, grinning a disingenuous smile, “when I could spend the day living the glamorous life style shoveling horse shit?”

“Oh right,” Reece said after he finished chugging the rest of his orange juice. “It’s compost day.”

“One thing I never thought about when I dreamed of working a horse ranch,” Liam shook his head, cringing, “was just how much actual *shite* was involved.”

Isobel’s nose scrunched too. She’d learned from the last ‘compost day’ that whoever was on compost duty ended smelling like, well, *shit*. How could they not, after hours spent in the compost shed raking the stuff that was in the early stages to aerate it? The second part was better—they got to use the four wheelers to take the finished compost and spread it over the fields as fertilizer.

“Just another reason I was so glad to get the manny job,” Reece grinned. “Ya’ll have fun with that today. I’m gonna have a quick drive down to Colorado to stock up on my... herbal remedies.”

Isobel shook her head at him. Xavier and Mel apparently didn’t mind him lighting up a blunt every now and then as long as he did it out of the house and after the kids were in bed.

“That’s not legal here yet, is it?” she asked.

“No. It’s not.” Jeremiah’s voice was flat as he stared at his brother. “You know if you get stopped with that shit on you, you could spend up to a year in jail.”

“Relax, man. You’re so freakin’ stressed out all the time. When I get

back, I can bake you some cookies that will totally chill you the fuck out,” Reece’s voice got all soft. The little shop I go to that’s right over the border has the *best* hybrid called Blue Dream and it will change your *life* man, I’m telling you—”

“Yeah, it’ll change your life,” Jeremiah said, still glaring. “When you get picked up by a state trooper watching for dumbasses like you who are obviously crossing the border to stock up.” Jeremiah reached out and tugged on a couple of Reece’s bleach-blond dread locks. “Could you say I’m here to buy weed any louder? At least put a fucking cap on.”

Reece jerked back from his brother and Isobel could see him losing his usually calm demeanor fast—something only his brother seemed to be able to provoke in him. “Why don’t you butt out of what’s none of your damn business? I’m sick of you always trying to run my life. You’re only older than me by three minutes, jackass.”

“Hey there. Okay.” Isobel jumped in between them and turned to Reece. “Where are Dean and Brent anyway? Why don’t you have them today?”

Reece’s face immediately softened. “Mel and Mr. Kent took the kids to visit his folks back east. Another month and she won’t be able to fly anymore.”

“Oh, right,” Isobel said. “She told me about it. Everything’s just been so busy, I forgot it was this weekend.”

“Well have fun with the compost.” She raised her bagel like she was the other guys who were getting up from the table. “I’ll be out to the stables in a little bit.”

“I’d say see you out there,” Jeremiah said, “but I’m pretty sure you won’t want to come within ten feet of us without a hazmat suit.”

* * *

Several hours later, Isobel was feeling great. She’d taken one of the sweetest horses on the ranch—appropriately named Sugar—for a long ride out into the countryside. Wyoming wasn’t the kind of place she would have typically thought of as beautiful. It wasn’t overly green or lush.

Instead, it had more of a stark beauty going for it. Wide open spaces. Scrub brush and hills that slanted into one another. Mountains in the far distance.

Being out there with just her horse for company made life feel bigger. She couldn't take in the scope of the big, wide world and not feel like all her problems were... well, *small*. God, why did she let herself get so neurotic about everything?

Food.

Sex.

Hunter.

Why? Why did she do that? Why did she obsess?

Then again, crazy might just be in your DNA.

She squeezed her eyes shut and breathed out. Breathe out all the toxic shit. Breathe in the beauty of the world around her.

She reached down and patted Sugar's neck, squeezing her thighs together to nudge the horse forward. It wasn't true. She wouldn't let it be true.

Perspective. That was what she needed. She needed to ride out here as often as she could so she could put her shit in perspective.

The world was big and beautiful.

She needed to stop taking all her own drama so seriously and step back and smell the wildflowers.

Maybe the way to change was to stop trying so damn hard. Just let change happen naturally without analyzing it all to death. Trust that everything would be okay.

Stop being so damn afraid all the time.

She laughed. "Easier said than done, huh, Sugar?" Still, she felt carefree as she patted Sugar's neck again, then she gently tugged on the left rein to turn Sugar back around to head back.

Rain clouds had started to gather across the big sky and she didn't want to get caught in the downpour.

The ride back was just as calming. When the Kent's ranch came back into view, she felt centered. Sure she could take whatever came her way in stride.

Even going back to work on Monday.

Okay, so she might need to take another long ride tomorrow to *really* make sure she was centered but she'd never felt more confident in her ability to take on the future.

A light rain started to fall right as she reached the stable.

She grabbed the shoehorn and swung her right leg off Sugar, dropping to the floor. "That's a good girl." She rubbed along Sugar's wither and gave her a pat. She was such a sweet horse. Which made her want to check in on her

other favorite.

She needed to brush Sugar down and get her some water but as they passed by Bright Beauty's stall, Isobel went up on tiptoe. "Hello beautiful girl — Beauty!" she shouted in alarm.

Beauty was on the ground, rolling back and forth, a sheen of sweat covering her glossy coat and a pinkish foam at her nostrils.

Quick as she could, Isobel wrapped Sugar's lead around the stall peg and then opened the door.

"Beauty!" she went down on her knees.

Oh God. Beauty had seemed fine only hours before—though granted Isobel had barely peeked in to call out hi before her ride. Dammit. She'd been so involved in her own worries she hadn't been paying attention.

Beauty tried to roll but couldn't get very far in the confines of the stall. These were all the classic signs of colic. Which could kill a horse within hours if not treated correctly.

Isobel swiped at her eyes and tried to think. First, she needed to get Beauty back up on her feet. Then take her vitals. Okay. She could do this.

Isobel jumped up and grabbed Beauty's halter from a hook right outside the stall. She slipped it over Beauty's head, buckled it, then attached a lead to the halter.

"Come on, girl. Up." She tugged on the lead rope with all her might. "Up you go."

Beauty pulled against her. Isobel dug in and tugged hard. And finally, after a few more tense moments, Beauty climbed to her feet. She immediately yanked against Isobel's hold though, twisting her head toward her flank and dancing back and forth.

Then she reared back, kicking at her own stomach with her forelegs.

"Whoa, girl!" Isobel cried, letting out more slack on the lead and flattening her back against the stall door as Beauty came back down again.

Crap. Having a twelve-hundred-pound horse rear right in front of you was never a comfortable feeling but Isobel knew showing how freaked she was would only make Beauty more tense.

"Shhh, shhhh," Isobel tried to quiet the horse down. She drew the lead rope back in and stepped close to Beauty's nose. "Shhh, that's right, girl. I'm going to figure out what's wrong and make you feel better, okay sweetheart?"

Maybe it was just her imagination but she thought Beauty calmed a little at her voice.

“That’s right, that’s right,” Isobel soothed.

She ran to grab some equipment and then hurried back so she could take the rest of Beauty’s vitals. Her temperature was okay but her heart rate was almost double what was normal.

Not good. Not good at all.

Then Isobel did an internal examination. Was it just gas? That was the best-case scenario. Or was there a twisted intestine causing the blockage? That was the worst-case scenario because it required surgery.

What she discovered instead was the middle possibility. There was an impaction—a thick section of intestine that was hard with what was most likely undigested feed that had gotten all clumped up in a six-inch section.

“Okay,” Isobel whispered. “Okay, okay, okay.”

She withdrew her hand and peeled off the glove, taking both it and the thermometer out of the stall. She rushed back over to the sink, throwing out the plastic glove and scrubbing both the thermometer and her hands.

“Okay,” she whispered to herself. “You can do this. This is going to be your job.” But somehow it felt like there was less at stake with other people’s animals. And Hunter was always there if she screwed up.

She paused mid-scrub. She could go call him. Get a second opinion.

But no. She’d felt the impaction. She *knew* what to do next. And she’d just helped him with that other colic case the other day.

Yes, that one had been a little different. They’d suspected it was a twisted intestine but the owner hadn’t wanted to pay for surgery—understandable since it could cost more than the horse was worth.

When Hunter had called later to follow up on the case, the owner told him the horse hadn’t lasted the night.

Isobel squeezed her eyes shut against the possibility. No. That wouldn’t happen to Beauty. Beauty had already survived so much—a cruel owner who had held her to an impossible standard, pushing her past her limits even when she was injured.

Now Beauty was finally getting the life she deserved. She was getting her happily ever after here on this horse farm with owners who cared about her and were happy to just let her be herself.

Then to have that all threatened *now*, right when her legs were barely even healing up so she could actually enjoy her new home?

It was cruel. It was wrong.

Isobel wouldn’t let it happen. She set her jaw before getting to work.

First she gave Beauty some oral pain reliever. Then she started trying to flush her system with the mineral oil.

“Come on, girl. You can do it.”

An hour later, Isobel was still trying. She was damp with sweat and the mineral oil/water mix that had sloshed out all over her.

Beauty was slightly sluggish from the medication and not jerking around as violently. Isobel was glad Beauty wasn't in as much pain, but she also wasn't sure if that meant the mare's gut would keep working the way it needed to in order to pass the gummed up food.

“Okay,” Isobel whispered to herself, looking around the stable. She wished one of the guys was around to ask them their opinion. She'd run out to check the compost shed, but all she saw were the missing four-wheelers.

She couldn't help feeling like she was doing this all wrong. Yeah, she was going by the book, but still? Why wasn't Beauty passing the food?

Isobel looked Beauty over. Maybe another walk?

After an hour and a half of trying to flush her system, Isobel had stopped and taken Beauty for a short walk up and down the barn. She'd hoped that might loosen things up. They couldn't go outside since the rain had started in earnest. Not that it mattered much because even in the limited confines of the stable, Beauty had been stiff and not keen to move far. They'd barely made two lengths of the stable before returning to her stall.

Then Isobel had reinserted the tubing and started again with the mineral oil.

And now another half an hour and still nothing. No stools. Not even any passed gas.

“How about another break, sweetheart? You've been doing so good.” Isobel patted Beauty on the side of her neck, then withdrew the tubing from her nose. Beauty snorted and shook her head as it came free.

“I know,” Isobel sympathized. “That can't be comfortable. You don't deserve any of this. We'll get you better. I promise.”

But even as she said it, Isobel was terrified it was a lie.

You're such a failure at everything you try. Do you have any idea how disappointed your father is by you? Like mother, like daughter.

Isobel squeezed her eyes shut against the memories. Why was it always the horrible words that lodged in her head and never any of the nice ones? She was sure her dad had said nice things to her over the years.

Hadn't he? She didn't know. She was terrified that all he saw when he

looked at her was her mother. History that was bound to repeat itself. He could barely even look her in the face.

“I’ll be right back.” Isobel’s throat was thick as she mumbled the words before stumbling out of the stall.

She wouldn’t do Beauty any good if she had a breakdown right in front of her.

Enough. She couldn’t do this. Not alone.

She lit out for the house, her boots sticking in the now soggy mud with every step. Farm calls took Hunter all over this county and the two surrounding it. It might take him hours to get here depending on what emergencies he already had on his docket. And that was without the rain. *If* he was close enough to the highway to have cell service.

Meanwhile, colic could turn on a coin and become deadly.

Oh God, she should have called him as soon as she realized what was happening with Beauty. Would Beauty die because she’d been too proud to call for help?

She yanked open the back door and then sprinted to the phone, ignoring the mud she was tracking all over the floor. She pulled the wall phone off its cradle and had Hunter’s number punched in seconds later. She bit her lip and paced back and forth in the kitchen as she waited for it to ring.

And ring.

And ring.

“Dammit.” She raked a hand through her hair.

“Hullo.” Hunter’s easy greeting came over the line.

“Hunter! Is that you? Like really you and not just your voicemail?”

Silence for a second. Then, “Isobel?”

“Oh thank God, Hunter. Bright Beauty, one of the mares, is colicky. It’s bad. There’s an impaction in her small intestine. It’s bad, Hunter. I’ve been trying to flush it with mineral oil for an hour and it hasn’t moved an inch. I don’t know what to do. I tried to walk her too, but nothing—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow down there. When did she start presenting symptoms?”

“I don’t know. I just found her down in her stall when I got back from a ride on another horse at, I don’t know,” she searched out the wall clock. It was 3:15 now. “Maybe 2:00? I glanced in on her a few hours early and didn’t notice anything off. But I wasn’t really looking. If I would have just—”

“You give her a painkiller?”

“Banamine. 10cc orally. Heart rate sixty-five. Hunter, I’m really worried.” She took a quick breath. “Can you come out?”

There was no hesitation. “I’ll be there in forty-five minutes.”

Isobel sank against the wall as she fought off tears. “Thank you, Hunter.” She swallowed hard, her fingers going white-knuckled around the phone.

“Yup.”

She thought he’d hung up but then his voice came back over the line. “We’ll take care of her. She’ll be okay.”

Isobel nodded fervently, then realized Hunter couldn’t see her. “Okay.” Her voice was little more than a whisper.

“Okay,” he said.

Still she didn’t hear the click that meant he’d hung up.

“You want me to stay on the line till I get there?”

Sometimes when he wasn’t being a world class asshole, Isobel thought Hunter Dawkins was kinda perfect.

She swiped at a tear that crested before it could fall down her cheek. “I should go be with Beauty and I’m not sure the phone will go that far.” It was a landline. They were so far out there was no cell service here. “Thank you, Hunter.” She hoped he could hear how much she meant it.

“Not a problem.” This time he did hang up.

For a long second, Isobel clutched the phone to her chest. Then she set it back down on its cradle and hurried back outside.

Chapter Fourteen

HUNTER

Hunter had been having a shitty day.
Isobel had run out on him after sex. Again.
Just like Janine.

He'd been cursing his luck with women while he delivered the Juarez's foal and then spent the rest of the morning testing cattle for TB out at Ben Fenton's place. He'd just made it back on the highway heading north when his phone rang.

He had his phone on Bluetooth and answered without looking at the number.

And then came the last voice he expected to hear. When he heard how frantic and panicked Isobel was, his gut clenched.

It turned out she was only upset about a horse and wasn't in any trouble herself, but his immediate instinct to protect had already been activated. He was due out for pregnancy checks at the Pimentel farm but they could wait. It had started raining anyway and he might have postponed on that basis alone—or so he told himself

He pulled off the highway and turned around at the next overpass, pushing ten over the speed limit so he could get to her as soon as possible.

She'd sounded so upset. The horse was important to her, that was clear. To her, this wasn't just another case.

But then, even on their regular cases, he'd seen how she connected with the animals. She had that way about her. Only the really great vets had it. They loved the animals. It could be a liability as much as a positive trait.

In school they talked about developing a detachment from your patients, probably just like doctors with human patients were supposed to. It always rubbed Hunter the wrong way. Animals in pain just felt wrong on a basic level. People might lie to you and betray you but animals didn't cheat or steal or manipulate. They'd hurt you, sure as hell—you never took your eyes off a cow or you were liable to get kicked for your trouble. But animals were rarely malicious—and if they were, it was only because humans had twisted them up that way. Like a couple of dogs from an illegal dog fighting ring he'd taken pro bono a few years ago.

He used to pride himself that he loved animals the way he saw in Isobel. But he'd lost it. It had all become routine the past year. Mechanical. He was a robot in a Hunter suit.

Until her. He used to say the way a person treated animals told you everything you needed to know about them. So what did Isobel's obvious empathy for all their patients tell him about her?

Rain had started pounding his window so hard his windshield wipers could barely keep up. He almost missed the turnoff for the Kent's farm.

The Florida Georgia Line song on the radio was cut off by three long beeps. "A severe thunderstorm warning is now in effect for Natrona and Carbon counties until nine pm."

"No shit, Sherlock." Hunter pulled the key out of the ignition and pulled on his rain slicker from the floor of the passenger side.

He was glad for the distraction from thinking about Isobel. Which lasted for... all of three point two seconds.

She'd left. No goodbye. No nothing.

What do you expect after you treated her like an ass for weeks?

His jaw clenched as he pulled in beside the few vehicles parked in front of the ranch house. He hopped up in the truck bed and grabbed his tools, then slammed the tool box closed.

He was just here to help a sick horse. That was all. He'd do the same for any horse owner who called so panicked. It didn't have to be anything more than that.

He jogged around the side of the house. He was familiar with the ranch. He'd come out here for years. The horses Xavier brought in were often in

rough condition. He'd helped horses riddled with parasites to difficult foalings to lacerations and other injuries to cases of laminitis. And several cases of colic. Not all of which ended well.

When the stable came in sight, he saw one of the twins, he couldn't tell if it was Reece or the other one, standing just inside the stable doorway. He disappeared as soon as he saw Hunter. No doubt to announce his arrival.

Isobel came flying out seconds later, ignoring the pouring rain.

It was definitely inappropriate to be noticing how good she looked in a tight pair of Wranglers and a damp maroon tank top that hugged every one of her luscious curves.

Yep. Completely fucking inappropriate.

His eyes still lingered for too long.

He managed to jerk his attention to her face when she came right up to him. Especially when she threw her arms around his neck.

"Oh thank God you're here." The hug was over almost as quickly as it began. She let go of him and then jogged back toward the stables, waving at him to follow.

He was still processing the feel of all that warm female wrapped around him, but he did manage to find his legs to follow her.

Four men were standing around the stall of the horse in question.

"Thanks for staying with me, guys. I know your game is starting. I'm good now."

"We're happy to stay," said the biggest of the four. Nicholas, Hunter thought his name was. He'd never actually heard the guy speak before today even though he'd been out here every few months.

Isobel placed her hand on Nicholas' arm, her eyes softening. "It's okay. There isn't anything to do except stand around. But I really appreciate you helping calm me down until the vet got here."

"You're the vet," said the twin.

Isobel just shook her head. She waved Hunter toward the stall. "Don't be ridiculous, Jeremiah."

Aha, so it was wundertwin number two. He was glaring at Hunter as he pushed past him. Apparently Twin One had shared what he'd seen out back of the bar. Which made Hunter bristle because it was Isobel's business and he didn't like the idea of anyone talking about her like that.

Hunter glared right back, then opened the stall. Right now it was most important to check on his patient. He set his tools down and then entered the

stall.

He could tell immediately by the look of the mare that it wasn't good. Isobel appeared right beside him.

"I just checked her pulse and it was seventy," she said in a small voice. "She's getting worse."

Hunter pulled out his stethoscope and then went to the horse's side, gently palpating the gut and listening for activity.

It was quiet inside. Too quiet. Not good. A healthy gut should be gurgling away. The blockage was stopping normal functions.

He pulled out a plastic sleeve and pulled it on, then did a rectal exam. He found exactly what Isobel had described over the phone.

"When was the last time you tried walking her?" He withdrew and pulled the sleeve off, balling it in itself to contain the muck.

"When I called you."

Hunter nodded. "Let's try taking her out again."

Isobel bit her bottom lip in worry.

"Come on, sweetheart, let's take another walk." Isobel tried to hand the reins over to Hunter but he just shook his head.

"She'll be more comfortable with you."

Isobel nodded while Hunter unlatched the stall door. All the other men had gone inside.

The mare took several stiff steps forward. Then her eyes went wild, the whites flashing.

"Let go!" Hunter grabbed Isobel and yanked her behind him right as the horse reared and then threw herself on the floor, rolling and writhing on the ground.

"We have to help her!" Isobel cried out but Hunter kept her firmly behind himself. The mare rolled back and forth, clearly in extreme pain.

But where Isobel only saw a beloved animal hurting, Hunter had enough experience to see a twelve hundred pound creature of instinct ready to lash out at anything and anyone.

"I've got some Xylazine in my tool kit. Go get it." He'd set it down behind them near the door of the stall door. Anything to get her further away from the volatile horse.

She was eager to help and he relaxed the second he felt her move away from his back. Only then did he venture toward the writhing horse.

He kept his breathing slow and easy. The only way to deal with a

panicked or pained horse was to emit an aura of calm. And you couldn't bullshit them. Horses were the best lie detectors out there.

Though if a horse was in enough pain, it wouldn't matter if you were the Dalai Lama, they'd still lash out at you.

In all her rolling, the mare's lead had gotten twisted up underneath her. Hunter leaned down, making sure he was approaching slightly to the left so the horse could always keep him in her view. Sneaking up on a horse was a bad idea for all involved.

The mare stilled slightly on seeing him approach.

"That's right," he whispered. "Let's get you back on your feet. Then we can give you some more medicine and see if we can't get you feeling better."

He reached out to the harness around her nose. This would either work or he'd get bitten for his trouble. You didn't work with horses for as long as he did without enduring a few horse bites along the way.

He tried not to think about it. Instead he kept up a slow stream of conversation. "That's right, girl. Let's get you back up on your feet. Here we go. Let me just get to this lead that's underneath—" He traced down her harness to where it clipped to the lead line, then gently tugged. "Upsy daisy. Let's go, honey. Up you go." He added more command to his voice as he pulled on her lead line and she flipped back over to get her feet underneath her. Finally, she scrambled back to a standing position.

She let out a groan and then blew air sharply out her nostrils. Horses only groaned like that when they were in severe pain.

Dammit. He ran his hand up the lead so he had tight control of the mare and then led her back to the stall.

He breathed a little easier once he had her confined inside again. Only to find Isobel waiting anxiously, syringe in hand. "Is Beauty going to be okay?"

He could tell by the tightness in her throat that she was afraid of his answer. She was intelligent and she'd just witnessed what he had. None of those were good signs.

"Let's get her this shot and see how she responds." He reached out and she placed the syringe in his hand. He pulled off the cap and entered the stall again. Isobel followed. He tried not to think of her at his back. He knew she was hoping he'd pull off a miracle. He wished he could.

Why couldn't this just be a run-of-the-mill colic case?

He couldn't change things he had no control over. Hadn't he learned by now how immovable the universe was when it had decided on a course of

action? Grant him the serenity to accept the things he could not change, yada fucking yada. Wasn't that what he'd spent the last year trying to convince himself of?

His jaw tensed and he forcibly relaxed it as he administered the shot.

"What now?" Isobel asked.

"We wait and see if she responds to the pain medication. It's only in severe cases that horses keep showing pain after giving them the Xylazine. In the meantime, let's check the color of her gums."

"Oh my God, I forgot about that." Isobel wrung her hands.

"It's fine. We're doing it now."

Hunter lifted the horse's lips to examine the gums and he breathed out heavily. Shit. They were supposed to be a salmon pink.

Beauty's were a dark red. Isobel's head swung toward Hunter, eyes wide with fear.

If a horse's gums turned all the way purple, it meant the impaction in the gut was cutting off so much blood flow to the intestines that they shut down. At that point, the horse's death was likely imminent within fifteen to thirty minutes.

"We have to get her to surgery." Isobel's face went white as she backed up quickly, banging into the stall door. She barely seemed to notice. Her hands went to her hair and she spun around. "Oh my God. The trailer. We've got to get the horse trailer. It's not hooked up to anything. But if I go get the guys, they can help and then we can—"

"Isobel." Hunter ushered her out the stall door and then he put a hand on her arm. She was so emotionally involved but they had to be realistic. And safe.

"I'm not sure that's the best idea. I don't have the set up for large animal surgery at my clinic. I contract out with the large animal hospital in Casper when I need to. But Casper's an hour and a half away on a good day." He gestured out the open stable door to where it was still coming down in buckets. "With the storm." He shook his head. "I don't like hauling a horse trailer in weather like this."

Isobel's features went livid and she threw his arms off her. "We have to try. She'll *die* if we don't do anything. I'll pay for everything, I don't care how much it costs."

"That's not what I—" He'd pay for it if it came down to that.

"You're wasting time Beauty doesn't have arguing about nothing." Isobel

turned and stalked off into the rain.

Hunter threw up his hands. Goddamned infuriating woman.

He jogged through the rain to catch up to her, his boots squelching into deep mud with every step.

Chapter Fifteen

ISOBEL

“Can’t this thing go any faster?” Isobel leaned over to glare at the speedometer. “Forty-five miles an hour? Seriously?” She glanced out the narrow back window at the trailer they were pulling behind them.

Please let Beauty be okay.

Hunter didn’t look her direction but she saw his jaw clench. “Don’t push it.”

He’d been grouchy ever since she refused to stay behind at the ranch while he rode off with Beauty in the trailer.

She shook her head. What the hell had he been thinking? He’d barely been willing to do the surgery in the first place. Like hell she was going to let him go off alone with her horse.

She bit her lip. Okay, that wasn’t fair. She trusted Hunter’s skills when it came to his veterinary practice. But still.

She’d had to threaten to drive behind him in her own car before he relented, his jaw tight. Between the boys bringing the trailer around, getting it hitched to Hunter’s truck, and getting the distressed Beauty into the trailer, almost forty-five minutes had passed, just at the ranch alone.

If Isobel was honest with herself, though, she knew it wasn’t him she was angry with. How had she not seen Beauty was sick *earlier*? And then she

hadn't called him right when she finally realized there was a problem. And God, if she'd only checked Beauty's gums right away...

Her eyes pricked and she blinked rapidly. She would *not* cry. Beauty was going to be fine. She was going to have the life she deserved. A life full of long afternoons grazing in the fields under the wide, blue Wyoming sky.

Isobel glared out the windshield at the unrelenting downpour. The truck's windshield wipers were on their highest settings and rain still poured down the glass. There weren't many other cars out on the small rural highway—they'd even seen a couple pulled off the road, like they were waiting for the rain to slow down before continuing.

If only today was one of those ideal Wyoming days. For Christ's sake, almost every day she'd been there had been clear weather. Then the *one* day Beauty got sick and they needed to get somewhere fast—

Three low beeps sounded over the radio. Hunter rolled the dial up—he'd had it on his normal country station, but it had been so low she'd barely heard the music playing. The robotic announcer's voice came through loud and clear, though.

"The national weather service has issued a tornado warning for Natrona and Carbon counties from 7:00 pm until 8:15 pm. A severe thunderstorm capable of producing a tornado was located ten miles south of Bessemer Bend at 6:55, moving southeast at thirty-five mph. Radar indicated rotation."

"Shit," Hunter said, turning the knob so the radio was louder.

"Impact: Flying debris will be dangerous to those caught without shelter. Mobile homes will be damaged or destroyed. Damage to roofs, windows, and vehicles will occur. Tree damage—"

"Isn't that a little dramatic?" Isobel scoffed. "They just say this every time there's a bad storm."

"Quiet," Hunter hushed her sharply, turning the knob up even more.

"Take cover now. Move to a basement or interior room on the lowest floor of a sturdy building. Avoid windows. If you are outdoors, in a mobile home, or in a vehicle, move to the closest substantial shelter and protect yourself from flying debris.

"Repeating, a tornado warning has been issued until 8:15 pm for the following counties, Natron—"

Hunter turned the knob down and then hunched over to look out the front windshield, flicking on his flashers and slowing down.

"Hunter," Isobel rolled her eyes. "Don't make a big deal out of noth—"

“I don’t like the look of that sky.”

Hunter turned off the road and Isobel swung around to gape at him. “What are you doing? We have to get Beauty to the hospital. Every minute counts.”

“Not at the expense of your safety,” Hunter barked, his whole body tense as his eyes focused ahead. “Weren’t you listening? That storm’ll be on top of us any second. With tornado conditions.”

Isobel’s teeth clenched. “They have to say that to cover their asses.” Was he really going to risk Beauty’s life for some stupid, paranoid—

Hunter slowed the truck and put it in park. In the middle of nowhere. Just right there, in the road. Isobel looked around. They were beside a big lake. No, it was a dam.

Which she could see pretty easily because the rain had finally let up.

“Look, it’s barely even raining anymore.” She jerked a hand toward the windshield. “Now can we please get back on the road?”

She turned back to look at the trailer. She could just make out the tip of Beauty’s head. She was still on her feet. Thank God. There was time to save her yet.

“Get out of the car.” Hunter’s voice was strained.

Isobel swung her head back around to look at him. “Wha—”

“Isobel, get out of the car. Now!”

He pushed open his door and sprinted around the front of the truck. What the hell was he—?

But then she saw it.

Holy—

Off to the right, opposite the dam, a funnel cloud was just touching down to earth.

The next second, Hunter was yanking at her passenger side door. But it was locked. Shit. Shit. She fumbled for the button to unlock it, her eyes never moving from the tornado. Hunter screamed at her and pounded on the door.

Finally she managed to get it unlocked and Hunter pulled her down from her seat. She barely landed on her feet but had no time to get oriented before Hunter was dragging her forward. She stumbled along behind him.

There was a tornado. An actual, real, bona fide tornado. Like in the movies. Holy shit. Fuck. Shit fuck.

Hunter dragged her toward a steep grassy embankment when she suddenly remembered. *Beauty*. She jerked her hand out of Hunter’s.

“Beauty!” The wind had started whipping around them so loudly she had to shout to be heard above it. “We have to get Beauty.”

“No time,” he shouted back. “And if you stop again, I’ll fucking carry you!”

Then he grabbed her wrist and yanked her so that she was forced to follow him. The rain had started up again and not just rain, but small pebbles of hail. She used the arm Hunter wasn’t holding up to shield herself.

When she looked toward the tornado again, her heart stuttered. Oh God. It was headed right toward them. And it seemed bigger now. At its base was a dark brown cloud. It was ripping and twisting up debris as it went.

They were going to die.

“Careful now!” Hunter yelled as they reached the steep embankment.

Isobel tried to focus. No, they weren’t going to die. She had Hunter. He grew up around here. She thought she could see where he was trying to take them. At the bottom of the embankment was the dam’s base where there were several concrete culverts. The sturdiest place around to take cover, though still open on one side to the storm.

Hunter took her waist as he stepped sideways down the steep grassy area. But they were rushing and the grass was slick from the rain. Her foot slipped once and he caught her, pulling her tighter against him.

They were almost halfway down when—

“Oh!” Isobel slipped again. Her feet went out from under her. Then, the world went topsy turvy— Ow! God. Ow! She rolled and slid and then rolled some more until she landed on the concrete at the bottom of the hill. All the air was knocked out of her lungs on impact.

She gasped for breath, feeling dazed and looking around. Where was Hunter? Was he okay? The tornado. Oh God, the tornado.

“Isobel!”

The next thing she knew, her body was being lifted. Cradled against a warm chest.

“Isobel, talk to me!”

She tried to say his name, but she still didn’t have any breath. Hail pelted her legs in painful stings though Hunter shielded most of her upper body. She couldn’t see the storm, couldn’t see anything but his chest. Her body jolted with his every step and with how fast he was moving, she knew the danger was far from over.

A few moments later, Hunter set her down. Concrete, hard at her back

and underneath her. They'd made it to the culvert.

She sucked in another breath and finally managed to take in air.

"Hunter," she gasped out. The wind was so loud, she doubted he could hear her.

He must have seen her lips move, though, because she saw the relief on his face right before he pulled her into his body. Even though he was as rain soaked as she was, he still radiated warmth. It made her feel safe. False comfort, she knew.

"Tornado?" she managed to ask, getting in more air with each breath now. She was less disoriented too and could make out the huge concrete box created by the structure of the dam. It would have been perfect—except for the fact that the tornado was heading toward them from the one exposed side.

Hunter pushed her into the corner and was trying to cover her body with his but she strained her neck to look over his shoulder. What little air she'd managed to gain whooshed out again.

"Oh my God," she whispered, shrinking into the corner. Not that she could hear her own voice over the storm. It roared like a locomotive racing past at top speed. It was almost on top of them, and it had gathered momentum so that instead of a spindly little funnel it was a wide cone, tearing up swaths of land as it went.

"Hunter!" She flung her arms around his waist and tried to pull him as tightly as she could into the corner with her.

The roar got even louder and debris was flung into the concrete wall of the dam. Isobel screamed as wood chunks and tree branches crashed all around them. Hunter hunched his body over her, both of them curled into the corner as tightly as possible.

They were going to die.

They were going to die.

And it was all her fault.

If she hadn't dragged Hunter out here. He knew it was a bad idea. She hadn't taken the storm seriously, but his instincts were spot on.

And now here they were.

For all the miserable times in her life when she'd thought it just wasn't worth continuing on—dammit, she just wanted to go back and smack herself now.

She wanted to live.

She wanted it so badly.

There was so much to live for.

Please God. Please. I want to live.

The wind howled. Debris continued to slam the walls. It piled up all around them. It felt like the world was coming to an end.

Chapter Sixteen

HUNTER

Hunter curled his body as tight as he could around Isobel as the storm raged on. He had to keep her safe. Safe. *Safe*. It was all he could think.

Pain ripped at his back but he only noticed it peripherally.

She had to be kept safe.

If it had to take someone, let it be him, not her.

Christ, *not her*.

But then, all of the sudden, the screaming wind quieted. The junk and debris that had been continually flying at them stopped. The punishing rain became a light sprinkle.

Hunter's eyes were clenched shut and he held his body around Isobel's like an immovable cage. It was only when she stirred beneath him and asked, "Hunter? Hunter, is it over?" that he dared look over his shoulder.

And saw that the tornado had turned and was moving east. Not only that, but the funnel was narrow again. Losing momentum, it seemed.

Isobel tried to push out from under him but he wasn't about to let her up yet.

"Stay down."

She stopped struggling and settled for craning her neck to look at the retreating twister with him. As they watched silently over the next minute or two, it grew smaller and smaller and then dissipated entirely.

Isobel started laughing. It had a hysterical edge to it but he couldn't blame her. Jesus, how close had the goddamn thing come to them before it turned? He finally released Isobel and sat back on his haunches, looking around them.

Debris, mostly tree limbs and churned up earth, cluttered the ditch running up to the culvert. But there was also a ripped-up car tire and the twisted frame of what might have once been a bicycle just a little to their left. Shit. If either of those had hit him and Isobel...

He shuddered. Better not to think about the 'what ifs.'

Isobel was standing and she held down a hand to help him up. He took it and got to his feet, the whole while checking her up and down for any damage. But other than being covered in mud and a few scratches she probably gotten from her tumble down the hill earlier, she looked fine.

She was okay. She was safe.

She looked around them at all the damage, shaking her head in wonder when her eyes suddenly widened.

"Beauty." Then she took off like a shot, jogging through the twisted tree limbs and—damn, was that a tractor?—to scramble back up the embankment.

"Isobel," he called, but she didn't slow down. Damn fool woman. If she wasn't careful, she'd fall and break her neck on that damn hill. He hurried after her, wincing at the stiffness in his back. Looked like he'd have some cuts and bruises of his own.

She was already halfway up the hill by the time he made it to the bottom, scrambling up with her hands and feet like she was a monkey. He almost called out to her again but then stopped himself. He didn't want to break her concentration. And within another minute, she made it to the top.

He had a slower time of it, but when he finally got back to the road, it was to find a beaming Isobel. He immediately saw why. While there was some debris on the road, it wasn't nearly as much as there had been in the culvert below. And his truck and the trailer stood pretty much untouched.

"Beauty's still okay. Come on," Isobel waved him toward the truck. "If we get going we can still make it to Casper in time." She ran to the passenger side and hopped in.

Her and that damn horse.

Hunter let out a deep breath. He wasn't sure if it was relief or exasperation or what. All he knew was that this woman was going to be the death of him.

He walked toward the driver's side of the truck, grimacing as he hauled himself into the seat.

He turned the key and the truck fired to life, no problem. But before he pulled it into gear, Isobel suddenly launched herself over the bench seat and wrapped him in a fierce hug. His back was still sensitive and he winced. The feel of warm, *alive* woman was enough to make him not care, though. He wrapped his arms around her and breathed her in.

He wanted to say a hundred things to her in that moment.

Like: Don't you ever scare me like that again.

And: I'm sorry for being an ass the last few weeks.

And: Let's both get out of these muddy clothes and celebrate being alive. While naked.

And: I'm terrified I'm falling in love with you.

But before any of those fool things could come out of his mouth, Isobel broke the hug and pulled back.

Then she screamed.

Because her arms were covered in blood.

His blood.

Oh.

Shit.

That was when he passed out.

Chapter Seventeen

ISOBEL

I sobel paced up and down the hospital corridor, her nails chewed to nubs. It was an obsessive habit she hated, but compared to the alternatives, it was one she could live with.

What she couldn't live with, however, was Hunter not being okay.

The ER waiting room was loud and chaotic all around her. Babies crying. *People* crying. The news on the big screen in the corner of the room. The tornado warning was finally over but it had touched down near a mobile home park. The whole ER was buzzing about it and there had been a load of patients who'd come in with minor to severe injuries.

It was all just freaking insane. And the rush and chaos meant no one was telling her anything about Hunter.

But he'd be okay. He *had* to be okay.

God, when she'd hugged him and her arms had come back covered in blood... And then his eyes had rolled back in his head and he'd just sunk against her—

She leaned against the wall, feeling out of breath all over again just remembering it. She'd never felt more terrified in her life. Not even after she'd swallowed all the pills from every bottle in the house she could find that horrible night back when she was sixteen. It was only after she'd finished downing them that she'd realized she didn't want to die—but she'd been

terrified she was too late and that she was just minutes away from death.

But no, not even that trauma compared to seeing all the blood and being positive that Hunter had just died in her arms. She'd been so busy worrying about the damn *horse* she hadn't checked to make sure that he was okay. What was *wrong* with her?

She pushed off the wall. It had been *hours*. She was just about to go to the nurses station and ask *again* if there was an update.

But then the double doors swung open.

And Hunter himself strolled out, wearing an oversized blue T-shirt with a giant yellow smiley face.

Isobel's mouth dropped open. Yes, he'd only passed out for a short time in the car, but he'd still been so woozy and out of it when she dropped him off. The nurse who did triage had taken one look at Hunter's back after Isobel had helped him stumble in and sent him straight into surgery. His shirt had been shredded and his back wasn't much better.

There'd been so much *blood*.

Isobel shook the images from her head and ran up to Hunter, automatically sliding her shoulder under his arm to prop him up like she had on their way into the hospital. "What are you doing up? You should be in a wheelchair." She looked up at him. "Actually, you should still be back there in a bed. What's going on?"

"Aw, I'm fine." Hunter swung his arm over her shoulder easily enough but didn't lean nearly as much weight on her as he had earlier. He headed toward the exit. He was a little stiff but walked with far more ease than Isobel would have expected.

She moved with him, completely confused. "But your back!"

"Just needed a little stitching up."

"A *little*—" She started, incredulously. His back had looked cut to pieces, especially that deep gash on his upper shoulders—just a few inches to the left and it would have hit his spinal cord. She shuddered and reached up to clasp the hand of the arm he had around her.

"What about the mare? Did you get her to the animal hospital?"

She turned her head to gape at him. Was he seriously asking about a *horse* right now? "You could have *died*."

He looked down at her with a wide, dopey grin. "Aw, you worried about me, Isobel? Isobel? Ma belle?" Then he tipped his head back and started to sing a butchered version of that old Beatles song *Michelle, Ma Belle*, except

inserting her name. “Isobel, *ma belle*—” then he’d sort of start humming along, obviously not knowing the French lyrics before busting out with *qui vont très bien ensemble* at the end of each line.

“Oh my God.” Isobel shouldered more of his weight when he stumbled a little. “What the hell did they give you?”

Hunter immediately started shaking his head. “Oh not that much.” They were nearing the hospital exit. “I told them to do a local where they were stitching and I think that’s all they did. But they were really good. I didn’t even feel it. I think I even fell asleep.”

Riiiiiiight. Isobel was pretty sure from both what she’d seen of his back and the way he was acting now that he’d been knocked out from anesthesia.

She looked back over her shoulder. “Are you sure you’re all right to leave the hospital? Aren’t they supposed to wheel you to the exit or something?”

“Phsh.” Hunter said sloppily, then waved a hand. “I’m walking just fine.”

Right then he tripped over his own feet and almost took a header face-first into the glass exit door.

“Hunter!” Isobel managed to catch him right before he got a face full of glass.

“Whoa. Thanks.” He started laughing high-pitched in a way she’d never heard before—like he’d gotten a case of the giggles.

Grouchy Hunter Dawkins. Was giggling.

Okay, the world had officially gone nuts.

But he’d pulled away from her and was walking out toward the darkened parking lot and he did seem a little steadier on his feet. Would wonders never cease.

It was eleven o’clock at night but the parking lot had enough street lamps lit so they could see where they were going.

She hurried to keep up with his long-legged stride when all the sudden he stopped. His momentum kept going forward and he stumbled a little bit, catching himself just in time before he toppled over.

“Whoa,” he said again, then shook his head. He looked around. “Where’s Rhonda?”

“Who?” God, what if he’d gotten hit on the head really hard and had a concussion or something in addition to his back and—

“My truck. Rhonda.” He looked at her like, *duh?* and then kept searching the large hospital parking lot.

Now it was Isobel’s turn to laugh. After the stress of the day, it was such

a relief, she had to grab her stomach she started laughing so hard. “You— Named your truck—” she managed to get out through heaving gasps, “Rhonda?”

Hunter only looked mildly insulted. “Rhonda and me go way back. Certainly the best relationship with a female I ever had.” All amusement fled his face with that last statement. He lifted a hand to the back of his neck but immediately winced at the movement and dropped his arm. It must have tugged at the wounds on his back.

Isobel sobered quickly. “Come on.” She took his forearm and tugged him to the back of the parking lot where she’d parked his truck and trailer.

“I dropped Beauty off at the horse hospital after they took you in,” Isobel said, finally answering his earlier question now that she had him steered the right direction. “They were ready for us since you called ahead and when you couldn’t perform the surgery yourself, one of the vets there said she could step in.” All the vets had been on call because of the storm and they were happy to get Beauty seen and fixed up so they could free up the operating bay for the flood of clients that would no doubt be coming in all afternoon and evening because of the storm.

“They called just a while ago to let me know that they removed the problematic portion of intestine and Beauty was doing great. They’ll stable her for the night.”

Hunter was nodding intently to everything she said. “You wanna stop by there and check on her before we head home?”

Again, Isobel stopped with her mouth dropped open. “No I do not want to — Are you *insane*?” Then she huffed out a breath and reminded herself that he was heavily medicated at the moment.

“You’re in no shape for a two-hour long car ride.” Isobel shook her head, looking out at the dark road. “Not to mention I wouldn’t want to make that drive at night with a trailer hitched anyway.” Then, more under her breath, “My luck, I’d hit a deer or hydroplane and manage to kill us both yet.”

“Come on.” She took his arm again. “We’re going to go stay at a hotel.”

He cracked a grin at this. “You tryin’ to get me in bed, Ms... Ms...” His face screwed up like he was straining to think. “What’s your last name again?”

Isobel rolled her eyes. “Such a charmer, you are.”

They’d finally reached the truck and Hunter went to grab for the driver’s side door.

“Oh no you don’t, Mr. Dopey-pants.”

He turned and gave her a spectacular grin that took her breath away for a second. It was annoying how handsome he was. “See, you can’t remember my last name either.”

Even heavier eye role. “Mr. Dawkins, would you please be so kind as to get your ass around to the passenger door because there is no way in hell I’m letting you drive in your condition.”

He made a face at her like he was back in Kindergarten. “Who died and made you boss?”

The smile fell off her face. Because today, the answer had almost been: *him*.

“Get a move on.” She pushed past him to unlock the truck and then climbed up inside. He just stared at her. Or more likely he’d been staring at her ass as she hauled herself into the cab. The fact that he was alive to ogle her made her slightly less snappish when she said, “*Now*.” Slightly anyway.

He finally got the hint and came around to the passenger side. He seemed to have some difficulty getting the door open, though. She saw him frowning in confusion at it through the window. Good lord, maybe she should have helped him up before getting in herself. She reached over and opened the door for him.

“Oh.” He took a stumbling step back, reaching for the door to steady himself at the last second. Isobel about had a heart attack in the moment he faltered, though.

“Get in the *truck*,” she all but yelled. For God’s sake, if she survived today, it was gonna be a goddamned miracle. She just needed to get Hunter somewhere where there was a flat surface he could lay down on and not do any harm to himself. She’d swear she lost years off her life driving to the hospital with him half conscious and bleeding all over the passenger seat.

She grimaced looking down at the seats. They were a somewhat washable plastic-y material, and no doubt the truck had seen plenty in its tenure as Hunter’s mobile veterinary office, but still. Seeing the brownish red stains along the seams leftover from her rush clean up job with the towels they kept in the back—

She jerked her eyes away from the upholstery and back to the man who was whole and healthy in front of her.

Hunter had his hand held in front of his face and he was staring at it like it held all the mysteries of the universe. “Have you ever realized your hand is as

big as your face? Like, what does that *mean*?” He looked over at her, wonder filling his face.

Well, he was healthy enough.

“All right, space cowboy. Buckle up.”

When he continued to stare at his hand, wide-eyed, she reached across him for his buckle. He nuzzled into her neck from behind. “You smell good. Did I ever tell you that?”

She jerked the belt sharply across his chest and pulled back, feeling her cheeks flush.

“I always thought so. Is it vanilla? No,” his eyebrows hunched, considering, “it’s got like a fruity thing. Vanilla fruit.” He nodded, then looked at her like he was waiting for her to confirm his theory.

“Um.” She was pretty sure she smelled disgusting at the moment. She’d only gotten a glimpse of herself when she’d run to the bathroom in the hospital earlier, enough to see that her clothes were muddy and her hair a disheveled mess. For once, she refused to allow her vanity to get the better of her, though, and she’d fled the mirror before any insecurities could take hold. Hunter’s *life* was in danger and she’d refused to obsess over petty bullshit.

But Hunter was, for all intents and purposes, fine now. And he was staring at her far too intently for her liking.

So she put the truck in gear and pulled out of the hospital parking lot.

As soon as the truck lurched, Hunter grunted and jerked his torso forward.

Oh. *Ouch*. She hadn’t realized it, but he’d been holding his body away from the back of the seat ever since he’d gotten in the truck. Until she’d started and the momentum pushed his sore back into the seat.

Her stomach knotted up when she thought of how much pain he must be in if it was still hurting through all the meds they’d doped him up with.

Speaking of...

“Hunter, did they give you a prescription you need to fill? To get more pain medication?”

Hunter made a dismissive noise. “I’ll be fine. Dawkins men are tough as nails.”

“Hunter,” Isobel said with a warning voice.

“I’m fine.”

Isobel gunned the engine so the truck jerked forward.

Hunter’s pained grunt at his back hitting the seat again told her all she

needed to know.

“Gimme.” She held out her hand.

“Fine, fine.” Hunter sounded like a chastened little boy as he pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket.

Isobel flipped it over. Vicoden. A month’s worth. Damn, they weren’t kidding around. She’d seen a Walgreens on the way back from the Animal Hospital.

She paused right before turning onto the road to flip on the GPS and click ‘go’ for the hotel she’d mapped earlier. Casper was a bigger metro area, if you could call a tiny city like this a ‘metro.’ But it had a Walmart and, more importantly, a hospital, so she was happy to count it as one.

Apparently this was the main hospital for all of east central Wyoming. Or so the nursing attendant had informed her over and over when she repeatedly asked for news about Hunter. As in, “we’re the only hospital for *all* of east Wyoming. We deal with an *incredible* amount of traffic. Everyone wants to know about their loved one and I assure you, the doctors are moving as quickly as they can while also assuring each patient receives the best care possible. You’ll be the first to know as soon as there’s anything to know.” The woman spoke like she was reading off a script. “Now, have you filled out your loved one’s insurance information forms yet?”

Uh, Hunter wasn’t her loved one and no she hadn’t filled out the goddamned insurance information because she had no idea about any of that. She’d said she was his fiancé so they’d at least tell her about his condition. Except it turned out no one had ever come to tell her squat before Hunter himself came ambling out.

She stopped for the prescription and then they headed to the hotel.

Where there was only one room available—a single with one king size bed. They were lucky to even get that. The rest of the hotel was full of people displaced by the storm.

Isobel didn’t care. She was just glad to get Hunter to their room. She helped him down from the truck and supported him under his arm.

Together, they made it toward their room at the end of the hotel strip. They were on the ground level, thank God. Isobel would have hated trying to get Hunter up the stairs.

Isobel fumbled in her purse for the key.

Meanwhile Hunter leaned in from behind her, all but sandwiching her against the door.

She felt a soft tug on her scalp and looked back to see Hunter rubbing the hair of her sloppy ponytail between his fingers, the corners of his mouth turned down.

“You never wear your hair down. My wife didn’t either. She knew I liked it long. She said that was sexist.” He huffed out a sad sigh. “Maybe so.”

His eyes were apologetic as he looked up at her. “I still like your hair down.”

His ex-wife. He never talked about her.

Isobel knew she shouldn’t pry. If he didn’t talk about his ex, he likely had his reasons. And he was probably only talking about her now because of the drugs.

But the little devil on Isobel’s shoulder won out. “What was she like?” she asked as she finally got the door open.

Hunter let out another long sigh that expelled all the air from his chest. He winced at the movement and Isobel cringed with him. Was it too soon to take one of the Vicodin? What exactly had they given him at the hospital?

“Forget about it. Let’s get you inside.” She helped him in and over to the bed. She pulled back the comforter and then he flopped down on his stomach, boots still on.

Isobel started reaching for his boots when Hunter’s sad laugh stopped her.

“Janie was beautiful. But hard. Like New York. Think that’s why I liked her. She wasn’t like any of the girls here.” He closed his eyes. She wondered if he’d drift off to sleep.

It was ridiculous, she knew. But it still hurt in some stupid, unnamable way to hear him talking about another woman. Knowing he’d loved her enough to marry her. And what about now? Did he *still* love her?

“I visited there once, did you know that?” He flopped his head sideways, cheek landing on one of his hands. “New York.”

Isobel shook her head but Hunter was already continuing. “And I thought, oh. I get it now. We never had a chance.”

He looked so sad and he shook his head again, his eyes dropping closed. “New York women.”

The next second, he shifted on the bed and let out a short grunt of pain.

“Don’t fall asleep yet,” Isobel said, her throat dry. “Let me give you some medicine.”

Her hands shook as she got a glass of water from the sink and a pill from the bottle. “Here,” she managed in a mostly steady voice. “Take this.”

He lifted up and took the pill, lids half-mast. Once he finished gulping down all the water in the glass, he handed it back and then collapsed back to the bed, arms hugging the pillow.

New York women.

It was because she was from New York? He'd pulled the one-eighty after they slept together only after learning she was actually from New York and not New Hampshire.

He thought she was just like his wife. *New York women.*

"Come to sleep, baby," Hunter murmured, face half buried in his pillow.

Isobel jerked back from the bed.

Did he just...?

He'd just been talking about his wife. Was he so out of it he thought Isobel was this Janie woman? His wife?

Oh God. Isobel felt sick.

But so much made sense now. Why he'd been so instantly attracted to her. He just said his wife wasn't like any of the girls around here. So when a new woman showed up in town, with the sophistication of the city on her that reminded him of his wife even if he couldn't pinpoint exactly why...

Her stomach flipped. She shot to her feet and made a beeline for the front door.

But then she stopped as soon as her hand touched the doorknob. She looked back over her shoulder.

Dammit. She couldn't leave him alone right now. No matter how much she wanted to run away and try to clear her head.

Because running was always the answer, right?

She squeezed her eyes shut and leaned her forehead against the door. Shit. Was that really her go-to when things got hard?

After everything that went down that hellish year when she was sixteen, she'd run to Rick and Northingham stables.

Then she'd run away to college.

Then here.

But dammit, what had taking a stand and trying to get control of her future gotten her? Facing her problems hadn't exactly worked back in New York. And every time she tried to assert herself and take charge of her life *here*, she just caused more problems. God, she'd almost gotten Hunter killed because of her stupidity in insisting they go out despite the storm.

She was pretty sure that a tornado dropping down almost *literally* on top

of her was karma's way of giving her the middle finger.

She banged her forehead once on the door before turning around and going to sit on the one chair in the room—the wooden one pushed in at a little desk top beside the TV. She pulled the chair out and stared down at it balefully.

She was exhausted. She needed rest if she was going to drive home tomorrow with the trailer. There was no way she'd even be able to catnap sitting on the uncomfortable chair. She looked over her shoulder.

Maybe she could sleep on the floor? But then her nose wrinkled. God, she was so tired. Her eyes lifted to the bed. Hunter was sprawled out, but mostly just on the left side. With the meds he was on, he'd be dead to the world all night.

She should take a shower. She'd done some spot-cleaning at the hospital but before she got in bed she should really—

Her shoulders slumped, the stress and weariness of the day finally hitting her full force. Oh fuck it. Housecleaning would clean the sheets whether she dirtied them or not.

She flipped off the lamp, then pulled off her jeans. After a second's hesitation, she pulled off her muddy shirt as well.

She'd wake up well before Hunter and slip out of bed without him ever knowing she was here. She got into bed, pulled the covers up over both her and Hunter, and was asleep within a few minutes.

* * *

Oh God, *yes*. Right there.

If he'd only—

But then Hunter's finger circled her clit.

Isobel moaned before remembering they had to be quiet. Hunter had pulled her into the women's restroom at Bubba's, then into the back stall, but it wasn't like there was a lock on the door.

Hunter's hand immediately slapped over her mouth, his hardness grinding into her ass from behind as he pressed her against the wall.

"Hush," his voice was a harsh whisper in her ear. "Those sexy noises you make are only for me. No one else gets to fucking hear them."

With his other hand he shoved her skirt up to her waist and her panties

halfway down her legs.

And she was glad he had his hand over her mouth because she couldn't help crying out and pressing her ass back against him. She hadn't heard him undoing his buckle but his cock was already out. He rubbed it up and down between her ass cheeks while he sucked on the back of her neck.

Oh God, he was driving her so freaking insane. Every touch, the perfect pressure of his fingers at her clit, the feel of him hard at her ass—

But she needed more. More. "More," she groaned out. "Hunter. *More.*"

She flipped so that she could face him and threw her arms around his neck.

"Ow." He flinched and pulled back from her.

Wait. What?

Oh God. His back. How had she forgotten? His back. The storm. The hospital.

This wasn't real. This was a—

Isobel startled awake.

Awake in a hotel bed.

With a very real Hunter.

Who very really had his hands down her pants.

"Hunter!"

"I'm gonna make you feel so good." Hunter was on his side, propped up on one elbow as he kissed down her jaw, his other hand at her core.

She should have pushed him away. No matter how good he was making her feel, he was on medication and might not be fully in the driver's seat at the moment. Plus, his back—

But in the hazy seconds between sleeping and waking, she wasn't processing information fast enough.

And that was when he dipped a finger inside her.

She almost came on the spot.

She'd been so primed by the dream. And it was Hunter. Who was alive. When he so easily could have died today.

That single thought had her grabbing his face and kissing him hard. His tongue was immediately tangling with hers. He kissed her so fiercely and with such urgency. Like he needed her for air. Like he couldn't live without this.

A second finger joined the first inside her and she bucked against him. Riding his fingers.

“Fuck, I’m so goddamned hard. Feel how hard I am.” He grabbed her hand and put it on his cock. Which was indeed very, very hard.

“That’s right,” he hissed. “Fuck, baby. Grab me harder. Jerk it.”

She did and he made a tortured noise of pleasure. Then his hands were back at her opening. “So fucking hot and wet. This cunt. Fuck.” His fingers were less expert than last time he’d touched her there, but he never once stopped moving them. Exploring her outer lips, then thrusting inside and pressing against each wall like he was watching for her pleasure to find out which she liked best.

And oh God, she liked all of it. When her back arched in pleasure, he cursed. “I gotta eat this pussy. Move up the bed. You gotta give me that hot cunt.”

“Hunter, your back,” she tried to protest even as he kissed down her chest and latched on her nipple. I don’t want to hurt y—”

He bit her nipple.

“Ouch!” She yanked back only to see him grinning up at her in the dim light provided by the bathroom.

“Then let me eat out the cunt that belongs to me.”

He tried to bend to move his head down her stomach but his face went taut with pain.

The goddamned lunatic was going to hurt his back all because he was too horny to listen to good sense.

“Fine, fine,” she said, pushing him back and scooting up the bed. She had to let go of his glorious cock, which was a shame. But as soon as her hips got near Hunter, he pushed her legs open and then settled between them, his face buried in her center.

He ate at her with abandon, all sorts of sucking and slurping noises as he’d suck her in and then let go with a loud *pop*. But it wasn’t until he focused on her clit, his long, talented tongue repeatedly lapping forcefully at her small bud that the world split apart.

Oh God— It was— She couldn’t—

“Hunter,” she cried out, her thighs clenching around his head.

He continued suckling her all through the earth-shaking orgasm.

She collapsed back to the bed and for several seconds, Hunter continued suckling gently on her clit. Then he laid the softest kisses all over her pelvis. Up her stomach.

It was so good, so beautiful. He was so... She still didn’t have words. All

she knew was that she wanted to make him feel good in return. Better than good.

She scooted back down the bed with her legs open, ready to take him in her body. But as Hunter lifted to crawl on top of her, he grunted again in pain. His jaw flexed and he kept moving anyway

“Hunter, stop.” She rolled off the bed and he immediately reached for her. But she shook her head. “I don’t want to hurt you. Does it hurt when you stand up?”

“Oh.” Hunter blinked, then frowned. “I don’t know?”

“Try it.” The dim lighting made Isobel feel brave. Or maybe it was Hunter that made her brave. He’d just been kissing her stomach and she hadn’t stopped to freak out once about how he’d think it was too squishy or fat.

And all she could think about now was driving him absolutely crazy. It was always like that with him. She stood up straight as she reached behind her and unhooked her bra. Her breasts fell free and Hunter’s nostrils flared.

He reached for the wall as he got to his feet.

“That’s good. Hold the wall,” she instructed, grabbing a pillow and then dropping to her knees in front of him.

His cock flexed toward her mouth. “Babe, you don’t have to—”

She grabbed hold of the base and then sucked the head of his cock into her mouth. She hollowed out her cheeks as she applied suction and then pulled back with a loud *pop*.

“Jesus *Christ*.” His legs wobbled and she pulled back.

“Is standing okay?”

“Yep. It’s great. All good here. You can keep going,” he spoke in a rush before pausing. “But you know. Only if you want. I’m not saying you have to ___”

She shut him up by sucking his cock back in her mouth.

“*Fuuuuuuuuuck*,” he hissed out, leaning against the wall and staring down at her. “Jesus, you’re gorgeous. So fuckin’ gorgeous. I love your body. You make me so hard.”

He loved *her body*? He certainly wasn’t lying about her getting him hard. He was like steel in her mouth. She hollowed her cheeks to get the best suction she could around his shaft each time his tip plunged past her lips. She was determined more than ever to drive him absolutely insane. She teased his slit with the very tip of her tongue as she slowly pulled back off again. A

girlfriend had told her a trick once to try to spell out the alphabet with your tongue as a way to drive guys crazy.

She'd made it to Z twice before Hunter groaned and pulled out of her mouth. His features were twisted in strain as he looked down at her. He fisted his cock and jerked it up and down roughly. "Baby, I don't know if I can come. I'm so fuckin' hard. Christ I'm so hard." His eyes briefly closed as he jerked his dick a little more roughly but then he opened them back up to look down at her. "But those pills or whatever at the hospital."

He kept jerking on his cock, twisting roughly when he got to the head.

Isobel had been getting a little fatigued. She didn't know how long she'd been at it but if she hadn't had the pillow, she knew her knees would be sore.

"But does it feel good?" she asked.

"Fuck yes," he said, squeezing his dick even harder. "I want to come so bad."

Which made Isobel's sex clench. God, he was sexy even when he wasn't trying to be. She bit her lip. Then took a deep breath. "I want to try something."

She reached up and batted away his hand, grabbing hold of his cock and gripping it as hard as she could before taking over and repeating the motions he'd just been doing.

He slumped against the wall, his eyebrows dropping and his mouth opening in pleasure as she jerked him off. "Anything." It was barely more than a whisper.

"You trust me?" She looked up at him, giving him the eye contact he was always so particular about.

"Anything," he repeated, his eyes burning into hers. "Always."

She smiled coyly up at him and then directed his cock back into her mouth. But then she started to finger herself. She moaned around his cock. God, she'd never before in her life found a blow job sexy but she was already on the brink again.

It was just Hunter's responsiveness. His thighs flexed each time she sucked him in. He was breathing so hard. One hand hovered near her head but it was like he was afraid if he touched her she'd disappear. It was sweet and fucking sexy all at the same time.

Which made her want to do bad, bad things to this man.

After getting her index finger lubricated with her juices, she sucked Hunter's cock in so deep the tip of him touched her throat. Then she teased

the finger she'd just had inside herself at his asshole.

He jerked in her mouth like she'd electrocuted him. He pulled all the way out and she lifted her head to look at him. His gaze locked on hers. His chest moved erratically up and down.

"Do you trust me?" she repeated.

She could see the hesitation in his features but still his head bobbed up and down in a single nod. "Always."

"Then relax." She bobbed the head of his cock in and out of her mouth several times in quick succession until she had him groaning in pleasure again. Only then did her index finger go back to its explorations.

He went tense at first. But then, like he'd ordered himself to, his ass relaxed. When she pushed at his hole, her finger slipped inside.

She hummed around his cock in pleasure. She'd never done this before. Only read about it. The male G-spot. She'd read about it in a romance novel and then done a ton of research to find out just how to do it. Jason had never let her try it out on him. In his words: "all ass stuff is gay."

But Hunter was trusting her. And she intended to reward him. She pushed her finger several inches down his channel, feeling all along the wall toward the front of his body. And... *bingo*. There was a small walnut-sized bump. She began to gently rub and press it.

"Oh *fuck*." A shudder went down Hunter's legs and his hips thrust forward, sending his cock toward the back of her throat. And it was fucking exhilarating. She wanted him to lose control. She wanted him to go fucking crazy.

She continued her massage of the small gland while bobbing up and down on his cock.

He cried out an anguished, feral sound as he jerked his cock out and then thrust back in again. He grabbed the back of her head and roared as he came.

And came.

And came.

She tried her best to swallow his cum but she couldn't keep up and it spilled out her mouth and down the front of her chest.

No time to worry about it though because Hunter stumbled and almost fell to his knees.

"Oh! Hunter."

He grabbed for the wall, just managing to catch himself in time. His hand immediately went to his cock. "More," he growled through his teeth. With

her finger still in his ass she kept massaging his prostate and he groaned as even more cum spilled out of his cock.

Isobel moved and extended her tongue, licking up the cum and watching Hunter through her lashes.

“Fuck. Gonna die. You’re gonna kill me,” he groaned, pushing his cock back between her lips already slick with his cum. He kept thrusting until long after he’d come all he was going to. She slipped her finger out of his back passage.

She got to her feet and started for the bathroom. He immediately pushed off from the wall and started following her. She turned back to look at him. “Lie down. I’ll be right back.”

But there was some look she couldn’t read in his eyes. A wariness. Or... fear. “Don’t leave.”

She went up on tip toe and kissed him. “I just need to wash up. Get in bed.”

She’d meant it to just be a quick peck, but he reached for her cheeks and he held her in place while he kissed her so deep she was gasping for breath by the time he let her go.

He closed his eyes and breathed out, his forehead to hers before finally letting go of her and stumbling toward the bed. He dropped onto his stomach before she could try to help him.

She ran to the bathroom and quickly washed up. Even so, she thought he might already be asleep by the time she got back. In her experience, guys usually went into an immediate coma about three seconds after coming.

But Hunter was awake, his intense blue eyes on her as she got into bed. He immediately pulled her to him, rolling slightly onto his side so he could wrap an arm around her from behind in a modified spooning position.

He must have just been fighting off the sex coma, though, because as soon as they were in place, she felt his entire body relax. And his voice was thick as he whispered the words that would have her awake the rest of the night:

“Love you, babe. Don’t leave me again. Please.” He snuggled into her neck, his arm cinching tighter around her waist. “I’ll do anything. Just don’t leave me again.”

And Isobel went cold from her head all the way down to her toes.

She should have realized as soon as he called her ‘gorgeous.’ For God’s sake, he’d said he *loved her body*. How had she not wised up, right then?

In his drugged head, the whole time he'd been having sex with her, he'd thought she was his ex-wife.

Chapter Eighteen

HUNTER

F *uuuuuuck*. Ow. Christ. Son of a mother—

Hunter's teeth gritted against the pain as his eyes blinked open.

"Goddamn it," he swore, stomach tensing as he tried to breathe through the pain. His back was on fire. Stabbing, painful fire.

He tried to sit up but even the tiniest movements pulled at his back and made it worse.

"Don't try to move." Isobel appeared in front of him like a dark-haired angel, her hair flying around her in a cloud.

For a second he could only stare. She must have taken a shower because she was cleaned up. She had on a pair of zip up coveralls they used in the field and always carried around in the truck—probably the only clean thing she had to put on. It was oversized on her but all he could think about was the fact that it would take one swipe of the zipper and she'd be naked.

Naked.

Suddenly the night before came back to him with the force of a hammer to the head. Her breathy groans. Her on her knees, mouth sucking his cock. Him pumping like a goddamned geyser down her throat after she—

"Hunter?" She held out a pill along with a cup of water. "Here, swallow this." She was looking toward him but wouldn't quite meet his eye. "It'll help with the pain. And this one's an antibiotic." She unscrewed another cap and

handed him a second pill.

Was she really just going to pretend like last night hadn't happened?

"Don't give me any macho bullshit," Isobel said when he laid there unmoving. "Swallow."

Well, how was he supposed to refuse when she went all sexy nurse on him like that? He popped the first pill, then the second, cringing in pain when he lifted up on his elbows to drink the water.

Christ, he was thirsty. The water tasted great.

But it also made him aware of another pressing need. Looked like he'd be getting up from this bed after all.

He went to twist and sit up again. He gritted his teeth but couldn't keep the groan back as he pushed through the pain to pull his body up.

"Hunter!"

He hated hearing the alarm in Isobel's voice. Hated even more that he couldn't do anything about it other than mutter, "I'm fine, I'm fine."

He finally managed to get to a sitting position, his legs swung over the side of the bed.

"What are you doing? You need to lay back down!"

"Bathroom," was all he was able to get out.

She nodded and then sat down, sliding her slim body beside his and slipping underneath his arm.

Warm.

Soft.

Female.

And not just any female.

Isobel.

Again his short-circuiting brain was side-tracked from the pain. If he kissed her right now, would she kiss him back? Or keep pretending like last night had never happened?

It *had* happened... right?

He blinked a couple times. Could it have all been some Vicoden-induced dream? He watched Isobel even more closely.

She bit her plump bottom lip. How was that not a fucking invitation? Or rather, an invitation to fuck?

She was breathing hard and he felt the side of her breast brushing his chest every time she took in air. Was being near him affecting her the same way? Another flash of memory: her screaming his name, legs shaking with

her orgasm while he ate her out.

Fuuuuuuuuuuck, he'd never forget the taste of that sweet cunt for as long as he lived.

But was his doped-up head just mixing up memories from the first time he'd had her? It was so vivid, though.

Then again, right before he woke up, he'd been reliving the storm. That had been vivid as hell too. The twister was coming toward them. Only this time it didn't veer away. It kept coming and coming and he hadn't been able to save her—

At the thought, his chest squeezed until he couldn't breathe.

No. She was safe. Her body was warm. So, so warm. If he just turned into her, he could lean down and bury his face in her neck. Lick along the shell of her ear until her breath hitched in that way that drove him absolutely fucking insane.

“Okay,” she said, her voice no nonsense. “Up in three. One, two—”

Well damn. Guess her thoughts weren't on the same page.

“*Three.*”

She stood up and he had to go with her or else he'd look like a damn fool. So as much as it fucking *hurt*, he lurched unsteadily forward. Again he couldn't help the groan of pain the movement caused.

Though it was actually more of a roar because Jesus *fuck*, that hurt. It hadn't been nearly this bad last night.

“Okay, I've got you, I've got you. You're doing great.” Isobel's small hand went to his stomach to steady him. Low on his stomach. And that just made his brain a mess of cross-firing synapses.

A beautiful woman's hand close to his crotch made him want to grab her and grind his body against hers. Hellfire stabbing back pain made him want to collapse on the floor in a ball. Or pass out again. That would work for him too.

But goddamn it, he had to piss.

So he stumbled forward, Isobel struggling to help him toward the small bathroom.

Isobel shook her head. “They should have kept you another day at the hospital. What were they thinking?”

So this was probably not the best time to tell her he vaguely remembered the doctor saying something about strongly recommending that he stay another day for rest and observation. And Hunter being like, *screw that, I can*

walk, I'm just fine.

Yeah. He was thinking Isobel didn't ever need to know that little detail.

He staggered the last few steps to the bathroom and then grabbed the doorframe to hold himself up.

When he stepped inside and flicked on the light, Isobel started to follow. "Whoa." He moved to block her path. "Where do you think you're going?"

She put a hand on her hip. "Don't be a baby. You need help."

She tried to slip past him but he held out his arm to bar her way. She must have seen the grimace on his face at the action—no matter what he did, it seemed to pull at his back. She immediately stilled.

"Are you okay?" Then her face fell. "Of course you're not okay."

Her lips pinched together and her eyes got watery. "I am so sorry, Hunter. I never even apologized last night. But I'm so, so sorry." She looked absolutely stricken. "You'll never know how sorry. I can't believe how *stupid* I was to risk your life when—"

"Hey." He ignored the pain it caused to lift his hand to cup her cheek. Her hand-wringing stopped and she went absolutely still, her large blue eyes coming up to meet his. "It's not your fault. These things just happen. We don't have any control over them."

That was one of the steps, after all. Acceptance. He couldn't go back and change anything that had happened with Janine—no matter how many times he called the number she never picked up to apologize to her.

What happened had *happened*. As sure as if it was set in cement. There was no time-travel to go back and undo it. No, 'if only I'd known then what I know now.' That was all bullshit fantasy.

Maybe everything had been fated before it even happened. Written down in some book in the sky, predetermined. So even if he *could* go back in time, nothing would have turned out any different.

Some days that thought comforted him.

Others it tortured him.

But Isobel was just shaking her head, eyes haunted. "If I hadn't been so stubborn, insisting we get Beauty to the hospital *right that second*—"

"Stop it." His voice was sharp. "There are no *what ifs*. There's just now. And we're both here now."

She stilled and he noticed her clenched fists loosen. She took a deep breath in. Was she letting go of her guilt? He hoped so. It was no way to live. He should know.

Her eyes dropped half-closed and she turned her head slightly, nuzzling her cheek into his hand as if without thinking about it.

This woman.

Fuck. Did she know what she did to him? And not just below the belt. Her sweetness. Her sassiness. Her intelligence. He'd never met anyone like her.

"I was so scared," she whispered. Her breath was hot on his palms. Her lips so close to his skin.

She was so beautiful. Delicate but strong. A winter rose, like his mom used to grow. His chest filled. He felt... She was just...

Her eyes widened suddenly and she jerked back from him. "Sorry. I'm supposed to be the one taking care of *you*." She dropped her eyes as she stepped out of the door. "I'll be right outside if you need me."

As soon as she closed the door, the pain that he'd been briefly distracted from made itself known again. He didn't bother hiding his grimace since Isobel couldn't see him now.

He turned his back toward the mirror and looked over his shoulder. He tried lifting up the back of his shirt to check out the damage, but twisting his arm like that hurt like hell so he quickly gave up. All he could see was the edge of a bandage anyway.

He went to the commode and quickly relieved his bladder. Then washed his hands and went back out to Isobel. She was making the bed. Unnecessary, since the maids would only strip it to wash everything once they left. Just habit or was she so uncomfortable around him she needed something to keep her hands busy?

"How long was I asleep?"

"You slept through the night." She punched a pillow to fluff it. "It's 7:30."

"Did you sleep?" Now that he was a little more awake, he noticed slight shadows under her eyes.

She waved a hand like it wasn't important. "Are you hungry?" She pulled the comforter over the bed and then smoothed out all the wrinkles.

He didn't miss how she immediately turned the questions back to him. But now that she mentioned it, he was starving. He hadn't eaten since before lunch yesterday.

"There's a Denny's next door," she continued. "I can go get you something and bring it back over—"

“How’s the mare?” He felt bad for just now thinking of it, but he was a little slow on the pick up this morning.

Isobel’s eyes opened wide at his question. Then she immediately jogged to her purse by the door. She quickly reached inside and rooted around for a moment before coming out with his phone. “They said they’d call this morning but I turned the ringer off so it wouldn’t disturb you sleeping.”

She walked back toward him, touching the screen. “Sorry, I had to use your phone. I didn’t think to grab mine when we—”

She froze in her tracks. “Oh. Crap.”

“What?” Hunter took a step toward her at the alarm on her face.

“Your mom has been calling. A lot.” She looked up at him apologetically, then hurried over to hand him the phone. He hobbled toward her, meeting her halfway. He was getting better at this walking thing. It hurt, but not as much as it had when he got up. No doubt the Vicodin was starting to work.

Still, when he got the phone from Isobel, he leaned against the wall. He looked down at the screen. Shit. There were twenty-nine missed calls from Mom. A bunch of missed calls from other numbers too. He immediately dialed his mom back.

“Hunter?” Her frantic voice answered the line after the second ring.

“Mom, it’s me.”

“Oh thank God. *Tom*,” she yelled his dad’s name, not bothering to pull the phone away from her mouth, “it’s Hunter.”

“Mom, I’m sorry I didn’t—”

“Hunter Thomas Dawkins, are you trying to kill your father?” His mother’s voice was irate. “You know he has a bad heart! We got a call last night from the hospital saying you were in surgery. Then nothing, for hours. We called and called, worried out of our *minds*. Then when they finally had something to tell us, it’s only that you were out of surgery but that you’d disappeared! You didn’t check yourself out. You were just gone!”

Hunter winced and held the phone away from his ear for a second as she continued her tirade. When he finally bit the bullet and put it back to his ear, she was midsentence.

“—to mention everyone’s been calling the house all night long looking for you. I couldn’t even take the phone off the hook because we were hoping you’d finally remember your poor mother and father. If you weren’t dead in a ditch, that was. Do you have any idea—”

“Why were people calling the house?” Did the whole town know about

his little hospital disappearing act? Jesus, that meant the town gossip train would be talking about it for—

“Well what did you think people were going to do when they weren’t getting a response from the emergency clinic line? Mollie Sanders wouldn’t stop moaning about her precious corgi who had mala-something-hooey stress because of the storm.”

“Maladaptive stress response,” Hunter corrected automatically. A fancy term that meant the dog was afraid of storms. Mrs. Sanders was sure it was a life-threatening condition that would shorten her beloved corgi’s life. She called Hunter without fail every time there was so much as a distant rumble of thunder.

“Then Bill Sawyers kept going on and on about his prize heifer having trouble calving. I’m trying to tell them I don’t even know if my *son* is safe, don’t come crying to me about an *animal!*”

“Why didn’t they just call Dr. Roberts?” Hunter asked.

His mom let out a huff. “I guess he reinjured his hip when he tried to help Bill with that damn heifer.”

Wow. His mom must be really worked up if she was swearing.

He softened his voice. “I’m fine, Mom. Really.” He ignored the biting pain in his back as he shifted his weight to his other foot. “I’m sorry I scared you guys. It wasn’t surgery, just some stitches. I didn’t realize the hospital had called you.”

“Well they still had us as your emergency contact number on file from when you had your appendectomy there when you were seventeen.”

Hunter smiled, shaking his head. And of course his parents still had the same number a decade and a half later.

“I’m sorry, Mama. I hate that I worried you.” He was, too. After Dad’s heart attack seven years ago and then everything with Janine... well, Mom had had too much to worry about for too long. He hated adding to her burdens.

A heavy sigh came across the line. He heard tears in her voice when she next spoke and it about killed him. “We can’t lose you. I feel like we’ve just got you back after...”

Hunter swallowed. “Don’t cry, Mama. You know I can’t handle that.”

She sniffed loudly. “Who’s crying? I’m not crying.”

There was a brief pause and Hunter imagined her wiping her eyes with one of the kitchen towels. Her voice was strong and no nonsense when she

continued. “Now tell me about this new woman of yours. Everyone’s been seeing you around town together but you don’t bring her to meet your own mother? What kind of son did I raise?”

“*Mom.*” He felt the back of his neck heating up. “It’s just a work thing.” His gaze flipped over to Isobel, who wasn’t bothering to hide the fact that she was following his half of the conversation with rapt attention. He was not about to discuss his complicated relationship to his summer intern with her in earshot.

“I gotta go, Mama. But I’m fine and I’ll call you back later today when I get home. It might be late since I’ll be out taking care of all these calls.”

He was already looking Isobel’s direction and he saw her eyebrows pop up in surprise at his words.

“You do what you gotta do. Just be safe, baby. And if I call you again, you better answer! Or call back within an hour if you’re somewhere without any reception. You promise me.” Her voice was hard but he heard the thread of fear and desperation underneath. He felt horrible thinking about the sleepless night she’d just spent because of him.

“Promise.”

“All right. Love you.”

“Love you too, Mama.”

She hung up without lingering. That was his mom. She was a marshmallow underneath, but you’d never know it for her mama bear fierceness. All she’d ever wanted in life was a big family she could love on. Instead she got his quiet, taciturn father for a husband and, after several miscarriages, him. Just one son to lavish all the love she had to give.

And life as an isolated rancher’s wife wasn’t an easy one—not that he’d ever thought about it growing up. He’d taken her for granted. Taken all of it for granted. It was only when his dad had the heart attack that he’d realized how much his mom needed him around.

How could he, her only son, desert her by moving away to the big city like Janine kept pressuring him to do when his Mom had given up everything for him?

Suffice to say, she and Janine had never gotten along.

“What did you mean by ‘take care of these calls’?” Isobel asked as soon as he got off the phone.

“Just what it sounded like.” Hunter tapped the phone to access his voicemails and put them on speaker phone while he walked over to the

nightstand.

A robotic voice read out the time the voicemail was left: *8:19 pm.*

Hey Hunter, this is Ken Peterson. I'm having some trouble with one of my mares. She got riled up by the storm and smashed herself real good on the fencing—

Isobel had brought in his spare change of clothes from the truck. They were folded on the bedside table. He picked up the button up denim work shirt and shook it open.

Grimacing, he tried to shrug into it. The pain was a lot less sharp than it had been twenty minutes ago but *damn*, that still smarted.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Isobel asked over Ken’s voice talking about the cut on his horse’s flank. “You need to lay back down. Right now.” She stalked over toward him and grabbed his arm, trying to pull him toward the bed.

So anyway, if you could call me back and come on over. It's a nasty gash, bleeding all over the place and I don't want it to get infected. I'm hoping to get her bred in a few— The recording cut off, running out of time on Ken.

There was a *beep* and then the next message started.

8:33 pm. Bill Sawyers here. Need help with Blue's calving. She's one of my best Angus. Expect your call back within the hour.

Beep.

Hunter grimaced and this time, it wasn't from the pain in his back. Whatever had happened with Blue was over and done with now, more than twelve hours later.

He sighed and sat down on the bed.

“Good,” Isobel said, relief clear in her voice. “Now lay down and I’ll go get you some food.”

Hunter reached for his work boots that Isobel had set beside the bed.

“Hunter!”

Isobel started to snatch the boots away from him but he jerked them back, grunting at the pain the move caused.

Isobel’s hands immediately flew up and she stepped back. “I’m sorry.”

Hunter gritted his teeth as he leaned over and slid his foot into the boot. *Aw fuck, aw fuck, aw fuuuuuuuck*, bending over like this was hell on his back wounds. He reached for the laces to tie them even though his breaths started coming short as he fought to breathe through the pain.

“Stop it! You’re hurting yourself.”

She dropped to the floor and knocked his hands away. She didn't pull the boot off, though. She just took over tying them. He breathed out in relief and sat up straight. So much better when he wasn't bent over.

She reached for his other foot and helped him slide it into the other boot. Then her fingers were tightening and pulling the laces. She yanked them extra tight. When he glanced down at her, her mouth was in a taut line.

Clearly, she wasn't happy. But goddamn she was beautiful. And her crouched down in front of him, just like last night, Christ, it was making his dick hard. The memory was fuzzy around the edges, but he'd swear the hardest orgasm of his entire goddamned life was no dream. But how could she act so nonchalant like nothing had happened.

"The animals don't take a day off," he said. "Ever. This is the job."

She jerked her head to look up at him, the sharp movement displacing some hair that had fallen over her neck. And revealing the hickie beneath. Right at the base of her neck where it met her shoulder.

His nostrils flared. He *knew* it wasn't a dream.

"You think you can pull a calf in your condition?" she asked, eyes flashing. "Hunter, you can't even tie your own shoes. You're not going to be any help to anybody until you get the rest you need so you can heal."

It was on the tip of his tongue to bite back that she was singing a different tune last night when she was roughly shoving his face into her pussy.

But dammit, she was right. This morning he could barely walk. The magic combo of whatever they'd given him at the hospital plus Vicodin that had let him enjoy last night's activities without too much pain was long gone. The Vicodin alone was enough to curb the sharpest edge of it, but the truth was, he was gritting his teeth against the pain this very second.

And the thought of farm calls sounded like torture. That didn't mean there was any getting out of them. Isobel would have to drive, of course. And it was true, most of the practical realities of being a large animal vet were physical. It was why Dr. Roberts didn't usually do farm calls at his age.

But Hunter had something Dr. Roberts didn't. He had Isobel.

Isobel got back to her feet after finishing with his laces and she looked at him in alarm. "Why are you smiling at me like that?"

"Do you trust me?"

Her whole body jolted at the words and her eyes cut to him, slightly widening.

It was the same thing she'd asked him last night.

Would she say something now? Acknowledge what was between them?

But she only nodded, eyes fastened on him.

Fine. She still wanted to keep running?

He supposed the real question was whether or not he was up for the chase. Was he willing to risk it all again for love?

He managed to keep his voice even as he said, "Well today's the day you get to jump in feet first, Dr. Isobel. You'll be the primary vet and I'll just be backup."

Her posture relaxed. She smiled but then quickly looked away like she was still gun-shy after the question about trust.

Should he risk his heart on such a skittish woman?

His knee-jerk reaction was *no*. Never again. But he had a feeling that where Isobel Snow was concerned, he might already be a goner.

Chapter Nineteen

ISOBEL

A week and a half later, Isobel was still doing most of the heavy lifting on the farm calls, though Hunter came out with her for most of them in case there were any dicey situations. That first day had been the worst—mostly because Hunter insisted on coming even though she could see the strain on his face with every step he took.

He looked so pale he might pass out by the fifth farm they'd stopped at. She'd taken him home right after, then gone by herself to handle the last couple more routine calls.

And she had. Incredibly. It turned out there might be one thing in life she wasn't useless at after all. Suck on that, Catrina.

If only she knew what to do about Hunter.

That night between them at the hotel had been... well, she'd say *unforgettable*, but apparently Hunter had completely forgotten it.

That wasn't fair. He'd been doped up all to hell. But that wasn't the worst part.

While it had been happening, had it been *her* he was having sex with, or his ex? That was the question that plagued her. She'd been so certain that night he'd been thinking of his ex. But on the endless replay of the night, remembering how he'd looked her in the eyes and how *present* he'd seemed...

Then again, he couldn't recall a goddamned moment of it, so how present could he have really been?

Ugh, she was going to drive herself crazy. She'd been snippy all week because of it. She'd overheard Liam whispering that she must be on the rag. It was a testament to her newfound self-control that she hadn't crossed the room and smacked him upside the head.

If anyone was getting the brunt of her bad mood, though, it was Hunter. But how could she look at him and not hear his words in the back of her head? *Love you, babe*. Which may or may not have been directed at her.

She shook her head as she approached the next cow in the field. She had some truly thrilling work today. TB testing cattle. Woo hoo. There hadn't been a case of TB in Wyoming for over twenty years.

Isobel was just flipping up the second cow's skirt—i.e., their tail—to make the injection when she heard shouting from over at the fence line.

Hunter was waving his arms at her and yelling something. She couldn't make out what. The fastest way into the field had just been to climb through the wooden fence so Hunter had stayed on the sidelines since he was still pretty stiff.

"What?" she shouted back at him, moving a few steps away from the cow. "I can't hear you!"

He used his hands to make a little speaker around his mouth and yelled again, over and over. B something?

"Ball?" she yelled back.

A movement from the left caught her attention and her heart dropped to her feet as she finally understood exactly what Hunter was screaming about.

Bull.

Heading straight toward her. It was huge. It had giant shoulders and a giant hump on its back. Holy *shit*.

"Run!" Hunter shouted.

Isobel didn't need to be told twice. She started sprinting toward the fence.

The bull was already halfway across the field, though, and her second of hesitation had cost her. He seemed to be gaining on her and she pushed harder. The ground was uneven though. If she tripped or fell, she'd be trampled.

She watched the ground trying to avoid any divots or dips in the field. She looked over her shoulder. The bull was far too close. *Shit*. He couldn't be gaining on her.

People ran with bulls all the time in Spain. So a human could outrun one. Right?

Right?

She looked forward. The fence was close now. Maybe twenty feet.

The bull bellowed behind her.

Ten feet.

Hunter had jumped up on the fence and reached out his arms. "Run," he kept shouting, features screwed up in terror. "*Run.*"

The roaring bull noises got closer than ever behind her but she didn't dare risk losing momentum by looking back. When she got close to the fence she jumped, reaching for Hunter's arms even as he stretched over the fence toward her.

He caught her and dragged her over the top of the fence. Their momentum kept carrying them and the next thing she knew, she was flying toward the ground. She landed on her back and Hunter collapsed over her, his chest to hers. He barely stopped himself from smashing into her by catching himself with his hand on the grass beside her.

Isobel blinked hard and gasped, her breath having been knocked out of her.

"Are you okay?" Hunter asked, his eyes frantically searching her face. Then he pulled back and grabbed her cheeks. "Isobel, focus on my finger."

He lifted his index finger and waved it back and forth in front of her face. She followed his finger with her eyes, feeling ridiculous. She would have told him how ridiculous he was if she had the breath to speak with.

Instead she just flopped her head back against the grass as Hunter demanded, "Tell me if it hurts," while he felt down one arm and then the other, then ran his hands up and down her legs.

When he started up the thigh of the second leg she sat up and knocked his hand away. She took a deep breath and finally got enough air to say, "Normal to have," she gasped in more air, "two near-death experiences in two weeks," another gulp of air, "on this job?"

She closed her eyes and focused on getting several deep breaths. "Should have read the fine print."

She smiled and reached a hand out for Hunter to help her to her feet but he wasn't laughing at her joke. No, he was glaring.

"What the hell were you *thinking?*"

"Excuse me?" Isobel asked, affronted.

“I was waving my arms and yelling at you for a full thirty seconds before you started running. What the hell else do you think this—” he waved his arms in an overexaggerated motion that had to be tugging on his back stitches — “means?”

Was he seriously saying it was her fault that she almost got trampled by a bull?

“Are you blaming me for that?”

“You never enter a situation where you don’t know the variables. The first thing you ask when you’re dealing with cows is if there are any uncastrated males around.”

“Well I didn’t see you asking!” Isobel yelled back at him, finally getting to her feet on her own.

Hunter took a step forward like he was going to yell something else but he couldn’t think of anything to say.

Instead, he turned on his heel and stomped back toward the four-wheeler they’d used to get out to the field.

Well, he wasn’t the only one who got to be pissed and act like a preschooler. She stalked over to the four-wheeler and got on the seat ahead of Hunter. She felt more than a little smug satisfaction when his arms had to snake around her waist so he wouldn’t fall off.

While she’d been overly cautious on the way out to the pasture to be careful not to go too fast because of Hunter’s back, now she had no such qualms. She gunned it along the uneven dirt path all the way back to the farm house.

Hunter’s arms tightened around her reflexively and for some stupid reason, it made her smile. It was nice to be in the driver’s seat for *once* where Hunter was concerned. He always made her emotions fly all over the map.

As soon as they got back to the house, however, Hunter was vaulting off the four-wheeler and stomping up to the door. He about banged the thing off its hinges before the owner came out.

Hunter immediately lit into him for not warning them about the bull.

The owner hemmed and hawed about how the bull had never hurt anyone and was docile.

Isobel couldn’t help arching her eyebrow at that and Hunter went through the roof. “Well you and your docile bull can find another veterinarian because I refuse to work for someone who endangers the life of my staff.”

Hunter pulled out the check the man had written him earlier and ripped it

in half before flinging it in the air. It fluttered to the ground as he turned and stalked away from the farm house.

Isobel just lifted her eyebrows again at the farmer because, well, what was there to say after that? She hurried to follow Hunter back to the truck.

His mood had not mellowed any, if the way he slammed his door and yanked his seatbelt on were any indication.

He was riding as a passenger since his back still wasn't healed up enough to lean back against the seat and Isobel tried to get him to rest in between stops. Not that she thought he'd be doing much resting at the moment. She pulled her seatbelt on and put the truck into reverse, executing a three-point turn in the wide gravel driveway and then heading back out onto the road home.

She'd heard that saying before—the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Well, she thought she might need a hacksaw for how tense things were in the cab of the truck. Hunter looked strung so tight that he'd snap with the slightest provocation.

So she really should have known better before asking, “Was it really necessary to ream that guy out so bad? It was probably just an honest mistake, him forgetting to tell us about the bull.”

Maybe it was the devil in her, wanting to poke the bull beside her, because he immediately erupted.

“Mistake? You call that a mistake? That asshole almost got you killed and you think it's just a fucking mistake?”

“Whoa, chill out.” She waved one hand at him.

“Both hands on the wheel,” he snapped.

Oh he did *not* just—

“I know how to drive, thank you very much.” Picking. He was always picking at something. Yes, he might be further along the path in life than her but that didn't mean she was stupid. “And I know how to take care of myself. I saw the bull without any of your help. You yelling and calling all that attention probably just made him start running faster.”

“Me. Yelling?” He enunciated each word and then angled his whole body toward her. “If I hadn't been yelling, you would have kept your nose up that cow's ass until the bull was trampling you. If I hadn't been there you'd be a goddamned—”

He took a deep breath but Isobel was already incensed.

“What?” She looked over at him furiously. “I'd be a what?”

“Pull over,” Hunter snapped.

“What?” Isobel looked back at the road, then checked her mirrors. It was empty blacktop on all sides.

“I said pull over.”

“Why?”

“Goddammit for once can you just do what I ask?”

“Fine!” Isobel yelled, slowly applying the break and bringing the truck to a stop on the side of the road. She jammed it into park and then glared at Hunter while crossing her arms over her chest. “Why are we stopped?” she demanded.

“Because it’s not safe to argue while you’re driving.”

“Ok,” she threw up her hands. “Now I’m so incompetent I can’t even drive your precious truck right?”

“Stop putting words in my mouth. That’s not what I—”

“You know what?” She swiveled back around to face front. “You don’t want me distracted while I drive? Then how about we just don’t talk at all?”

She reached for the gear shift to put the car back into first but Hunter grabbed her hand.

“Goddammit, woman.”

She swung her head toward him, glaring daggers. So help her God, if he said one more thing about her driving or—

And then Hunter was kissing her.

He yanked her roughly into his arms and his mouth demanded response.

And oh God, she couldn’t help but give it to him.

“You don’t know how fucking terrified I was,” he whispered frantically before kissing her again. Then he pushed her back against the car door, his elbow honking the truck’s horn, but he apparently didn’t care because he didn’t stop.

He was wrong. She thought of the blood that had covered her arms when he’d collapsed in front of her. She *did* have some idea just how scared he’d been.

Thinking of that moment and then having him, hot and alive and demanding in her arms— Suddenly her need to have him was all consuming. Her core throbbed with needing it. Needing him. Needing to be filled.

Her hands scrabbled down to his belt. A second later, she was pulling his cock out. He was hot and hard in her hand. She squeezed him and he jerked in her fingers.

Oh God, that giant cock of his. She wanted to lick it and nip it and tease it, but even more, she wanted it inside her.

“Christ,” he swore, his hands just as frantic to pull down her jeans and underwear. She lifted her butt so he could yank them down her thighs and off her feet.

As soon as she was free, Hunter pushed her legs open wide and positioned his cock at her pussy. He didn’t even hesitate a second before shoving in. There were no sweet words. No preparation. He just speared her against the car seat.

Isobel moaned and threw a hand up against the back window. If anyone was driving by, if anybody saw them— But the next moment she couldn’t care because oh *God*, he felt so good inside her.

“Harder,” she commanded, shoving her pelvis up toward him as soon as he pulled back.

“Baby,” was all he said before thrusting into her so hard his balls slapped her pussy.

“Yes,” she cried out. “More. Fuck me harder. Hunter, I need it. I need you so bad. You don’t know. You don’t know.”

She kept saying it over and over because he didn’t know—couldn’t know. How bad she needed this from him. After such a run of shit luck in her life and then to have almost lost him, too? She needed him to make love to her so hard that he fucking marked her. So that it felt *real*. With him fully aware of who was underneath him.

Maybe he felt a little of what she was feeling. Because the next thing she knew, he pulled out and then lifted her by her waist so that she was spread out beneath him on the long bench seat.

His eyes were dark and almost feral as he looked down from above her. Mr. Nice Guy Veterinarian that everyone else thought they knew had left the building. Or the truck, as it were. Instead here was a man who excited Isobel more than any other ever had before.

“I’m going to take every one of your holes until you know who you belong to. You’re fucking *mine*.”

Her nostrils flared at that. Okay, she couldn’t decide if that was the hottest thing she’d ever heard or the most chauvinistic, but him dropping to an awkward perch on the floorboard and starting to eat her out was definitely winning him brownie points toward the hottest lover of the year award. Or you know, the century.

“Oh shit,” she couldn’t help cursing, dropping her hand and winding it in one of the seatbelts. Hunter had latched on her clit and that plus the sight of his dark head buried in her pussy—

Oh God, oh God, yes. Don’t stop. Never stop. Never, ever, *ever*—

The hand not twisted in the seatbelts dropped to his head and she shamelessly thrust her pelvis into his face as her climax hit. One pulse of heat, then two. And she held it, that fucking perfect explosion of everything, the center of light and heat and—

When she finally sagged back against the seat, Hunter was moving, scrambling in the cramped space.

“*Goddamn*, I love it when you fuck my face like that. Do you know how crazy you make me? My dick is hard as fucking iron. I’m always having to hide stiffies around you. Not anymore.”

He slid her even further down the seat and shoved her shirt up. Then he yanked down her bra to expose her breasts. “That’s right,” he hissed out. “Love those beautiful titties of yours.”

He leaned forward and rubbed his cock in the valley between her breasts. Then he massaged and pressed her breasts together until her cleavage made a tight channel around his cock.

He thrust back and forth several times. Seeing his cock jump toward her face from between her breasts—God, why was that so freaking hot? Even though she’d just come, the sight of him using her body for his pleasure like that, holy shit.

She stuck out her tongue to lick the slit of his cock the next time he thrust forward through her breasts and his whole body jolted.

“Christ, I need your mouth, Bel. I need every inch of you.” He shifted so that his cock was right at her mouth. He grabbed it and rubbed it back and forth over her lips, teasing her.

“Tell me you want it.” His voice was so low and gruff and full of lust that Isobel would swear she almost spontaneously orgasmed on the spot.

In answer, she dropped her mouth open wide and sucked him inside.

“Shiiiiit,” he swore as his hips jackhammered forward, almost like he couldn’t stop himself. Isobel didn’t mind. She loved him like this. Unrestrained. Free in a way he could only be with her. Completely real.

She swallowed around him and he swore. He grabbed her head, but instead of using it to shove deeper down her throat, he stroked her hair. “Fuck baby, that’s so good. Do you know how good that is? Christ your throat’s like

a wise. I just want to fuck you and fuck you and *fuck you.*”

He emphasized each *fuck you* with a thrust of his hips. The juxtaposition of his gentle hand at her head and his fat cock forcing its way in and out of her mouth, making her drool all down his shaft and over his balls—Isobel couldn’t help groaning little needy moans around his cock. And when she did that it seemed to make him even crazier.

“Fuck, that’s right baby. Let me know how much you love my fat cock. That’s right. Christ, this is the best hummer— Isobel, shit, I’m gonna— Not yet— I—”

With a growl, Hunter pulled himself away from Isobel’s mouth, using her shoulders to hold her still because she kept chasing after him with her tongue. He’d been about to blow and she wanted to taste him and suck him dry and make him beg at her mercy and—

He glared down at her like he knew what she’d meant to do. But the next second he was leaned down and kissing her so deep, she could taste herself on his lips.

“Fucking vixen,” he whispered, and then thrust his tongue in and out of her mouth in an imitation of fucking.

Her legs squeezed together but then she realized—wait, that’s stupid. She had the hottest fucking man in the universe above her. She reached for his cock and tried to guide him back inside her but was only met with his dark chuckle.

“Oh no you don’t.” He pulled his hips back from her grasping touch. Her eyes flashed up to his in confusion.

“I told you I was taking all of you. Right now.”

His meaning barely had time to register before he was grabbing her and flipping her over on the car seat. “Hands and knees,” he bit out.

Holy shit, he wasn’t really going to— His hands were immediately on her ass, massaging the fleshy globes in his hands.

She squeezed her eyes shut in horror. Her giant ass was in his face. He must be disgusted. She should just turn back around—

But when she made a move, his hand came down in a *thwack* across her left butt cheek. She yelped and jumped on the seat.

“Goddamn but I love this ass. Do you know how many nights I’ve spent dreaming and jerking off over thoughts of this ass?” She felt his warm breath against her flesh and then his teeth nipped and bit at her, up and down all over her ass. She yelped but he just gripped two handfuls again and growled

low.

“After the hotel and knowing what your sweet mouth and pussy felt like, it’s all I’ve been able to think about. Maybe if I’d claimed you completely you’d stop playing these fucking games with me.” He gave her ass another sharp smack.

“The hotel?” Her voice barely came out above a whisper as she looked over her shoulder at him. Did that mean he— “You remember that night?”

His mouth dropped open and his eyes narrowed. “You thought I forgot it?” The question was a mixture of disbelief and anger.

“You didn’t say anything!”

“Neither did you.”

She just stared at him. So he remembered. And he— He—

“You drove me so fuckin’ insane that night.” He kept her gaze as he dipped a finger in her pussy and dragged it along to press at her back entrance. “Now it’s my turn.”

He remembered that night. And he’d known it was *her*.

Her.

He’d called *her* gorgeous. He loved *her* body.

It seemed so obvious now with his body so hot on hers. They were a match. This was right. It always was between them. So why had it been so hard for her to believe it? Why was it always so hard to believe the good stuff?

He sank one knuckle, then two inside her. She clenched around him and moaned, her sex clenching too. Oh God, oh fuck, it was so hot. Was he really going to take her there? Would he fit? Would it hurt?

She was so caught up in him, in the craziness of everything they were doing, she didn’t care. She wanted it to hurt if it meant what he said was true. If it meant it would mark her as his. She’d never belonged anywhere. And he wanted her to belong with him. God, that night in the hotel, he’d said he *loved*—

Nope. Couldn’t think about that right now. Every nerve was on sensation overload. So instead she tried to shut her brain down and rely instead on her body and what it wanted.

And what it wanted was: “*More*,” she groaned, twisting restlessly on the finger he had up her ass. “More, Hunter. You said you’d take me. Stop fucking around and do it.”

He thrust his cock inside her pussy again. She cried out because *yes*, oh

God yes. Not exactly what she meant but she'd take him wherever she could get him.

But then the next second he'd pulled out again. Slick with her wetness, the head of his cock pressed at her anus.

Her eyes popped open wide and her stomach swooped, both in anxiety and excitement as she wriggled her ass at him. An invitation.

His cock pressed in. He didn't shove. More like he kept up a constant pressure until her muscles gave way and let him in.

She grunted at the feel of him. His hands caressed her hips. "You're so beautiful. Christ, Bel, you're so fucking beautiful."

He leaned over and kissed along her spine even as he continued pushing in. Oh, *oh*, wow. It was— She felt—

"Bel, you giving me this, *Christ*." He groaned low once he was fully seated in her ass, squeezing her hip with the hand not bracing on the back window. "There's no going back."

He reached over her shoulder to tilt her head back so she was looking at him. And what she saw in his eyes was enough to have her catching her breath.

"No more running. No more games." He pulled out slowly and then pushed in again. Slowly, so achingly slowly. "You're mine now."

She was glad that he kissed her then because she didn't know what to— How could she— She kissed him fervently, hoping a kiss could communicate what she couldn't yet formulate in words.

"Touch yourself," he whispered. "I don't have a good angle and I want to feel you come around me while I'm in your ass."

Her whole body shivered in delight at his words. He stroked in and out again. She reached and started rubbing her clit just like she did when she was alone. But she wasn't alone now. And that made it so much hotter. God. Oh *God*—

"Fuck that's so hot," Hunter whispered, his breath hot on her neck. "Stick two fingers in your cunt. Fuck yourself with your fingers, baby."

She let out a tortured moan as she obeyed. She was drenched and her fingers slipped right inside.

Hunter's cock jerked in her ass. "Now three. Three fingers." His voice was hoarse. Isobel's breathing went shallow. He was close to losing control. God, she could hear it. And it made her own need spark like nothing ever had before.

“I’m fucking myself,” she said, her voice high-pitched and strained. “What now?”

“Aw hell, baby. Tell me what it feels like.”

“I’m tight,” she gasped. “My little cunt is a tight fit. I bet my ass is even tighter, though.” When he next thrust in, she clenched around him with all her might.

“Bel. Oh Jesus. *Bel*. I can’t— It’s so fucking good. I’m gonna—”

His movements got frantic. He yanked out and then jammed back in her ass. Over and over, just *reaming* her out and God, oh *God*, it was so dirty and so goddamned hot. She fucked herself with her fingers and rubbed her clit with her thumb.

“Fuck! Isobel!” He grabbed both her hips and shoved himself so far inside her, her eyes popped open wide. And she shoved her fingers in and out and ground at her clit until— until—

“*Ohhhhhhhhh*—” She screamed, fingers digging into the seat as Hunter’s cum pumped into her ass and she rode out her own orgasm.

He slumped over her, breathing so hard it was like he’d just run a marathon. They were both sweaty and she was being mashed into the seat, but she barely cared.

“Shit, sorry Bel. Am I crushing you?” Hunter withdrew. He rustled behind her but she barely had the energy to look over her shoulder.

She felt limp and sated and for once, like everything was *right* in the world. It was such an unfamiliar, wonderful feeling, and she didn’t want it to end.

But a few seconds later, Hunter was helping her tug her pants back up her legs. It was awkward and she had to twist and stretch her legs at odd angles before she finally managed to get herself back in order. She avoided Hunter’s eyes. Because what now? After that insanely intense sex? Were they supposed to just—

“Hey.” Hunter’s voice was confident as he pulled her over to the passenger side and up onto his lap. He put his hand underneath her chin. “I meant it. No more games or misunderstandings or whatever the fuck’s been keeping us apart. You’re mine now.”

Isobel gripped his hand so tight she hoped it left a bruise. He wasn’t the only one who could leave marks. “And you’re mine.”

She didn’t know what all that meant. What kind of commitment he was claiming, if any at all. Maybe he just meant she was his in this moment. Right

here, right now, they owned each other completely. That was true enough. As for the future...

But thinking of the future only brought up the past. Would Hunter be holding her so snugly if he knew what kind of person she really was?

Fear lodged in her throat. How long before she failed him just like she did everybody? No more running, he'd said. But it was what she did best.

Not this time, she whispered internally. Not this time.

But as Hunter kissed her shoulder blades reverently as he slipped out of her ass, she wondered if she'd ever be capable of staying and being the woman he thought she was. She knew better. She'd fall apart again and he'd see her for the weakling she really was. She could hardly bear the thought of it.

"We should get going," she said, slipping off his lap.

Hunter grumbled something that sounded like assent but the next second he was pulling her back and kissing her breathless. He kissed all other thoughts out of her head.

When he kissed her like that, for just a moment, he made her believe that anything was possible.

Chapter Twenty

ISOBEL

“Well look who actually came home for once,” Mel teased Isobel over breakfast several weeks later. Isobel’s cheeks went pink.

It was true, she had been spending more nights at Hunter’s cabin than at home lately. But ever since they’d reconnected—as in really *reconnected*—in the truck that afternoon, well, they couldn’t get enough of each other.

It was work all morning in the clinic, then out to farm calls in the afternoon. Hunter was finally taking a hands-on role in her internship and she was learning more than she would have ever thought possible back in her stuffy Cornell classes. There was nothing like up close and personal experience with the animals.

Hunter was patient as he helped her learn the difference between how a heifer’s ovaries felt when she was ovulating and ready to breed and when she wasn’t at peak cycle. They’d been called out for more calvings than she could count since it was the season for it—they didn’t always end happily, but she learned more and grew more confident with each one. While there was nothing to be done about stillborn calves sometimes, they hadn’t lost a mother cow yet.

Isobel had always known that working with horses made her feel good, but she hadn’t expected the bone-deep satisfaction of saving an animal’s life

that people depended on for their livelihood. They were both saving an animal *and* helping people. It brought an insane rush of adrenaline each time. If she were doomed to be an addict, she might as well channel her impulses toward healthy obsessions.

“You just let us know if that boy isn’t treating you right,” Mel’s husband Xavier said gruffly. Several of the other guys at the table chimed in, agreeing with him.

Isobel smiled at Xavier. “Hunter’s great.”

Xavier just grunted. “He better be.”

It had taken Isobel a little while to get used to Xavier’s scarred face. He was such a big man, and then with his face—it was hard not to be intimidated. But then she saw how clearly his wife and sons adored him and after a few weeks she barely noticed the scarring anymore. His older son especially seemed to idolize him. Even though Reece was officially manny to both boys, Dean spent half his day out shadowing Xavier, imitating whatever his father was doing.

Currently, Dean was sitting across the table from Isobel, crammed in between his brother and his father. “Daddy, Daddy.” He grabbed at his father’s giant forearm while Xavier lifted a biscuit to his mouth. “Can we go now? Look, I finished my spinach.” He held up his empty plate for his father’s inspection. “You said I could ride with you if I ate it. Can we go?”

“Me come too!” said Brent, turning and standing up on his chair, holding the back of it for balance.

“Whoa, buddy,” Reece said, snatching Brent up and setting him back on his bottom. The little boy jumped right back up again like a jack in the box. “I wanna go with Daddy and Dean!”

Dean rolled his eyes.

It was such an exasperated expression to see on a six-year-old that Isobel had to choke back a laugh.

“Tell you what, bud,” Xavier stood up, wiping his mouth with his napkin as he went, “later today when I finish up my work, you and me will go around and pet the horses together. Just you and me. Deal?”

“I wanna go now!” the little boy shrieked.

“Whoa, Brent,” Reece said, “that’s not how we talk to—”

But Xavier already had Brent up in his arms, his face only inches away from the little boy. “Do you want to have special time with Daddy later or not?”

The little boy's lip trembled, his face uncertain. "I wanna go now."

Xavier arched a warning eyebrow. "Do I need to count?"

The little boy's eyes widened and he shook his head. "No, daddy. I be good."

Xavier smiled and his whole face warmed. "You're always my good boy. Daddy loves you." He rubbed noses with his son, then tossed him up in the air and caught him again. Brent shrieked and giggled.

"Xav, don't," Mel said when he went to toss him again. "All his breakfast will come back up."

"One more time?" Both father and son looked pleadingly at Mel. She waved a hand and rolled her eyes. "Don't come crying to me if you end up with pancake all over you."

Up Brent went into the air again. Then Xavier kissed him on the top of his head and patted his behind before sitting him back down in his chair.

Isobel took a last bite of her eggs and bagel before moving her chair back when Liam came and grabbed the seat beside her that Jeremiah had just vacated.

"So, birthday girl, what kind of cake do you want Nicholas to bake for dinner tonight?"

"Oh that's right," Mel said, raising a hand to her head, "I almost forgot. Happy birthday, Isobel."

Isobel waved a hand. "Oh. It's nothing."

"It's not nothing," Reece said, wiping Brent's face with a napkin. "Your birthday should be the most special day of the year."

"Which is why you've gotta tell us your favorite cake and liquor so we can have both on hand for dinner."

"That's so sweet, guys." Isobel put a hand on Liam's arm. "But Hunter's actually taking me out on a date tonight."

"Well of course he is. He'd be a brute not to wine and dine his girlfriend on her big day."

Liam's words made her freeze. Girlfriend? Yeah, she guessed she sort of was. Not that she and Hunter had sat down and made it official or anything.

Everything was just so wonderful... which was terrifying. It was like she was floating in some dream bubble and any second it would pop. Then she'd come crashing back down to reality. And it would be ten times more crushing to bear because she'd glimpsed what crazy happy could feel like.

"So we celebrate tomorrow," Liam continued. "Still need to know what

kind of cake. Your American desserts are disgustingly sweet, but when in Rome,” he shrugged and grinned. “I’m trying to develop my sweet tooth. So what’ll it be?”

Isobel shook her head at everyone around the table staring at her expectantly. “Well, I actually don’t like cake either. When I was little, my mom used to always bake me an apple pie on my birthday. It sort of became tradition.”

“That’s sweet,” Reece said, hiking the little boy onto his hip. Only Reece could pull off such a maternal move and not seem a bit effeminate.

“Apple pie it is,” Nicholas said. “Do you like crumble or pastry topping?”

“Crumble, if you know how. But really, you don’t have to go through the trouble if you—”

“Consider it done.”

Isobel couldn’t help smiling as she walked out the door. The longer she stayed here, the longer everyone started to feel like the family she’d never had.

A thought which had the smile falling from her face. Because again, when was the other shoe going to drop?

God, did she have to be such a fatalist all the time? Maybe some people actually got to have a happily ever after?

Chapter Twenty-One

HUNTER

Hunter finished his pork chops and then just sat watching Isobel as she took dainty bites of her burger. He kept waiting for it to get old— watching her, finding out new little quirks of hers, waiting to find some habit that annoyed the hell out of him. Hunter hadn't done a ton of dating before Janine because well, he just hadn't found that many women that he wanted to spend time with.

Either they were interested in things he found mind-numbingly boring or they wanted more of his attention than he had to give. Or they wanted to change him. Or their voices were too shrill. Or they wanted to call him daddy in bed—

Yeah. He hadn't been big on the whole dating thing. But Isobel was just — Jesus, even when they were fighting he was still enthralled by her. And lately since they hadn't been fighting, he'd been able to find out even more about the way her intelligent mind worked. They talked for hours in the car between farm calls, and—

“What?” Isobel's eyes widened. “Do I have something on my face?” She immediately brought her napkin up and swiped around her mouth.

“No,” Hunter laughed. “You're gorgeous as ever. The most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life, actually.”

She frowned and looked down at the tablecloth. She hadn't talked much

throughout dinner. Actually she'd gone quiet about halfway through doing the rounds of farm calls this afternoon. Hunter hadn't pressed it because he knew there were days he didn't feel like talking much and he hated it when people constantly pestered him to know what he was thinking. Sometimes he just wanted to drive and let his mind wander.

But now he wondered if there wasn't more to it. Isobel looked upset.

"I wish you wouldn't say things like that." She set her burger down on her plate and pushed it away from her. Was she not hungry? He knew firsthand the burger tasted amazing. She'd offered him a bite earlier.

"Say things like what?"

She glanced up at him and then back down at her plate. "Never mind." She waved a hand but he could tell by the way her brow was furrowed that she was upset about something.

"Bel, talk to me. What's going on?"

Her jaw flexed and she grabbed her napkin, scrunching it into a ball between her fingers. He thought he was going to have to spend the next ten minutes pulling it out of her but she finally started talking. "Guys usually have a type when it comes to women, right?"

Um. What? Where was she going with this? Hunter slowly shrugged. "I don't know. I guess?"

Apparently that was the wrong answer. She nodded, looking like she was about to start crying even as she stood up and yanked her purse over her shoulder. "I'm tired. I'm gonna turn in early and—"

Hunter jumped to his feet and moved to stop her. "Bel. It's your birthday. We haven't even—"

But she was already hurrying to the door. And goddammit, all eyes in the diner were on them. Jesus. The diner was Gossip Central. Not the place to be having this conversation. Or argument. Or whatever the hell was going on.

Then again, Isobel was almost out the door. Swearing, Hunter fumbled for his wallet and threw a few twenties on the table, then rushed after her.

Outside on the sidewalk in front of the diner, he finally grasped her arm and spun her so she was forced to look at him. Only to find tears running down her cheeks. "Bel—"

She jerked out of his grasp. "I saw the framed wedding picture you keep in your glove compartment earlier when I was looking for hand sanitizer." Her eyes were both devastated and accusing as they flashed up at him. "You keep a picture of her in your *truck*? I guess you're not as over her as you

pretend to be.”

Hunter felt like she'd punched him in the chest. He couldn't help taking a step back from her.

She just started nodding rapidly. “That's what I thought. And I'm not exactly your type, am I? I'm not skinny or blonde or—” She broke off and shook her head. “Just forget it.”

Hunter heaved out a deep breath and ran a hand into his hair. Christ. How did he even begin to untangle all this?

“Jesus, Bel, it's not about being blonde or— I mean, if I think about it I guess you and Janine do have some things in common.” Speaking Janine's name hadn't hurt as much as he expected it to.

And suddenly he wanted to tell Isobel about her. As much for Isobel's sake as his own. He took a step closer to her, speaking quietly as he reached for her hand. She let him take it. “Janine was strong. And stubborn.” He felt the familiar twinge in his chest every time he thought about her. “She was a good woman. Passionate. Rebellious.” He smiled sadly.

“Do you still love her?”

Hunter let his eyes drift, thinking about the small blonde firecracker he had married. They'd made so many mistakes, but he liked to think the love had been genuine. He nodded. “I hope some part of me will always love her.”

Isobel yanked her hand out of his and she backed up several steps. More tears shone in her eyes. Seeing her like that made Hunter's chest ache.

“Isobel, wait.” Hunter started to follow her but she held up a hand.

“If you love your ex so much, maybe you should go find her and be having dinner with her.”

Then, before he could grab her hand again, she turned and hurried down the sidewalk.

“Isobel. Isobel!” he called as she strode down the sidewalk, not looking back.

He jogged and caught up with her just as she reached her car that was parked on the street in front of the diner. “Isobel, stop. Shit. I didn't realize you thought—” He grabbed her shoulders and forced her to turn around when she didn't move.

Her mouth was pinched and she refused to look up at him.

Fuck. There was nothing to do but come out with it. “Janine died a little over a year ago.”

If he thought saying her name was hard it was nothing to uttering that

sentence. He felt like he'd been punched in the stomach as soon as he got it out. He dropped Isobel's shoulders and put a hand against her car to steady himself.

"What? Oh my God, Hunter. The night we met, you just said she left, so I assumed..." she trailed off and Hunter ran a hand through his hair.

"Yeah. I haven't been so great at being able to talk about it. Or deal with it. At all. I even kept on paying her cell phone bill so I could call and hear her voice. It's only just recently that I've been able to..." Hunter paused as a middle-aged woman walked past with a big dog on a leash. The sun had just set and while there weren't a lot of people around, there were still some.

"Want to take a walk?" He held out his hand to her.

She nodded and took it. As soon as he felt her small hand in his, he felt calmer. Like maybe he could tell the story after all. For the first time since giving his statement to the police that night.

"She hated living in a small town. Almost from the first day we moved in." He explained a little about how things had gotten worse and worse toward the end.

"It was one of those nights after we'd, well," he looked away, "been intimate. But then right afterwards, she left to go sleep on the couch. I got pissed. I followed her and we started fighting."

Hunter remembered every detail of that night. Janine had been wearing his ratty old Purdue shirt to sleep in. She was beautiful but he hadn't been able to see it. He was so *tired* of the rut they'd fallen into.

"What do you want from me?" he'd demanded.

She accused him of not loving her.

"Not love you?" he scoffed. "You think I'd put up with all this bullshit if I didn't love you?"

Her eyes flashed with fury and she got right up in his face. "You don't even know me! If you knew me at all, you'd know I could never be happy out here in the bu-fuck middle of nowhere, living with all these uncultured *hicks*. I want to talk to someone who's read this week's New Yorker. I want to go to the theater. I want to go to poetry readings and wine tastings and then I want to put on a skimpy sequin dress and go clubbing and then in the morning I want to go eat a bagel and lox at Benny's on the corner of Broadway and Bleecker."

"So, what?" Hunter threw up his hands. "You want to just up and move back to Soho?"

It was a rhetorical question but Janine shoved her hands on the table and shouted, “Yes! That’s exactly what I want.”

And then she’d gone to the bedroom and started packing.

“What?” Hunter had scoffed. “You’re just leaving? Right now?”

“Right now.”

“But it’s the middle of the night.”

“Well I can’t stand spending another minute in this house.”

Hunter took several steps back from the bedroom at her words. That was when he’d gotten it. She meant it. She was actually leaving him. It had come to this. How had it come to this?

His wife. His beautiful, neurotic, infuriating wife, was about to walk out the front door and out of his life.

And that was when he knew none of the rest of it mattered. Not the mortgage on the house. Not the veterinary practice he was in the process of taking over from Dr. Roberts. Not even his parents.

Janine was his *wife*. She was his first priority. And he’d failed her. He could deny it all he wanted her, but he’d known she was unhappy.

Hunter looked over at Isobel. They’d stopped walking right by the little city park along main street. Her eyebrows were drawn in compassion as she listened to him talk.

“Just a little more time, I kept telling myself.” He shook his head at how stupid he’d been. “Just a little more time and she’ll adjust.”

“But if you realized that... Before she left, I mean,” Isobel said, confused.

Hunter shook his head again. “It was too late. I tried to talk to her. I said that okay, we’d move to Manhattan. That I wanted to go with her. That I was sorry. That she was the most important thing to me.”

But Janine had pulled away from him and grabbed her suitcase. She said she needed some time by herself. She said she had to think.

“And then she got into her car and drove off.” Hunter’s voice was bleak and Isobel reached out and took both of his hands.

“What happened?”

“Car accident,” Hunter whispered. “It was winter. The roads were icy. Her car slid on a curve and she ran into a tree. Died on impact.”

Hunter had to strain to get the next words out. It was the worst bit of all—the part that kept him up at night torturing himself. “But from the time of night and the angle of her car—” His voice broke but he shook himself, determined to tell Isobel everything.

“She wasn’t leaving town. It was right before dawn. She’d driven about two hours away and had turned around. She was coming back. For me. She left because of me and came back because of me. She died because of me.”

Isobel’s hands went to his face. “No, Hunter, no, that’s not true—”

“I know,” he nodded, swallowing hard. “I know.”

“Do you?” Her eyes searched his.

He huffed out a short, slightly bitter laugh. “Knowing in here,” he tapped his head, “and believing in here,” he put a hand to his chest, “are two different things.”

He breathed out, feeling like a weight had lifted off his shoulders. “But I’m glad you know now. After Janine…” He shook his head. “I didn’t think I could ever feel that way again. That I’d ever want to.”

He reached up and covered one of her hands on his cheek. “But then you came to town. Even after that first night, I was already feeling so much for you. I’d been a dead man walking for a year and then—” He looked her in the eye. “It scared the shit out of me. *You* scared the shit out of me.”

Isobel smiled, her eyes full. She flipped his hand so she could kiss his palm.

“But I’m not scared anymore.” He moved back but still held her hands tight. “Bel, I love you. I can’t lose you. It’ll be August in a couple more weeks. I told myself not to think about the future, to just take this one day at a time. But dammit, Bel, I can’t do that anymore.”

“Because I want a future with you. I want it all. I want to wake up with you every morning and have babies with you and grow old together. I won’t make the same mistake twice. We can live wherever you want to. Whatever will make you happy. As long as it’s together.”

And then he dropped to one knee. “Isobel Bianca Snow, will you marry me?”

Chapter Twenty-Two

ISOBEL

“No!” Isobel jerked her hand away from his. She didn’t mean to. It was just automatic.

But God, everything he’d just said, God. Growing *old* with her? *Babies?*

He had no idea. This man who’d already been so broken by the last woman he’d loved. He had no idea about her.

She saw the devastation hit his face at her rejection.

“Hunter, you don’t—” She scrambled for words to make him understand. The last month had been the happiest of her life. Of course she wanted a future with him.

But that didn’t mean it was something she had to give. God, look how obsessive she’d gotten after seeing the picture of his wife. All the old thoughts and insecurities had come roaring back in spite of the progress she thought she’d made since coming here.

She hadn’t even meant to snoop. She’d just opened up the glove compartment and found the picture frame, face down.

As soon as Isobel flipped it over, all the air had swooped out of her chest.

In the picture, Hunter stood side by side with a gorgeous, petite blonde. Isobel’s eyes had immediately zeroed in on the woman. She had such a tiny waist. Like impossibly tiny. Barbie tiny. And her clavicles. They were sharp,

jutting out just like the models in magazines did. In fact, the woman might have well been a model.

The Hunter in the picture looked at the woman like she was his sun and moon and stars.

Like she was his life.

And Isobel's head had immediately jumped to the worst possible conclusions. Which was why she had to refuse his ridiculous proposal.

Didn't he see how screwed up she was? How *crazy*?

The furrow in Hunter's brow moved from pained to confused. But God, how did she even begin to explain? Apparently he was running out of patience, though.

"Talk," Hunter demanded. "Tell me why we can't have a future together. Do you not feel the same way about me? I know this is fast." He ran his hands through his hair. "I can slow down. Shit. I'm sorry. We can—"

"Hunter," she cut him off, pained. "Stop. There are things you don't know about me. About my past." She looked down at the sidewalk. "And my family."

"Then tell me." Hunter put a finger underneath her chin to lift her face. "I want to know everything about you."

Isobel pulled away from his grasp and walked to the center of the park where there was a white gazebo. A couple street lamps lit the path. "You say that now. But you don't know." She shook her head, tears pricking at her eyes.

"Don't tell me what I want." His voice was dark as he moved to keep stride beside her.

God, he wasn't going to let it drop, was he? She took a deep breath. He'd revealed things about himself tonight and now it was her turn to be brave.

"My mother committed suicide when I was eight years old. She hung herself from the ceiling fan in her bedroom while my dad was at work. I was the one who found her."

"Jesus Christ," Hunter hissed out and then the next thing she knew, his strong arms were around her, pulling her to his chest. "When you were just eight?"

Isobel nodded into his chest. For a moment, just a moment, she let herself absorb his warmth and comfort, but then she pulled away from him. She needed to get the rest of this out. She needed him to understand.

"That's not all." Her voice was little above a whisper. "My whole life

everyone told me how much like my mom I was. I looked like her. I was quiet and bookish like her. But only my dad knew that I was emotional and had black moods like she did. Still, everyone talked. After she..." Isobel's voice trailed off. "Well, after that, it was like everyone was just waiting for me to turn out the same. To turn out crazy like her."

Hunter's nostril's flared. Isobel cringed, waiting for him to pull away from her. "People said that to you?"

Isobel shrugged. "It was just the way the grown-ups would look at me. But they must have talked about it behind closed doors because the kids would say it to my face." *Insane Isobel, gonna crack like crackers. Just like her mom.*

"I started seeing a therapist right after Mom died. Apparently I was very *at risk*. That was the term they used. At risk."

"Motherfuckers," Hunter spat. "Your dad was okay with that?"

Isobel shrugged. She didn't really remember a lot about Dad from that period. He worked a lot and she spent most of her time with the nanny and her therapist.

Isobel walked up the gazebo steps. Hunter hurried behind her and swiped a little dirt off the bench seat so they could sit down. It was easier, telling him all this in the dark where she didn't have to look at his face.

"Anyway, a couple years later, he got remarried. A woman named Catrina. I didn't get along with her very well. There were a few rough years." She didn't want to go into all that. It was hard enough to get this out as it was. She finally turned toward Hunter. "What I'm trying to get at with all this is that they were right. I did turn out just like my mom."

"What are you saying?"

Isobel's hands fidgeted in her lap. Then she took a deep breath. Now or never. "I tried to commit suicide when I was sixteen." Isobel squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't bear to see if he cringed or pulled away from her. "It was right after I'd gotten out of a clinic for an eating disorder. I didn't feel like being there had fixed anything and when I got home, things with my stepmom were harder than ever. So I swallowed some pills. A lot of p—"

She couldn't even finish her sentence before one of Hunter's arms went around her waist and the other pressed her head to his chest.

"Christ, Bel, I'm so sorry you had to go through all that." He laid his cheek on her head.

The tears she'd been keeping back finally spilled over. She tried to pull

away from Hunter but he just kept her pressed fast to his chest. Goddamn him. Didn't he realize every second he held her meant it would hurt that much worse when he didn't want her anymore?

"You're not listening," she said, pounding at him. "I'm trying to tell you how fucked up I am. My eating disorder relapsed just this summer after my dad died and—"

"Your dad just died?" Hunter finally pulled her back, only far enough so that he could look at her face.

She wiped furiously at her tears, hating that he was seeing her like this. "At the beginning of April. But Hunter, you're missing the point. I'm—"

"You were grieving," he said firmly. "Who wouldn't be screwed up by that." Then he cupped her cheeks, holding her face in a firm grip. "Do you still think about hurting yourself?"

"No." The response was automatic. And true. "Even when it's bad, I've never gone there again."

Hunter nodded, then pulled her tight to him again. "Because you know, deep down, you deserve everything. A good, full life. You're worthy, Isobel Bianca Snow. You're beautiful and you deserve every good thing life has for you."

How could he— Hadn't he just heard what she'd—

She jerked violently away from him, shoving him back and stumbling to her feet. "I'm broken. I'm no good for someone like you. No matter how hard I try, it won't make a difference. I'll always end up back there." She threw a hand behind her. "Don't you get it? I'm terrified all the time. Why do you think I run so much?"

Isobel put her hands to her head and looked upwards at the dark gazebo ceiling. "Every day I see her there, hanging. God, it was so horrible. How could she *do that*?" Her voice was getting hysterical but she didn't care. "How could she just leave me? Why didn't she love me enough?"

"No, Isobel, don't say that." Hunter got to his feet and approached her but she held her hand out to stop him.

"It's true. I wasn't good enough for my own *mother*."

"Christ, Bel. She was just sick, she didn't—"

"Exactly." She was crying so hard her tears nearly blinded her. "And I'm sick the same way. What if I did that to you? Or God forbid I ever..." Her hands went to her stomach. Oh God, she and Hunter hadn't always been safe when they'd had sex... Wait no, she'd just had her period a couple weeks ago

and they'd been using condoms since then. She dropped her hands and breathed out in relief.

But a man like Hunter deserved children. And she'd never trust herself around them. She sobbed so hard her chest hurt.

"Please let me hold you." Hunter's voice was ragged. "It's killing me seeing you like this and not holding you."

Isobel didn't have anything left so she just shrugged. Hunter must have taken that as a yes because he dragged her against him. Then he sat down on the bench and pulled her into his lap, cradling her to his chest.

He rubbed her back and whispered soothing sounds in her ear. "Shhh, you're going to be all right. It's all going to be okay. I promise. Do you hear me, Bel? I swear we're going to make it all turn out okay."

Isobel just buried her face in his chest. She hadn't even told him about Catrina or the real reason she'd come to Wyoming yet. She didn't have the strength for it right now. His arms around her felt so good, so safe. When he said everything would be all right, stupidly, impossibly, she wanted to believe him.

She knew better. Lord above, she knew better. Good things didn't last. She couldn't shed her DNA like last winter's coat. She couldn't outrun it, no matter how hard she kept trying.

Her hands fisted in Hunter's shirt as she tried to gather the strength to do the right thing—to push him away for his own good once and for all.

But before she could muster it, his phone started ringing in his jeans pocket.

"Shit," he swore. "I'm on call. I have to get that."

She nodded and climbed off his lap. To be honest, she was glad for the interruption. She was so confused. Being in Hunter's arms felt amazing. Like always, it felt *right*.

It was selfish to want him, though, when she was a ticking time bomb. She crossed her arms over her chest while Hunter stood up and answered the phone.

He nodded several times. "How long has the cow been down?" More nodding. Hunter sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Okay Alex, I'll be out there in thirty minutes."

He hung up the phone and looked over at Isobel. She tried for a wan smile. "So we're off to look at a sick cow?"

Hunter breathed out. He clicked his phone back on and checked the time.

“About that. I’m supposed to be getting you down to Bubba’s for a nightcap.”

“What?” Isobel asked in confusion.

“God, Mel’s gonna kill me.” He ran a hand through his hair. “But it’d be shitty to just send you in there like this. It’s a surprise party.”

Isobel’s face must have shown just how horrified she felt by the idea because Hunter crossed the short space between them and took her hands.

“Look, it’s shit timing. I’m sorry. I’m sorry about all of this. I was supposed to make you feel special on your birthday and instead I brought up all this heavy shit. And now I’ve got to leave and take care of this call.” He winced. “Why don’t I just call Mel and tell her you’re tired and not up for it tonight?”

Isobel thought about Mel and all the guys waiting for her in the bar. They’d be disappointed if she didn’t show. And they’d have questions.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had that—people who wanted to celebrate the good times with her and noticed and cared about her enough to press when things were bad. If she’d ever had it at all, apart from the summer with Rick’s family at the stables. In the short months they’d all had together, the people at the ranch had started to feel like family.

“No, it’s all right,” Isobel finally said. She could grin and bear it for a few hours. Who knew, maybe being around everyone would help her forget her troubles for a while? Or at least help her put off making a decision. She was, after all, the queen of running away from things she didn’t want to face.

Her shoulders slumped at the thought but she stood and walked down the stairs and headed toward the sidewalk. Bubba’s was at the end of the block on the other side of the road. There weren’t any more cars parked out front than normal. They must have all either parked in the back or on side streets to keep up the illusion that it was just a regular night.

Hunter was quickly by her side, his hand sliding into hers. It was such a simple gesture, childish almost—holding hands. But Hunter’s grip was so firm and solid that again, she was tempted to believe that anything was possible. That what if maybe, just *maybe*, her future didn’t have to be as bleak as she always assumed?

How could a simple touch do that? But no, it wasn’t just any touch. It was Hunter.

Ugh, she was tired of her rollercoaster thoughts and emotions. Didn’t that just prove she wasn’t stable enough to trust herself?

Before she could think on that too long, though, they were in front of

Bubba's.

"Do you want me to come in with you?" Hunter asked, eyebrows furrowed in concern as he looked between her and the door.

"No." She shook her head and then went up on her tiptoes to kiss him. "Go see to the cow and then hurry back." She looked up at him through her lashes, trying to end the evening on a lighter note. "After all, I still need my birthday spankings tonight."

His eyes flared. "I'll hold you to that."

"You better." When he pulled her into him to kiss her, she couldn't help nipping at his lips. Lust flared through her body. At least this part was easy. There was zero confusion when it came to her body's response to Hunter.

Was it cowardly to ignore everything else and just revel in their connection for a little longer? She winced.

Gorging now and ignoring future consequences was an addict's logic.

Hunter's arms were around her again—how did she keep letting herself get caught in this position?

"I don't know what's going on in that head of yours," Hunter said, dropping his forehead to hers, "but I want you to think about one thing."

"What?"

"Look at me."

She'd had her eyes cast down but she leaned back just far enough so she could meet his gaze. He didn't say anything. She started to ask him what he was thinking but he just covered her lips with a finger. And stared into her eyes.

Like the first night they'd met.

They were fully clothed, standing on a public sidewalk in the center of town. But somehow it felt more intimate than the first time when he'd been naked and buried inside her. And far more terrifying.

She knew him now. She knew that when he slept he preferred the left side of the bed. But his favorite way to fall asleep was with his arm slung around her waist, right beneath her breasts, tugging her ass up against his groin. If they hadn't already made love that night then the position usually led to it.

She knew that while he could wake up as early as any of the farmers around, he was a bit of a bear before he'd had his first cup of coffee. She knew he loved animals but didn't have any pets because he didn't feel like he'd have enough time or attention to give them. She knew how he loved it when she teased him by ever so lightly scraping her teeth along the ridge of

his cock right when he was on the edge of coming.

She knew all of that and a hundred other things. She'd found all that out in just two months. How much more was there to discover? She could spend a lifetime and not know him completely. Because he'd be constantly changing and evolving and oh *God*, how she wanted to be there to see it. To be part of it.

And in his eyes, she saw the offer—the offer of *everything*. No holds barred. No restricted access. She could have all of him if she'd just reach out and take it.

When she blinked, a tear streamed down her cheek.

Hunter finally spoke. “You keep talking about how you run away all the time. But what if you've been looking at it all wrong? What if it's not running *away* from the bad stuff? What if it's more about running *towards* something good?”

She could only blink at him. Everything she was feeling, and then his words... Could she really—

“I gotta go.” He held her face and kissed her hard before pulling back again. He kept cupping her cheeks as he looked her in the eye. “I'll see you later tonight.”

She nodded. She felt a bit speechless at the moment.

“Remember to act surprised.”

She nodded again and he pressed another kiss to her lips before turning to walk toward his truck.

Isobel took a deep breath and then let it out through her teeth. After the emotional night of revelations and the freaking rejected *proposal*, all she really wanted to do was go climb in bed with a pint of Ben and Jerry's.

Hunter wanted to marry her. Could she even wrap her head around that?

Nope, she decided. Not at all. And there was still a surprise party to get through. So she tried to bottle up all her emotions as best she could, and then she turned toward the door.

“Surprised, act surprised,” she whispered to herself.

Then she pushed open the door and put on her best surprised face.

Chapter Twenty-Three

ISOBEL

The bar erupted as soon as she opened the door. “Surprise!” was yelled from everywhere at once and a confetti cannon erupted right in her face. And into her open mouth.

Isobel coughed and waved confetti out of her face

“Jesus, Reece,” Jeremiah said, smacking his twin on the back of the head.

“Give the girl a second to catch her breath, will ya?”

“Oh no!” Mel laughed, coming forward and helping Isobel get confetti off her shirt and out of her hair.

As soon as she’d gotten most of the confetti out of her mouth, one server with a tray of champagne glasses handed one to her, and another approached with a big slice of apple pie. With a crumble topping.

Isobel took the pie and champagne, immediately looking around for Nicholas. He was always easy to spot in a crowd since he was a head taller than everyone else. He was standing toward the end of the bar near Liam, who was bent over his phone. She lifted the plate of pie toward Nicholas and mouthed *thank you*.

He nodded, then looked away, seeming embarrassed at the acknowledgement. That man. Mel was right. Whoever caught him would be lucky indeed. She handed off the champagne and took a bite of the pie—the waiter had brought a fork with it. It melted in her mouth it was so delicious.

People crowded all around to wish her happy birthday. Not just the guys from the ranch but everybody and anybody from the town who she'd even remotely had contact with through the veterinary practice. She was glad that Mel stayed by her side and helped her field all the well-wishers. She was glad too for the pie. Whenever she couldn't remember someone's name, she'd just take a bite. Except soon the pie was gone.

But then it was Liam to the rescue. He came and grabbed her arm right as one of the elderly farmers was starting in on how he was worried that switching to a cheaper feed might make his cows bloat. "Sorry, I gotta steal the birthday girl away," Liam said, then snatched her and pulled her behind him.

Isobel waved at the disgruntled farmer. Then, after they were out of earshot, she whispered to Liam. "Thanks for the save."

"What?" Liam pulled her to the back corner of the bar where Mack was already waiting.

"Did you show her?" Mack asked.

"Show me what?" Isobel looked back and forth from Mack's grim expression to Liam's wary one. "What's going on?"

Liam tapped something on his phone before holding it out to her. "Do you know you're a missing person's case?"

Isobel grabbed the phone which had a video from one of the network morning shows keyed up to play. And there was Catrina sitting on the couch across from the famous host. Isobel's eyes widened and her heart sank through the floor.

"They're calling you The Missing Heiress," Mack said, reaching over and pushing play.

The camera focused on the hostess. "The public is fascinated by this case. Is it true your husband left your stepdaughter half a *billion* dollars in his will?"

The shot switched to Catrina. She'd had professional hair and make-up done but there seemed to be a few more lines on her forehead than Isobel remembered. What, had she been neglecting her botox injections?

"Yes, Isobel's father loved her so much. We both do. It's her birthday today." Catrina dabbed at her eye with a handkerchief. Isobel felt like hitting something. Catrina, crying over her? Yeah, when hell froze over. "I just want to know that she's all right. That she's safe and getting the help she needs so she can receive her inheritance and live the life her father and I always

wanted for her.”

Isobel’s hands clenched around the phone so hard she was afraid she’d crack it.

“When you say ‘the help she needs,’ what exactly do you mean by that?” The hostess tilted her head and looked at Catrina with a compassionate expression.

Catrina swallowed and sniffled dramatically. Isobel scoffed. “Overplaying it a bit, aren’t we, mommy dearest?”

In her periphery, Isobel saw Mack and Liam look at each other but she ignored them as Catrina began to answer.

“Isobel is a... a passionate girl. At times, troubled.” Catrina’s eyebrows came together. “But I’m afraid, sometimes she just...” Tears leaked out of her eyes. “Well sometimes she can become unstable. Violent even. Towards herself and others.”

Catrina stopped and broke down in sobs.

The hostess reached across and put a hand on Catrina’s arm. “I’m a mother too. And so are many of our viewers out there watching.”

The screen went back to a shot of just the hostess, staring straight into the camera. “Again, Isobel Snow has been missing since April 22nd, last seen driving a silver Toyota Carolla heading west on I-80.”

A picture of Isobel appeared on the screen.

Isobel winced. Oh God. It wasn’t a bad picture. They must have gotten it from her phone, but it was one Veronica had snapped of her smiling at Jason back when they’d all been at Cornell. Had they been sleeping together even back then or had it only started after she left?

They’d cropped Jason out of the picture but Isobel couldn’t help wondering if Catrina chose it because she was hoping to get a reaction out of Isobel.

“Do you have any last words in case Isobel or anyone who might know her whereabouts is watching this?” the hostess asked Catrina, who seemed to have barely recovered from her most recent sobbing fit.

The camera focused back on her. “Just please, please, Izzy bear. It’s time to come home. Everything will be forgiven. Just come home and get what you’re due.” Then a number flashed across the bottom of the screen.

Isobel slammed the phone back into Liam’s hand and turned away, barely managing to stop her scream of fury. *Izzy bear* was the nickname her mom—her real mom—had given her. It always set her off when she’d heard it after

her mom died. And Catrina knew it. The bitch knew it and she was trying to goad her.

Plus, what was all that bullshit about Dad leaving her the money?

“Iz?” Liam asked cautiously.

“It’s bullshit.” She swung back around to him. “My dad didn’t leave me squat.” He couldn’t even look at her in the end. “Catrina had him so wrapped around her little finger.” Isobel was shaking, she was so mad. “The first thing she would have done was made sure his will was changed so she’d be the sole beneficiary.”

“I don’t know what that shit was about.” Isobel waved her hand toward the phone that was still in his hand. “Maybe some sort of trick to get me to turn myself in. Like I’d be stupid enough to go back just for the money.”

“Turn yourself in?” Mack asked at the same time Liam said, “Whatever’s going on, just tell us. We can help you. We can—”

“When did that air?” Isobel interrupted both of them.

“This morning,” Liam answered.

She turned away from them, shoving a hand out behind her. “Just give me a second,” she said, knowing they were following her. “I just need a second to think.”

Her first impulse was to run.

Go get in her car and start driving. They knew she’d been on I-80. That interstate led in almost a straight shot across the country to Wyoming. She could go south. Bleach her hair blonde. Cut it short. Head to Mexico.

What if you’re not running away from the bad but are actually running towards something good?

If she ran now, she wouldn’t be running toward anything good. All the good was here. The good was Hunter. And Mel. And Liam and Mack and Nicholas and the twins and Xavier and the boys. It was the animals she got to work with every day. It was this tiny nowhere spot on the map that had embraced her.

She stopped pacing.

No more running.

All along she’d been looking for what she’d found here. A place to belong. Family who loved her unconditionally. People who built her up instead of tearing her down.

When Hunter got back tonight, she’d tell him everything. Whatever repercussions she had to face from her past mistakes, they’d face them

together.

And if it was too much for him? Her heart hurt at the thought. But it was better to know that he couldn't handle all her baggage before she got even more of her heart invested in him. She was stronger now. Every day built her confidence. She'd do her damndest to handle whatever life threw at her.

And in the meantime?

She took a deep, cleansing breath in. In the meantime, she was going to enjoy the hell out of her party.

She turned back to Mack and Liam with a bright smile. "How about this? I promise I'll tell you *all* about it—tomorrow. Tonight, can we just kick back and have a great time? Can you guys do that for me?"

Mack and Liam exchanged a glance. Mack was the first one to speak up, stepping forward and offering her a quick embrace. "Whatever you need, beautiful. You just let us know."

She pulled back, laughing as she looked at the two of them. "Wow." She glanced over their shoulder. "Did I miss the flying pigs?"

"What?" Liam frowned like he was questioning her mental stability.

"The two of you." She gestured between them, laughing. "I thought the two of you would only get along when pigs flew."

"Ha. Ha," Mack said, completely straight faced, muscled arms crossed over his chest.

Liam laughed and pointed at Mack. "What, me get on with this tatted up bastard? You off your nut?"

"What are you guys doing over here in the corner hogging the birthday girl?" Reece came up and took Isobel's hand, then bowed over it and brought it to his lips. "May I have this dance, oh ye fair maiden?"

Isobel put a hand to her chest. "Why I would be honored, sir."

"I call dibs next," Liam said as Reece pulled her toward the area in the middle of the bar where people had gathered and started dancing to the music—country, naturally. But like Liam had said earlier today, *when in Rome*.

She spent the next half hour laughing, dancing, and mingling. She could really get used to this taking-life-as-it-came thing. Why did she spend so much of her life so damn worried all the time?

She took a break from dancing as the twanging notes of steel guitar faded. Her, actual enjoying country music. It was definitely a night of firsts.

She fanned herself as she headed toward the bar where Jeremiah and Nicholas were sitting together. She dropped to an empty barstool beside

them.

“It’s hot in here. Do you guys feel hot? God, I’m so hot.”

“Well I could have told you that, love,” Liam said, coming over and handing Isobel a tall mug of beer. She took it gratefully and pressed it against her heated cheek. Then she took a deep swallow. But she only felt more thirsty and hot afterward. She set the mug down on the table, sloshing beer over the sides. She barely noticed though, she was so busy fanning herself again.

She looked around the busy bar. “Where’s Hunter? He said he’d hurry back.”

“He’s not coming back.”

“What?” Isobel swung around. The voice had come from behind her, she was sure, but when she looked, no one was there.

“Isobel?” Nicholas asked. “You okay?”

“Huh?” Isobel turned around and looked at Nicholas and the others who were watching her. She swiped at the sweat on her brow but then blinked. Her hand felt weird. Swollen. Too large for her arm, like she had a giant lobster claw for a hand. What the—

She jerked her hand in front of her face and shook her head.

Okay. It was normal. Not swollen.

“Aw, is poor little Isobel finally going crazy? Cracking like crackers?”

“Who said that?” Isobel turned so fast her head felt like it moved more quickly than the rest of her body.

“Whoa,” Nicholas said, reaching out and steadying her. “Honey, who are you talking to?”

“Hearing voices is how it starts, you know.”

Isobel jerked away from Nicholas, looking all around her, trying to figure out who was talking. “Do you hear that?” she asked the guys who were all staring at her like... like she was crazy.

“Crazy. Just like me, baby girl.”

Isobel spun around and then she screamed.

Because there, dangling from the neck by a rope, was her mother, her toes barely scraping the bar top.

Chapter Twenty-Four

ISOBEL

Isobel tried to run forward to help her mom down, but her legs wouldn't work. They were distorted like in one of those carnival mirrors.

"Mom!" she cried out, reaching out. If she could just get to her in time, if she could cut her down before—

"Why didn't you save me?" her mom gasped, her hands going to the rope around her neck as her legs started to twitch horribly.

"Mom!" Isobel screamed, again and again, but it was like a faraway sound—a tinny recording on one of those old tape players her dad used to keep around.

Why couldn't she get back in her body? If she was human, she could cut her mom down.

She blinked and Mom was gone. But so was Isobel. Her body was gone. She was outside it. Separate from it. Separate from everything. Even time.

That meant she could go back and undo it all. She wouldn't let Mom leave them. She'd wrap Mom in her Supergirl cape to keep the bad thoughts away. And she'd always be a good girl so Mom would love her enough to stay.

Noises buzzed like insects all around.

Pulling her back.

No. *Mom*.

“Iz!”

“Isobel. Can you hear me?”

“Izzy, talk to us.”

Hands.

Shaking her body.

“Isobel, talk to me. What’s wrong?” Mack. Mack’s voice. Mack’s hands.

She looked down and it was like watching puppets. She watched the Mack puppet grab the Isobel puppet by the shoulders. But the Isobel doll just stood frozen, looking over Mack’s shoulder like a frightened rabbit.

She was dying.

No.

She was dead.

All of this—the little town of Hawthorne. Liam, Mack, the twins, Mel.

Hunter.

None of it had ever happened.

She was still sixteen years old, wasn’t she? She’d just swallowed a bottle of pills. Her dad *hadn’t* come home and found her in time.

People said your life flashed before your eyes when you died, but they never told you it was the future you got to see and not just the past—the future life you *could* have had.

But Isobel wouldn’t get to live any of it.

There would never be a summer at the stable with Rick’s family. There wouldn’t be any of the years at Cornell or dating Jason or Dad dying of cancer. She wouldn’t mind missing out on some of that.

But it also meant there would be no Wyoming. No Mel’s Horse rescue.

No falling in love with the love of her life.

She’d miss it all.

And why?

Because she thought things were so miserable that she couldn’t stand another day of it? Of living in that house with that woman talking down to her and making her feel two inches small?

God, there was so much more to life! It wasn’t fair! She’d been just a kid. She hadn’t known what choice she was making.

And now she never would.

So why? Why show her what she would never have? Why be so fucking cruel?

“Isobel! Thank God! I finally found you!”

Isobel had never believed any of the bullshit about how people who committed suicide went to hell but everything she was experiencing was making her question her belief.

Why else would Catrina be showing up in her afterlife?

Lightning flashed from all sides. Blood roared in Isobel's ears. When she focused her energy on Catrina, suddenly she was back in her body and flying toward the bitch.

Actually flying. Her feet barely touched the ground. Her body defied gravity. She was fucking invincible.

And she was going to make Catrina pay. She was a fucking superhero and this bitch was finally going down.

Ding dong, the fucking witch is *dead*.

Isobel crashed into Catrina with every ounce of momentum she'd gained, immediately taking her to the ground. Her hands wrapped around her stepmother's throat.

As soon as she did, though, Catrina's face distorted and her eyes started glowing red. Horns sprouted from her temples on both sides of her head.

"She's the devil!" Isobel shrieked. "It's Satan!"

But then suddenly bands of steel whipped out of nowhere. They wrapped around Isobel from behind and from the left and the right and she was ripped away from her target.

"No!" Isobel screamed. "It's the devil! I have to kill it. It has to die! I have to kill it."

But the monster that had gotten hold of her wouldn't let her go. It had so many arms. She fought and clawed but it has so many arms—

"What the hell is going on here? Isobel?"

Isobel looked toward the door and there was Hunter. He was bathed in golden light.

Hunter.

Sent from heaven. The love she could have had. The future that might have been hers. If it hadn't been stolen by Satan.

She roared and threw off the arms that held her back. Then she barreled forward through all the shields surrounding the devil.

Isobel was already in hell. But she wouldn't go down without taking Satan with her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

HUNTER

Hunter had no idea what the *hell* was going on. He'd hurried back from the farm call as quickly as he could—the cow had milk fever and had just needed a dose of calcium and magnesium. She was up on her feet in no time.

Then to get back here only to find Liam, Reece, and Jeremiah trying to restrain Isobel, who looked so furious she was about to burst a blood vessel. Not to mention the TV crew and gaggle of reporters that had descended on the bar. They were snapping shot after shot of Isobel like fucking paparazzi.

His eyes went back to Isobel. She did *not* look okay. Her face was red and sweaty and she was snarling that she was going to kill someone. The way she was staring at the woman across the room cowering behind several reporters made it pretty clear who.

Hunter started toward Isobel but all of the sudden, Isobel screeched at the top of her lungs and somehow jerked loose of the guys. She charged at the group of reporters like a raging bull. One of the bastards tried shoving a microphone in her face. “What does it feel like to see your—*oh!*”

Isobel shoved him violently aside, clearly trying to get to the tall, statuesque woman behind him.

Hunter jumped forward as Isobel screamed something that might have been, *Satan!*

What the *fuck* was she on? If one of the guys had given her some goddamned party drug to help her have a ‘good time’ on her birthday, he swore he’d kill the fucker.

“Bel!” he yelled right as her hands went for the woman’s throat. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her backwards. Her legs flew up and she immediately started thrashing wildly.

“Satan! Have to kill Satan!”

He saw how she’d gotten away from the guys earlier. She was using every ounce of strength she had to fight and it was like she didn’t care if she hurt herself to do it. The way she was thrashing, she was likely to dislocate her own arm but it wasn’t stopping her.

Hunter carried her toward the back wall, all the guys and Mel grouping around him as he went. “Nicholas,” he nodded to the largest man, straining to hold on to Isobel who was still fighting like a hellcat.

“Bel. Isobel. It’s us. It’s Hunter. You need to calm down, honey.” Hunter tried to flip her around so she was facing him but she just used the opportunity to thrash out and elbow him in the face.

“Damn.” He grabbed his jaw as Nicholas took hold of Isobel from behind. He crossed her arms over her chest and held them down at her sides like a straightjacket and then gripped her in a backwards bear hug.

“What happened?” Hunter asked, looking around from one shocked face to the next.

“I don’t know,” Liam said, jerking a hand through his hair. “One second she was fine, dancing and partying. The next it was like she was hearing voices. Then when her stepmom and the film crew showed up she just freaked the feck out.”

Hunter’s head jerked around to look at the woman Isobel had attacked. Her stepmother. Who was currently talking to Marie. The Sheriff. And pointing in their direction.

Shit. “We don’t have much time,” Hunter said. “Did any of you give her any drugs?”

“Fuck you,” Mack said, stepping into Hunter, eyes cold.

Hunter wasn’t backing down. He went chest to chest with Mack. “She’s high as fuck on *something*.”

“None of us gave her anything,” the dread-lock twin said.

“Well what has she had to drink since she’s been here?” asked his brother. He looked around at the little group. “Someone could have roofied

her drink.”

“That’s no roofie,” Mack said darkly. “More like fucking meth or angel dust.”

“They handed her some champagne when she came in but I don’t think she even drank it,” Mel said.

“It could be food too,” Hunter said. “Something she ate. We ate at the diner a couple of hours ago but I ate off her plate and I’m fine. Did she eat anything here?”

“Just the pie Nicholas made,” Mel said. “A waiter gave her a piece as soon as she walked in the door.”

“Did one of you tell him to do that?” Hunter asked.

Everyone in the group looked around at one another. Isobel had quieted down with a zoned out look on her face. Christ. They needed to get her to a doctor and find out what the hell was in her system.

Hunter looked at everyone. “So? Did anyone tell the waiter to give her the pie? Were they walking around giving pie to everyone else?”

“They were handing out champagne to everyone,” Mel said, “but not pie.”

“You think someone put something in the pie before they gave it to her?” Reece asked, obviously horrified.

“Pie?” Hunter shook his head in confusion. “Why was there pie anyway?”

“It was a family tradition,” Jeremiah spoke up. “From when she was a kid. She’d have apple pie for her birthday instead of cake. She told us about it this morning.”

“So who else would know she always ate pie on her birthday?” Mack asked, anticipating Hunter’s next question. “If that’s how they drugged her?”

“We were the only ones there,” Mel said, looking around the small circle.

“No. There’s someone else who would know.” Hunter turned around and looked at Isobel’s stepmother. Marie had finished with her and she was apparently so distraught she just *had* to talk to one of the reporters. On fucking video.

“That bitch,” Mel whispered.

“We’ve got to find the plate Iz was eating from,” Jeremiah said. “There are probably traces of whatever she was dosed with.”

“And find the goddamned waiter, too,” Hunter growled.

“On it,” Liam said, heading toward the back of the bar.

Marie strode toward them. Though she was petite with short blonde hair that made her look more like a pixie than an officer of the law, she walked with an air of authoritative confidence. She'd earned the respect of almost everyone in town a couple years ago when she singlehandedly solved one of the most brutal homicides the county had seen in a decade. "Sorry guys, but I gotta take her in. Her stepmother is pressing charges."

"The hell you are," Mack said, stepping between Marie and where Nicholas was still holding Isobel. Nicholas hadn't let up on his grip, but Isobel had gone limp.

"She needs a doctor, not a jail cell," Jeremiah pushed Mack aside. "She's been drugged. Just look at her."

Marie frowned. When she stepped forward to look at Isobel, Mack tried to block her again but Jeremiah shoved him back. The two men glared at each other but Marie ignored both of them. She took out a pen flashlight and shined it in Isobel's eyes. Isobel flinched from the light but gave no other reaction.

"She's on something all right," Marie said. She stood up straight and looked around at all the tall, intimidating men around her. She only came up to Jeremiah's chin but she didn't back down. "But she's heading to lockup first. Then she'll receive medical attention."

Mack started to interrupt her but she cut him off. "And if any of you so much as *think* of interfering with an officer of the law, I'll haul your ass in with her." She leveled each one of them with a cold stare that dared them to fuck with her.

Then she turned back to Isobel. "All right, honey. I'm gonna take you in now." She looked up at Nicholas as she pulled out a pair of cuffs. "Let her go, please."

"Are handcuffs really necessary?" Reece asked.

"Standard protocol for a 10-15 call."

"You swear you'll get her checked out first thing?" Hunter demanded.

Marie nodded, looking him straight in the eye. "We've got Dr. Lucero on call and I'll get him on the line as soon as she's in the squad car."

Hunter huffed out a breath, but letting her go with Marie was probably the quickest way to get her medical attention.

As soon as Nicholas let go of Isobel, it was like she came back to life. She flew at Hunter, grabbing his face in her hands. "I would have loved you. But you're not real. Just my beautiful might have been." She looked so

devastated as she said it.

Hunter grabbed her around the waist. "I'm here. Bel, I'm right here and I'm not going anywhere."

But she just shook her head, a tear sliding down her cheek.

And then Marie was pulling her hands behind her back to put the cuffs on.

"I'll get to the bottom of this," Hunter said fiercely. "I swear." He kissed her even as Marie finished latching the cuffs and started pulling Isobel away.

"I swear I'll fix this!"

Isobel kept looking back at him as Marie led her out of the bar, hand on her shoulder.

He wanted to run after them. But what would that accomplish? He'd promised Isobel he'd fix this and he could do more here. Isobel would be safe at the sheriff's office and the doctor would see to her.

The reporters and cameramen tried to follow Isobel out the door but Marie barked at them. She handed Isobel off to one of her officers at the door and blocked the rest of the squawking reporters.

Damn it, he had to fix this. Fast.

Hunter looked around, then jogged over toward where Liam and Mack were questioning a young guy in a white button up shirt and black slacks. The waiter.

"Talk or I'll smash your fucking face in," Mack said right as Hunter got to them.

The kid's face went white.

Liam rolled his eyes. "Ignore this slap-happy bastard." He pulled out his wallet. "We can be civilized here." He took five one-hundred dollar bills out of his wallet and handed them over to the waiter.

The kid took the money with wide eyes. "That's way more than she gave me."

"Who?" Hunter and the other two asked at the same time.

"Her." The waiter pointed at Catrina. "She just said she wanted everything to be special for the lady's birthday. So I should make sure to give her the piece of pie as soon as she came in the door. Then she gave me the plate of pie and a hundred bucks." He held up his hands. "And she said it was a surprise so not to say who it was from."

"You fucking idiot," Mack muttered.

"The pie was dosed with something," Hunter said. "You helped drug that

woman.”

The waiter’s eyes went wide as saucer’s. “I didn’t have anything to do with that.”

“Then you better go tell the sheriff everything you just told us,” Jeremiah said, leading the guy by the arm toward Marie, who was still fending off reporters at the door.

“Sheriff!” the radio at Marie’s hip erupted loud enough to be heard across the bar. “Suspect is out of her cuffs. Attempting to apprehend now.”

The bar went completely silent for a second.

And then Marie bolted for the door, the reporters and cameramen right on her tail. Hunter was right behind them.

“Get out of my way.” He shoved at the people bottlenecked at the door. Shit. He yanked a skinny guy with a huge camera around his neck out of the way and finally made it outside.

Just in time to see Isobel sprinting down the center of Main Street. A fat deputy trailed her, huffing and losing distance with every step. Isobel was screaming words he couldn’t make out. He immediately took off after her, noting with disgust that the fucking cameraman had set up his tripod and was recording the whole thing.

Isobel was more than half a block ahead of him and his heart all but stopped when she ran straight to her car.

“No!” he shouted. “No. Bel. Isobel!”

But like a nightmare doomed to repeat itself, he watched the woman he loved get into her car and then—

“Isobel. Stop!”

Her door slammed.

It was supposed to happen in slow motion. That was what he’d always heard about moments like this.

But Christ, no, it was just a blink of an eye and then it was over.

The engine rumbled to life.

Then the car jumped forward like she’d stomped the gas. Maybe thinking it was reverse? But it wasn’t. It was in drive.

The car jumped the curb and ran straight into the front of the diner.

Glass shattered. All around, people shouted.

And Hunter ran harder and faster than he ever had in his life.

Chapter Twenty-Six

HUNTER

They'd had to airlift Isobel to the hospital in Casper. Her injuries had been that severe.

In her altered state, she hadn't been clearheaded enough to put on a seatbelt.

PCP. They found fucking PCP in her bloodwork. Not just a little bit, either. Her stepmother had poisoned her. With her birthday apple pie.

And it had fucked Isobel up so much that she'd broken the bones in her left hand to get out of the cuffs without feeling a thing.

Then she'd gotten in her car and—

Hunter fisted both his hands and leaned against the hospital corridor wall. Blood. There'd been blood everywhere when he got to the car. And his Isobel was lying on the hood like a broken doll, her head and half her torso through the front windshield.

There was so much swelling on her brain, they'd had to induce a coma. That was four days ago. Now they were waiting for her to wake up. She should have woken up by now. Why the hell wasn't she waking up?

The door to her hospital room opened and Hunter jerked his head toward it. It was only Reece coming out, his face somber.

Still, Hunter couldn't help asking, "Any change?"

Reece shook his head. But then he closed his eyes and took a deep breath

in. With a decisive nod, he opened his eyes. “But Izzy’s strong. She’ll make it through this.”

Hunter didn’t reply. Janine had been strong too. Hunter knew all too well that sometimes it didn’t matter how strong you were or how much you prayed or how fair it was. Death was going to snatch whoever he wanted, whenever he wanted.

Still, as Hunter walked into Isobel’s room, he caught himself praying, “God, not this time. Not this one.”

Seeing her so small and pale in her hospital bed hit him straight in the gut just like it always did. It was so *wrong*. She was supposed to be up, standing toe to toe with him, eyes flashing, calling him on his bullshit.

He went to her side and sat down in the chair that was rarely left unoccupied. They all took turns sitting with her. Xavier had the kids at home while the other guys took shifts driving back and forth to be here with Isobel and help with the horses.

Only Hunter and Mel had stayed at the hospital the whole time—though she’d eventually had to get a hotel to sleep at night, what with her being seven months pregnant. She’d offered to get Hunter a room too, but he’d declined. He didn’t mind sleeping in uncomfortable hospital waiting room chairs. He needed to be there the second Bel woke up.

Because she *would* wake up. She had to.

“Hey Bel.” He reached over and took her hand. “They said we should talk to you. Let you hear our voices. That you might be able to hear us even if you can’t respond yet. So I just want you to know I’m here. I’m here and I’m not going anywhere.”

He pulled her hand up to his mouth and kissed it. Her skin was so cold. He rubbed her hand between his to try to warm it up.

“Liam just got back from his turn with the horses. Thought you’d like to know that Bright Beauty’s doing real well. Her back legs are healed up almost completely. Dean was begging to ride her so Xavier saddled her up. Liam said she seemed excited to have a rider again. Even if his feet could barely reach the stirrups.”

Hunter attempted a smile but mostly failed. He kept trying to warm her hand up, then paused and reached over to pull up the blanket that had fallen down to her waist. “Gotta keep warm, honey.”

He picked up her hand again after fixing the blanket. It lay so limp in his. His throat got tight.

Just keep talking.

“Things are moving forward in the case against Catrina. Thought you might like to know that too. Marie found another vial of PCP when she searched Catrina’s purse.” Marie had probable cause because of what the waiter had told her. “That was enough to throw her in lock up. Then Xavier and Mel got their lawyer involved. I guess he specializes in inheritance law. They looked into it with your dad’s estate lawyer and it turns out it’s true—he did leave all the money to you. But if your stepmom could get you declared mentally unfit—well, then she’s still officially your next of kin.”

Hunter’s jaw clenched. He’d never thought himself capable of violence toward any woman, but he just might make an exception for Catrina Snow. She’d put Isobel through hell. Not just now. Isobel hadn’t told him much, but it was clear enough that Catrina was a toxic presence in her life. And after what the attorney’s PI had turned up...

Hunter’s stomach went queasy at the thought of Isobel having to grow up with such a vicious, vindictive witch.

“When Xavier’s lawyer contacted your father’s estate attorney, the guy flew out here to confirm it was actually you. I don’t know if you remember, but he’s actually been in here a couple times. Dan. He and your dad were good friends. Your dad had asked him to look into a few things the last year. Like investigating the psychiatrist you saw throughout your teens.”

Hunter had to let go of her hand because he was afraid he might crush it. Every time he thought about this part, he got so furious he wanted to break things. “It turned out there was a lot to know about Dr. Rubenstein. Like how he had a gambling habit. And how on several occasions, he just *happened* to have large sums of money deposited into his account. And how those deposits just *happened* to coincide with extravagant ‘trips’ your stepmother claimed she was taking a group of girlfriends on.”

Hunter’s hands balled into fists and he could feel his blood pressure rising. He paused and took several deep breaths. He looked back to Isobel and it killed him knowing she’d been abused by the people who were supposed to be helping her. “I’m so sorry, Bel. I’m so sorry that she had everyone believing her lies. That she even got the therapist involved to gaslight you and make you think you were crazy. Who the fuck does that?”

He took her hand again. “But your Dad knew. He knew in the end what they’d done to you. Dan gave him the report about a week and a half before he died. That’s when he changed the will. Dan says he was horrified by it.”

Hunter willed her to respond. Watching for any twitch.

Nothing.

“So with all that, the county judge set your stepmom’s bail at half a million dollars. Without access to your dad’s money, she’s broke. She’s being charged with attempted manslaughter and with felony possession. And those are just the charges she faces in Wyoming.”

Hunter had run out of things to say. “I miss you, Bel. Please... just... please.”

He watched her for any sign that she was hearing him.

But she continued lying still like she was frozen under some supernatural spell. Beautiful and perfect and young but forever out of reach.

Hunter looked around and, not seeing anyone, got up from his chair. He leaned over Isobel. He rolled his eyes at himself for being a fucking idiot, but still. He kissed her. He squeezed his eyes shut as he pressed his lips against hers.

Please, Isobel. I’m here. Can’t you feel me here? Come back to me. Fight for us.

Her lips were soft as always, but unresponsive.

He pulled away, eyes searching her face for long moments.

Still nothing.

He huffed out a laugh at himself, then ran both his hands through his hair. Jesus, he was losing it. Like a kiss was going to just magically make her wake up.

He scrubbed his hands down his face.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep beep beep, beep-beep-beep-beep—

Hunter looked up in alarm to see the machines monitoring Isobel start to go crazy.

Isobel began convulsing.

“Isobel!” He reached for the nurse call button and punched it. “Help, we need help in room 301.”

Jesus! Hunter reached out for her but didn’t know where to hold her that wouldn’t make things worse. “Fuck! Fuck!” He ran for the door. “Doctor!” he yelled.

But a team of doctors and nurses were already headed toward the room. Hunter pulled back to make way. “Her heartrate started going crazy and then she started shaking like—”

“We’ll take it from here,” said a male nurse, trying to usher Hunter out of

the room while the others went to Isobel's side.

"She's going to be okay, right?" Hunter asked, shoving the man aside so he could see what they were doing to Isobel.

"Sir, if you'll just—"

Suddenly the beep-beep-beep of her heartbeat became a loud flat line.

Hunter screamed, "Isobel!"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

ISOBEL

Isobel woke up in a white room. White walls. White bedsheets. White floor tiles.

She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed, immediately lifting her hand to her forehead. Whoa. She felt dizzy.

“Hello?”

Where the hell was she?

The room was empty except for a man standing beside a window lit up by bright sunlight. The man was dressed in—of course—all white. They looked like comfortable white scrubs, or maybe a t-shirt and sweatpants.

“Hello?” she said again, standing up. She was struck by another wave of dizziness and had to hold onto the wall beside the bed to steady herself.

Her body felt weird. Oddly... light.

She shook off the feeling. There was something familiar about the man by the window. She took several more steps forward to investigate.

And then her mouth dropped open.

“Daddy?”

The man winced at her words and turned away as she ran forward and grabbed his arm.

It was him.

“How...?”

He looked healthy. His skin was flushed a healthy pink and he was on his feet—far from the emaciated man who couldn't even sit up in bed by the end.

“Isobel.” Her name was heavy on his lips. His head sank to his chest as he said it and he lifted a hand to his temple like he was in pain. Because of her.

Her elation at seeing him again sputtered. Even in this miracle place where her father was healthy again, he still couldn't stand to be around her. His own daughter.

“I'll go.” She backed away from him, her voice thick.

But as she started to turn, her father's hand shot out to stop her.

“No, Isobel.” He finally lifted his head and what she saw on his face froze her in her tracks. Tears welled in his eyes.

“I'm so sorry. I don't expect you to ever forgive me. But I'm so, so sorry.”

Isobel blinked, struck speechless.

“I failed you for years. Didn't believe you when you said—” He turned his face away from her. “I was too much of a coward to face things and make it right. And then it was too late. I know money can't make up for how I failed you but I just needed you to know—you were everything to me.”

“Daddy!” Isobel threw herself into his arms and he wrapped her up in his embrace. She'd never felt such soul-deep warmth in her life.

“I needed you to know that, baby. I love you and I'm so sorry for how I failed you. But now you need to make a choice.”

He pulled back from Isobel and pointed behind her.

She turned around and saw her body on a hospital bed, doctors working frantically all around her. And Hunter near the door, an orderly holding him back.

She swung back around to her father. “What? I don't underst—”

“Sure you do,” her dad said, putting a gentle hand on her arm. “You're so beautiful.” He reached out and touched her cheek. “Just like your mother.”

Isobel jerked back from him. “Exactly.”

Her heart sank as she looked back at herself on the bed. “I'm too much like her, Dad. This will be hard on Hunter. But,” her voice cracked and she had to swallow before going on. “But maybe it's better this way—before I go crazy like mom and screw everything up. Or if we ever had children...” She shuddered at the thought. No, she'd never put a child through what she'd gone through. Better her heart stop beating while she lay on that hospital bed right this second.

Maybe this was what loving Hunter meant. Hurting him now to save him from the far greater hurt she might inflict later on.

“Baby, you aren’t your mother,” Dad said, his eyebrows furrowed. “All I ever wanted for you was to live your own life. I never wanted that single day to define you. It’s why I tried to get you help.” He shook his head but then took her hands, entreating her. “You’re perfect just the way you are. Whether you come with me now or many, many years from now, please know that. You’re perfect.”

There was such sincerity in his eyes as he repeated it over and over. That she was perfect and he loved her just as she was.

But then he glanced over her shoulder.

“Not much time now. You’ve got to make a decision.”

Isobel’s throat went tight as she turned, looking back and forth from the hospital scene to her father. She didn’t know what was the right thing to do.

“What if I can’t decide? I mean, this is too big. I can’t—”

“Doing nothing is making a choice.”

She clutched her dad’s hands.

“I’m scared.”

“I know.”

Her eyes moved from her still form on the bed to Hunter, fighting against the orderly, trying to get back to her.

I want a future with you. I want it all. I want to wake up with you every morning and have babies with you and grow old together.

Was she still running? Even now?

Wasn’t Hunter and the life they might have worth facing her worst fears?

It was then that she knew what she had to do. She just hoped she wasn’t too late.

“I love you, Daddy.” She squeezed his hand.

He smiled and it was full of the morning sunlight. “I know that, too. Love you, baby.”

And then she started running.

Toward Hunter.

Toward a future.

Toward life.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

HUNTER

“I’ve got a pulse!”
“Eye movement.”

The orderly holding Hunter back released him and Hunter ran toward the bed.

“Isobel!” he called out. He stayed several feet behind the doctor and nurses, not wanting to get in their way.

Especially when he saw that they were right, Isobel was blinking and coughing and moving her head like she was trying to get her bearings.

“Bel!” he called, laughing and crying at the same time. One of the nurses moved aside and Hunter couldn’t help himself. He fit himself into the empty spot at Isobel’s side and grabbed her hand that didn’t have the IV in it.

“I’m here,” he said, lifting her hand and kissing it. “Bel, I’m here.”

Isobel’s eyes had been flickering wildly around but at his touch and voice, they settled on his face.

Her mouth opened up and it seemed like she was trying to say something.

She winced, dragging her hand to her throat.

“Water,” Hunter called out. “We need some water over here.”

Hunter had no idea who he was barking orders to or if any second they were going to try to boot him from the room again.

Screw that. His Isobel was alive and awake and nothing was going to

drag him away from her side except the goddamned reaper himself.

Apparently someone had been listening, because the next second, he was handed a cup of water with a straw in it. He immediately held it up to Isobel's mouth, settling the straw between her lips.

She took a sip, then coughed a little, then took another sip.

She tried talking again. Her voice was still croaky and Hunter could barely make her out when she said, "Yes. My answer is yes."

"What?" Hunter asked, leaning in to hear her better.

She took another sip of water and then said louder, even though it looked like it was taking all her energy, "Yes, I'll marry you."

Did she really just—

Hunter let out a whoop and almost dumped the water over in his eagerness to kiss her. Then he pulled back and looked at the doctors and nurses still in the room. "Did you hear that? This woman's gonna be my wife!"

Isobel's exhausted giggle was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard in his life.

Epilogue

LIAM

Liam's leg bounced up and down while the pastor droned on and on and on. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, yada yada. He had to scoff at that last one though. All the people who'd ever loved him had certainly only been in it for the riches.

Hunter had loved Isobel before he knew he was getting a half billion-dollar payday out of the deal, so they might be all right. Liam had tried to get her to write up a prenup but she wouldn't have it. Half a billion was chump change to him but he'd seen people lose their shit over *far* less.

"I do," Isobel said, beaming at Hunter.

"It's just so beautiful," Reece said from beside Liam, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief.

Jeremiah shook his head at his brother but Liam saw him swipe at his eye when he thought no one was looking.

Liam smirked at them. They were a good bunch. Well, except for Mackenzie. That guy was just an asshole. But the others... Liam glanced down the row at the twins and Nicholas. Xavier and Mel were sitting a row ahead of them with their sons—all *three* of them. The baby was napping quietly in Xavier's arms.

Liam had never really had friends like this before. People who were nice to him, just, well, for *him*. The only ones who knew who he was or how

much he was worth were the Kents and somehow, Mack. He had no idea how the fucker had found out. He was sure neither Xavier or Mel had told him.

After Mack confronted him one night about his ‘hidden identity,’ Liam had done his own digging. Which was when he found out Mack had done hard time. An eight year sentence for attempted manslaughter.

Did the Kents know who exactly they had under their roof, hanging around their kids? Apparently they did. Or at least Xavier did. Xavier just waved him off and said not to worry about it when Liam tried to talk to him about it.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Everyone started cheering as Hunter dipped Isobel and planted one on her. It wasn’t a quick peck either. Liam had to tug at his collar because damn. It had been too long since he’d had a warm woman wrapped around him. Far too long.

“There’s a reception after this, eh?” Liam shouldered Jeremiah.

Jeremiah nodded. “At Bubba’s.”

“Classy.”

Jeremiah punched his shoulder and they both got to their feet as the crowd stood up. Isobel and Hunter clasped hands and walked back down the aisle. Liam clapped along with everyone else. Even his cold, sarcastic little heart had to give it to them—those two crazy kids deserved their happy ending.

Liam thought his dad was a piece of work but he was fucking Gandhi compared to the sociopathic shitshow that was Isobel’s stepmom. At least the bitch would be locked up for a while. She made some kind of plea deal so she didn’t get the max sentence but when she got out, she’d be broke, alone, and friendless. Meanwhile Isobel had Hunter and the rest of them. And, ya know, half a billion dollars.

What more could you ask for in a happily ever after? You can bet the media ate that shit *up*. Liam had flown in his PR guy from Dublin to handle the spin. He was one of the few people Liam actually trusted from back home. Then again, bullshit was the guy’s business, so it was entirely possible he was just better at buttering Liam up than everyone else.

That was the problem with money. You never know who was just begging to be bought. In his experience, everyone had a price.

Everyone.

But he was enjoying this little vacation to the wilds of America to pretend

for a little while that they didn't.

And toward that end...

"I call dibs on the hot blonde in the pink dress," Liam said as they joined the sea of people crowding into the aisle to leave the church. He'd only meant for Jeremiah, Reece, and maybe Nicholas to hear.

Mack was several people in front of him but he turned around and glared. "Shut the fuck up. Women aren't meat." More and more people crowded in from the side pews and Liam was forced to pause halfway down the aisle.

So he couldn't do anything but watch on as Mack plunged through the crowd—people had a habit of making way for a six foot giant covered in tattoos of gargoyles and monsters—and approached the woman in the body-hugging pink dress.

Liam's mouth dropped open and his blood spiked. That ruddy bastard—

Mack took the woman's hand and drew it to his lips. She blushed and as soon as Mack released her hand, started toying with her hair.

"Fuck," Liam whispered.

Mack dropped his hand to the small of the woman's back and ushered her out of the church.

"Oh you've done it now, boyo." Liam rubbed his hands together and then shook his arms out like he was getting ready for a jog. "Let the games begin."

The Virgin Next Door

The Virgin Next Door
Roughneck #2

STASIA BLACK

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The ugly duckling is a misunderstood universal myth. It's not about turning into a blonde Barbie doll or becoming what you dream of being; it's about self-revelation, becoming who you are."

- Baz Luhrmann

Chapter One

MACK

Sometimes people needed to die. There was a certain kind of evil where there was nothing to do but to kill it.

Mackenzie ‘Mack’ Knight had learned this lesson early. He’d gotten a full ride academic scholarship to Harvard and hadn’t come home for Thanksgiving because he’d been busy studying for finals. But he’d finished his Philosophy term paper early. He wanted to make it home to surprise his mother on her birthday.

That was when he found her on the floor. Two black eyes and a broken nose.

“He didn’t mean it.” She kept repeating it over and over. “He’s a good man. I upset him. He didn’t mean it.”

When she wouldn’t give him a name, Mack tore through all her shit. Found her phone. Found the fucker’s name.

Mack tore out of the house. But not before grabbing his baseball bat.

Then he went and took care of evil.

The only thing he regretted when the police took him away in cuffs three hours later was that he hadn’t finished the job.

Chapter Two

LIAM

Liam slammed the hot blonde up against the back of the women's restroom door after shutting and locking it.

He kissed her deep and ground his erection into her stomach unabashedly. After all, she was the one who pulled him into the bathroom after a short ten minutes of heavy flirting. If she wasn't going to bother being subtle, well, why should he?

"You're the hottest girl I've laid me eyes on." *Tonight anyway.* He didn't add that last part. A little flattery was expected with these things.

His hand roamed up from her waist to cup her breast. He paused when he felt how unnaturally firm they were. Like two hard little melons. Damn, even girls out here in the middle of nowhere got boob jobs? Was nothing sacred anymore?

But hey, boobs were boobs. Liam plucked at her nipples through the thin little nothing spandex tube top she was wearing.

Then she pulled back from him. "I want to blow you. Is that okay?"

Liam's eyebrows went up. "Well, who am I to deny a beautiful woman when she wants what she wants?"

She giggled. "I love how fancy you talk."

It never failed. His Irish accent got him almost as much tail here in America as being a famous playboy billionaire had back in Dublin.

She dropped to her knees right there on the restroom floor and reached for his pants. Liam leaned back against the door and crossed his hands behind his head. He couldn't help smirking as her little hands fumbled with his belt and zipper.

He could help her, sure, but watching the show like this was more fun. Eventually she managed to get her greedy little hand in his slacks. She yanked out his cock.

Ow. "Gentle," he hissed, his hands dropping to her bleach blonde hair.

She looked up at him through her eyelashes and smiled. "Sorry. I just want to taste you so bad. I didn't mean to be rough. I've seen you at the bar before and I was always hoping we might..." She glanced down like she was bashful.

She had her hand on his knob, her lips an inch away from his crown and she was going to pretend to be shy now? Come the feck on.

Liam wanted to growl at her to shut up and get her mouth on his dick already. He stopped himself at the last second. An Irish accent would only get a lad so far.

And wasn't the whole reason he'd taken this extended vacation to America because he was tired of everyone bowing and scraping at his feet no matter how he treated them? He was trying to learn how to be a decent human being for a change.

He put on his most charming smile, the one he knew brought out his dimples. The bettys went mad for dimples. "Well looking hot as fuck in that little red minidress was sure a good way to get me attention."

She pulled his cock toward her mouth and gave a long, sloppy lick up the bottom side of his shaft. She repeated the action several times, licking him up and down. In a way that reminded him of a deer at a salt lick.

"Why don't you suck me?" He put a little pressure on her head. "Pretend I'm your favorite flavored popsicle, yeah?"

"Am I getting you hot?" she asked, holding the base of his shaft and smiling up at him. Some of her lipstick had smeared onto her chin while she'd been licking at him. Liam had to fight to keep his cockstand.

"Yeah," he said, less than enthusiastically. "So now why don't you suck me in your mouth? That'll get me even hotter."

She grinned like he'd just said Christmas was coming early and popped the crown of his cock in her mouth.

Fucking finally. Liam was just about to relax against the door and enjoy

the ride when she suddenly gagged and yanked back from him.

“Sorry,” she said. Jaysus, the lipstick situation was even worse now, a little bit of saliva dripping from her bottom lip. “I have a really sensitive gag reflex.”

So why’d she fuckin’ go down on him in the first place? This was getting less and less fun by the minute.

“Look, maybe this was a bad idea.” Liam pulled his pelvis back from her mouth and would have stepped away except she still had an iron grip on his dick.

“No, wait!” Her eyes flashed panic and she jumped back to her feet. She leaned in for a kiss but Liam turned his head, not wanting to make contact with her manky lipstick smeared mouth.

She just rolled with it, though. She went up on tiptoe so she could whisper in his ear, hand still on his cock. “I just want to be with you. You can stick it anywhere. Up my ass if you want.”

Well shite. A woman went and made an offer like that, what was a lad to do?

She finally let go of his knob and sauntered over to the sink. She wiped her mouth with her forearm, which helped clear off the smeared lipstick. She was sorta pretty. In the same generic way a hundred other girls were. Liam wasn’t sure if it was worth it. Sure, he hadn’t got his oats off in a while, but the rest of the guys were outside and he’d already been gone too long—

Then the woman—Brittany? Betty? he couldn’t remember—bent over at the waist, her arse pointed toward Liam. She yanked up the nothing little scrap of spandex that was her miniskirt and *damn*.

Her tits might be fake, but that was one-hundred percent genuine, Grade A American arse. She leaned to look at him over her shoulder, then widened her stance even further so that he could just make out the contours of her shaved pussy.

“Any hole you want,” she repeated her earlier offer.

Liam’s cock jumped. He dropped a hand to jerk his shaft up and down as he took a step toward her. He pulled a condom out of his pocket. Lessons that every good Irish boy learned early—never leave the house without a rain-slicker or a handful of condoms. The hope being that even if it was raining cats and dogs outside, a lad would always have a warm, safe place to stick his prick.

“Oh I’m clean,” the woman said when her eyes dropped to the condom in

his hand.

“That’s nice,” Liam said, rolling the condom down his cock as he stared at her tight little arse. This just might be her best side. Yeah she was pretty but she was obviously one of those birds who knew it. Tons of make-up, the fake boobs.

Liam slapped her arse and it jiggled just like a proper arse should. She yelped and glared at him over her shoulder. The glare lasted just a moment, though. The next second she’d softened her features and she licked along her top lip in a way that was obviously meant to be seductive. “Do you want me to help you get it in?”

“No, I got it. Just lean over. Face forward.” He put his hand on her spine to urge her a little lower. His balls were aching and he really wanted to just fuck this chick and get out of here. It’d been almost a month and her pussy was better than his hand.

But it’d really go a lot easier if she just stopped fuckin’ talking. His cockstand was already drooping again and that was just a fecking shame. Her face might only be a six but this arse really was a nine.

His hands dropped down and he caressed the round globes, closing his eyes and pressing his condom covered cock into the crevice of her arse. He massaged and molded her cheeks until they cupped his hard-on.

“Jaysus,” he whispered. “You got one fine arse here.”

He reached around to strum at her clit, still half lost in the feel of his cock grinding her arse. But his eyes popped abruptly open when he touched her flesh and realized she was barely wet at all. What the fuck?

“Oh, that feels so good,” she said breathily, wiggling her arse against his hard on.

“Does it?”

She must not have heard the skepticism in his voice because she just let out another breathy moan.

All right, well, fair enough. He hadn’t done much to work her up other than shoving her up against the wall when they first got in here and then having her gag on his knob. He was willing to put in the work. Any woman who slept with him was damn well going to get off.

It was another of the promises he’d made to himself when he crossed an ocean to leave his old life behind. How many bettys had he fucked throughout his youth without bothering to see to their pleasure? They were fighting to throw themselves on his cock and service him without asking for

anything in return. Okay, that wasn't true—they asked for plenty. Exclusive club memberships. Diamond bracelets. Trips to the Riviera. Just not orgasms. Because *that* might make them look too demanding.

Liam shook his head and tried to come fully back to *this* moment. This woman. This arse.

His forefinger quickly zeroed in on her clit and her body jolted when he made contact. Oh yeah. He hadn't lost his touch. He circled the small bud, loving the feel of how it hardened but all the hot flesh around stayed soft and yielding. He reached around with his other hand and dipped a finger inside her.

She hissed out in pleasure and pressed back against him. And for the first time, it didn't feel like a calculated move. That was goddamned right. He'd make her so crazy she'd forget to put on some stupid fucking show.

He leaned over and kissed the back of her neck, still circling her clit with a gentle, explorative touch.

After his misspent youth and finishing Uni, he really put in the time to discovering the mechanics of female pleasure. He nipped with his teeth at the back of her neck even as he slipped a second finger inside her.

“*Oh. God,*” she whimpered, shuddering around his fingers.

“That's right,” he coaxed, his cock coming back to full mast at her response. “Give it to me. Give it all to me.”

“But you—” she tried to protest. “Stick it in so we can—”

“Hush.” Liam finally increased the pressure on her clitoris, returning over and over again to one particular spot that made her words cut off and her back arch.

“Yes. Keep— Oh my God, *yes.*”

Liam used his thumb to continue strumming her clit. Then he tugged her hair so she'd look over her shoulder at him. He loved watching women while they came. No matter what they rated on the hotness scale, they became beautiful during climax.

“Now,” he ordered, losing the cheerful joviality he'd had all night. “Come. Fucking now.”

Her eyebrows lifted and then her whole face scrunched in surprised longing that almost looked like pain as she orgasmed. Jaysus, he loved that. That line between pleasure and pain. And how fucking fleeting it all was.

Her mouth dropped open and her head tipped back as the shudders racked her body. Liam kept stroking her all the way through it, more fucking turned

on than he had been all night. He was finally hard as a rock against her.

Her body had barely stopped quaking before he had his cock nudging at her now drenched pussy. He grabbed his shaft and rubbed the crown back and forth over her swollen lips.

“Yes. Oh God, yes. Please, Liam. Make love to me. Oh my God,” her voice was hoarse. “I’ve never made love with a billionaire before. You’re even more amazing than I thought— *Oh!*” She grabbed the sink and swiveled her head to look at him as he yanked back from her. “What is it, baby?”

“What did you just say?” He stared at her, willing himself to have misheard her.

She giggled and pushed a stray hair out of her flushed face, again putting on that fake fucking show of innocence. It made him want to fucking gag. In fact, everything about this little bar bathroom tryst was suddenly making him sick to his stomach.

“Just that I’ve never— well, you know.” She blinked her eyes up at him in a way he imagined her practicing in front of a mirror. “Been with someone like you.”

“Someone like me?” It took most of his newly acquired self-discipline to keep his cool.

“*You know.*” She lowered her eyebrows and whispered, “*A billionaire.*”

Liam jerked away from her like she’d slapped him. “Who told you that?”

“Nobody told me, silly.” She stood up, not bothering to smooth down her skirt. The red fabric bunched around her waist, her pussy still exposed. She tried to take a step toward him but he held out a hand to stop her. She cocked her head to the side like she was confused.

“So how’d you know?”

She shrugged, smiling and taking another step toward him. Liam didn’t move and she ran a hand down the buttons on his shirt. She did that thing where she angled her face down and then looked up at him through her lashes.

Another practiced fucking move if he ever saw one. Jaysus, this woman was as bad as any of those leeches back in Dublin. How did he not spot it earlier? He was out of practice, that was for sure. His hand shot up and he gripped her wrist, prying her away from him. “How did you know who I am?”

Her smile faltered as she tried to pull her arm out of his grasp. He didn’t let go.

“How?” he demanded.

“Look, it’s no big deal,” she tried to laugh it off, pulling her hand back when Liam finally let go of her. “I was just curious about the new people in town, so I googled you. Everybody does it.”

She was lying. “What’d you google? You don’t even know my name.”

She looked at the floor before trying on another insincere smile. “Well, Google has that feature where you can look up people by their faces now. So last time you were in the bar, I snapped a picture.”

“Jaysus.” He walked several steps back from her. She was a goddamned stalker. And he’d almost— *Jaysus*. He cringed even at the thought. He’d had a few obsessive women try to stalk him back in Dublin. Then there was the woman he’d had an affair with who tried to claim he was the father of her baby. That had been a fecking nightmare. No wonder this slag hadn’t wanted to wear a condom. She was probably hoping she’d get knocked up and that she could sink her hooks into his life and his bank account permanently.

He was about to turn and get the hell out of there but he stopped. “Who else have you told? About who I really am?”

Her eyes went wide. “Oh I would never tell a soul. I know you wanted to get away from all that scandal and I would hate for any of that to get out—”

“Are you trying to fuckin’ blackmail me?” he bit out.

“No!” she exclaimed and for once she sounded genuine. “I wouldn’t want any of these other bitches getting a hold of you. Besides,” her voice softened. “I know what it’s like to be rich when everyone around you is poor. Daddy owns half the land in this county and people have been jealous of me my whole life. But I knew you’d understand me completely. It was like,” she shook her head, “like fate brought you to me.”

“What a crock of shite.” Liam glared at her. “I didn’t come halfway around the world just to pick me up another damn stalker. This,” he waved between them, “is never happenin’.”

With that he pushed past her and headed for the door. He unlocked it and swung it open, zipping up his fly as he went.

Only to find a thin lad standing on the other side reaching for the handle, a surprised look on his face when he saw Liam. Coming out of the women’s restroom.

Then again, he was a dude reaching for the ladies, so he was obviously confused in general.

“Hey man, wrong bathroom. This is the ladies.”

The lad just stared at Liam. He was wearing a thick flannel shirt underneath overalls and a dirty trucker's hat. Liam had seen him at the bar a few times. One of the sad little ranchers who lived around here. When he just kept standing there without saying anything, Liam wondered if he was slow. Jaysus, sometimes this little backwoods town was depressing as fuck.

"Ladies bathroom," Liam said slower, pointing to the stick figure with a skirt on the door.

"I *am* a lady. Um, a woman, I mean."

Oh. Shite. Liam's eyes immediately dropped to her chest but the flannel was too bulky to make out if there were any breasts hiding underneath. "Sorry."

When he looked up at her face, he could see that though her features were angular, if he tilted his head just right... yeah, she *was* female. Especially considering the way her cheeks were turning pink.

"Do you mind?" She glared at him.

Liam held up his hands. "Sorry. Sorry." He moved out of the way. She shoved the bathroom door the rest of the way open and disappeared inside.

Liam ran his hands through his hair. Way to feckin' step in it. He headed for the bar. He needed another drink. Or ten.

Chapter Three

CALLA

Having her crush think she was a man was just the last in a long line of shitty things that had happened to Calla that day.

But nope. The universe wasn't done screwing her over. Because as soon as she got in the bathroom she saw Bethany Cunningham doubled over laughing and pointing a finger at her.

Calla's eyes shot back to the door. So that was why Liam had been coming out of the women's restroom. He'd been in here with Bethany. She thought of how his hair had been mussed and he'd been buttoning his fly.

"He thought you were a guy!" Bethany laughed even harder.

Great. So Bethany had heard the whole thing. The one person in the world who could make that humiliating experience even worse.

Calla knew how stupid it was to have a crush on a guy she barely knew. Lord, even the word *crush* made her cringe, but she didn't know what else to call it. She'd talked to Liam a couple times when he and the other guys from Mel's ranch came out to Bubba's. Granted, he'd been *very* drunk both times.

But she was done for the first time he'd flashed that gorgeous smile of his. Dimples. It wasn't fair. That accent *plus* dimples? Come on, God, couldn't you be a little fairer when you're distributing things? Why was it always people like Bethany who got the looks and the money? And the guy.

"You've really lived up to your potential. Weren't you voted 'Least

Likely to Ever Get Boobs' in high school?" Bethany cracked up like it was the best joke she'd ever heard, wiping at her eyes. At least Calla had managed to make her smudge her perfect make-up. Bethany had little black mascara tracks running down her cheeks.

It was on the tip of Calla's tongue to shoot back: *weren't you the bitch on the yearbook staff who gave me that name?*

She and Bethany had hated each other ever since they started facing off in barrel racing competitions throughout high school. Bethany couldn't stand the fact that a nobody like Calla could wipe the floor with her in the arena. Out of all the times they went head to head, Bethany only beat Calla *once*. And even then, the bitch had done it by cheating.

But did Calla confront her or kick her teeth in like she wanted to after finding her horse overfeeding on an extra hay sack drenched in applejuice? This on top of the year when she was a freshman, all courtesy of Bethany starting rumors about Calla and the English teacher being in a lesbian love affair.

No. Calla had been an adult about it. Always. She'd turned the other cheek and gone on to compete as well as she could with her hay-heavy horse. Bethany's smile had been vicious as she claimed her blue ribbon.

Calla wished she was the kind of person who could face down the town bully. But she hated confrontation. She had ever since she was a little kid and would hide under the bed when her parents had screaming matches. Then Mama left when Dad got sick. Not before that one last fight, though, where she shouted about how she was still young and there was no reason to let Dad's illness ruin two lives.

"What about Calla?" her dad asked. "What about your daughter?"

Silence. Then, "I couldn't bear watching her get sick too."

"There's only a fifty percent chance she has it. It's just as likely that she's perfectly fine."

"And you expect me to live like that? Hoping on a coin toss? No. It's better if I leave now."

"Better for who?" Calla had never heard her dad's voice so bitter.

Another long silence. "I know I'm a coward. I don't expect your forgiveness. But I'm just not strong enough for this. Goodbye Edward."

Then she left. The house got real quiet after that. Years and years of quiet, her dad only talking to her when there was something to be done around the ranch.

All of this meant Calla didn't say a word to Bethany as she turned to slam back out the door.

"Just admit it," Bethany straightened up. "Your dad raised you like the son he always wanted. You couldn't even get that right. You lost him his ranch. Now what are you going to do? No man is ever going to want you."

Calla froze at the door, an alien fury burning in her chest.

Too far.

Too much.

She'd woken up that morning only to say goodbye to the only home she'd ever known.

All the land that had been in her family for three generations was officially sold to none other than Bethany's father, Ned. He'd been trying to buy them out for years. Dad always swore he'd never sell his land to a Cunningham. Turned out that between the failing economy, a few years of serious mismanagement, and Dad's worsening illness, the choice was made for them.

Not that Dad saw it that way. Last time she went to visit him at the home, he'd refused to even see her. If he'd had his way, they would have fought till the day the bank came and foreclosed on the place. And then Ned Cunningham would get the property anyway—at the bank auction.

Screw it. Calla was tired of keeping quiet and not causing waves. She swung back around to the blonde little Barbie wannabe.

"Well if being a woman means being a vindictive bitch like you, guess I'm happy the way I am. Besides, I don't need a man to validate my existence."

Bethany's mouth dropped open before she scrambled for a comeback. "Good, because the only man who'd want to fuck you would be a gay dude."

"Well at least I know I deserve better than a drunken hookup in the bathroom of a bar."

Bethany looked like she was about to spit fire. "Liam and me are meant to be. Not that I expect some he-she freak like you to understand. No one will ever want you. You'll die old and alone."

Enough. Calla's entire body was shaking as she shoved the bathroom door open. She refused to let Bethany know how well her words hit target.

Calla held her head high as she walked through the bar to the counter. Hey look, God answered some prayers. Liam was nowhere in sight as she walked over to her still mostly full beer mug.

“Hey Bubba,” she said when she got to her stool, “I’m gonna cash out my tab.” She pulled out her phone and clicked on the Uber app. Hawthorne had a total of two Uber drivers, but Wayne only drove on weekends. Tonight there’d only be Carl and he liked to be in bed by eleven. It was ten-thirty, so she was pushing it.

She clicked through the app. Okay, Carl was ten minutes out.

“Heading home so soon?” Bubba ran his hand down his long Santa like beard in the habitual way he had that Calla was sure violated some health code.

She smirked. “Been warming this stool since dinnertime.”

Bubba leaned his elbows on the bar. “Prettiest face gracing my counter tonight.”

Calla rolled her eyes. Bubba sure could tell a whopper with a straight face. “My tab?”

“All right, all right, if you’re in a hip and a hurry.” He pushed off the bar.

He came back with her credit card and a receipt to sign. She signed it and gave a generous tip. She couldn’t afford it, or the drink for that matter, but what the hell. Bubba had been great company while they watched the game he had on. She’d almost been distracted from her shit life for awhile and that was worth throwing away a little money she didn’t have to spend, right?

“Don’t forget to get your fortune,” Bubba said, fishing a fortune cookie out of the large jar he had set up beside his cash register.

Calla lifted an eyebrow. “You do realize this joint isn’t a Chinese restaurant, right?”

“What? My Susie loves reading her horoscope every morning. And I’m always looking for little ways to jazz things up around here.” He grinned, his ruddy cheeks pink and his coffee-stained teeth shining.

“Hey, I’ll take all the luck I can get,” Calla took the fortune cookie from him.

“Have a good night, gorgeous.”

Calla rolled her eyes again. She heard a loud laugh from the far end of the bar that sounded a lot like Liam’s—a fact she hated that she knew, and decided to wait for Carl outside. It wasn’t just Liam. All night everyone had been flashing her pitying looks. Town the size of Hawthorne, everyone knew everyone else’s business. She was sure she and Daddy had been a hot gossip topic lately.

She shoved the fortune cookie in her pocket and headed for the door.

“Night, Cal,” a couple people called out as she walked by. She just nodded, avoiding everyone’s eyes.

She kept her back straight, chin up until she was out of the bar. Once she was out of sight of everyone, though, she collapsed back against the brick wall. She squeezed her eyes shut as the events of earlier that morning flashed for the hundredth time.

Today was the hardest since she’d moved Dad into the nursing home six months ago. The ranch was so in debt they’d barely come out of the deal with enough to secure his long-term care. Huntington’s Disease was degenerative and he only got worse as the years passed. But being so cash-strapped also meant that in addition to her truck, she’d had to sell her horse.

She’d taken Prissy out for one last ride before Chris Mendoza, a local trainer she’d sold him to, came to pick her up.

“Okay, girl.” Calla had scratched down Prissy’s long nose. “One last ride.”

It was a warm June afternoon but Calla felt cold through and through. She smiled though, not wanting Prissy to pick up on her mood.

Prissy snorted and nudged Calla with her nose. Calla wasn’t fooling her. Prissy knew something was off.

“Can’t get anything past you, can I, Priss?”

Calla ran her hands along Prissy’s sleek shoulder and flank, not wanting to lose a single second of contact during the short time she had left with her beloved mare. Her best friend.

Calla lifted a foot in the stirrups and then hiked herself up. Prissy neighed, throwing her head and stepping forward. Calla shifted her weight and got her seat right in time.

“Whoa, whoa, girl. What is it?”

But as Calla looked down the long road that led to her dad’s ranch, her stomach sank.

No. Not Dad’s ranch anymore.

She’d signed the papers just yesterday finalizing the sale. Ned Cunningham hadn’t made any bones about the fact that he expected Calla off the property within twenty-four hours and that anything she left behind was forfeit.

Calla swallowed as she watched the progress of the truck and trailer rig. At least the Cunninghams weren’t getting Prissy. The thought of Bethany owning Prissy was more than Calla could take. So she’d made arrangements

with Chris, who was always looking for good barrel racing horses. Since Prissy was getting older, Calla had taken a loss on her. But it was better than that witch Bethany getting her.

The approaching truck kicked up dust and dirt as it rumbled closer. Calla's jaw clenched and she clicked her teeth. Prissy came to attention underneath her. When Calla squeezed her thighs, Prissy responded.

The movements were almost unconscious at this point. She and Prissy had been together so long, the horse was more like an extension of Calla herself. So it was barely a thought in her head before Prissy took off at a canter that quickly became a full gallop around the side of the house to the practice paddock.

The gate was open and Calla leaned back in the saddle as they sped toward one of the barrels that was still set up in a cloverleaf pattern. She pulled on the left rein and Prissy turned on a dime to circle the first barrel.

Calla urged her on with her legs and then they were flying toward the second barrel. She felt her hat flip off at the speed but she pushed even harder. Wind beat at her face as she leaned back and pulled on the opposite rein to circle the second barrel. Prissy made an even tighter turn than the first and then dirt flew as they went hell for leather toward the third and then fourth barrel.

Both Calla and her mare were breathing hard when Calla finally pulled the reins to bring Prissy to a halt right beside the paddock fence.

Calla leaned over and breathed in Prissy's familiar horsey smell as she clapped her on the neck. "That's right, my strong girl. You did so good. You never let me down. Not once in my whole life."

Calla got Prissy when the mare was just two years old. Calla was eleven and more often than not in the past fourteen years, Prissy felt like the only true friend Calla had in the world. And now she had to say goodbye.

A loud clapping shook her out of her thoughts. Calla swung around to see Chris standing by the gate. She'd arranged to sell Prissy to him a few weeks ago. Just a few years older than her, Calla knew Chris in the same way she did most people in Hawthorne—he was a friendly acquaintance she'd known forever.

Growing up, she told herself the reason she didn't have any close friends was just because there'd always been too much work to be done around the ranch. There was no time for socializing when you had to run home after school to see to the calving, or check the irrigation lines, or to help bring in

the hay.

Dad started showing symptoms for Huntington's when she was twelve and she'd had to take on more and more of the physical tasks around the ranch every year as he got worse.

It wasn't until she got to college that she finally realized the real reason she didn't get close to people. Every year she watched her dad's health decline, she knew the same could be in store for her. *Would* likely be in store for her. She was a dead ringer for her dad—she'd looked at pictures of him when he was her age and they could have been twins.

She couldn't get the test to find out if she had the mutated gene that brought on the disease until she was eighteen. And by then she'd made such a habit of keeping folks at a distance that it was a way of life.

As for the test? Now twenty-four, she still hadn't taken it. Because even though she fully expected to test positive for the gene, there was some foolish little part of her that thought, *you never know. Maybe you don't have it.* Stupid as it was, she hadn't wanted to give up that hope by testing and learning for certain.

"If I wasn't already sold on her, that run would have convinced me." Chris looked admiringly at Prissy. "How fast was that? Seventeen seconds? Less?"

Calla swallowed hard, her throat thick. "Don't know. Just wanted one last run."

Chris's expression changed from impressed to sympathetic. Pitying. It was the same look everyone had been flashing her around town since news of the deal with Cunningham had been announced in the local paper.

Calla swung off of Prissy, her back to Chris. She took a moment to compose herself and then turned around to face him again. "She should make for a great training horse."

"Don't I know it." His admiring gaze was on Prissy before he looked back to Calla. "You can come visit her anytime you want."

Calla controlled her features. It might about kill her to have to go visit her beloved horse and then turn her back over for someone else to stable. She could only handle so goddamned much. "Maybe I will," she lied.

She turned away to unbuckle the cinch straps that secured the saddle. She ran her hand down Prissy's flank and gave her one last pat before tying the cinch and sliding the saddle off.

"Let me get that," Chris said, stepping forward.

Calla wanted to yank back from him. But he was about to own the saddle along with Prissy, so that was stupid. She handed over the heavy tack and he took it without complaint.

“I’ll help you load her up.” Calla made a clicking noise and Prissy fell into step behind her as she led her toward Chris’s trailer.

After she got Prissy trailered, Chris pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and handed her a check. Calla wanted to shove it back at him the second her fingers closed around it.

Prissy let out an anxious, high-pitched neigh and shifted in the trailer, ears flicking back and forth. She knew something was wrong.

Calla’s mouth went dry as she stared down at the check in her hands. Five-thousand dollars. Was she really going to sell her best friend, even for so much money?

After putting away money for Dad’s care, she did have a little bit to live on. Maybe if she really scrimped, she could—

But then she forced her eyes shut as she shoved the check into her pocket. She’d already been over this a thousand times. Even if she didn’t need the money to live on, she couldn’t afford the boarding fees and all the other costs that came along with owning a horse. There was no way to justify spending six to seven hundred dollars a month when it wasn’t an absolute necessity. Not if she wanted Dad to stay in the best nursing home around. It was the same reason she’d sold her truck earlier in the week.

So she squared her shoulders. “Could you drop me in town? I need to deposit this.”

And then go get a stiff drink. Or ten.

She’d gone to the bank, then walked down to Bubba’s where she’d been warming a barstool all night.

Calla stood up straight and swiped at her eyes when she saw Carl pulling up in his Honda Odyssey. Lord, she couldn’t believe she’d let herself stand here in the dark and wallow like a little baby. So she’d had a crap run of luck lately. So what? Plenty folks had it harder.

She was young. Healthy, at least for now. And she had a place to stay and a good job for the foreseeable future.

No more pity parties. She took one more deep breath and jogged over to the back seat of the van.

“Where to?” Carl asked after she pulled open the back door and got inside. He was a bald guy in his late fifties who used to play poker with her

dad.

“The Kent ranch.”

Carl nodded and pulled onto Main Street. “I heard you was gonna go work out there after losing your dad’s place.” Carl was also one of the prime movers of gossip in Hawthorne. She’d often thought he might be a driver for the gossip as much as for the extra income.

Calla’s mouth went tight but she nodded as Carl went on.

“Kent’s a good man. None of us was too sure about him when he bought up the old resort and moved here. What with his face all mangled like it is.”

Calla looked out the window, hoping to dissuade conversation but Carl wasn’t put off.

“But he and that wife of his are good folks. Just look at ‘em helping you out.” Carl nodded, glancing back toward Calla. “Good folks.”

Calla kept her gaze trained out the window. “It’s been a long day. I’m just going to close my eyes till we get there.”

“I bet. Heard you even had to sell your horse to the Mendoza boy. Awful sad. I remember seeing your picture in the paper with her when you won those first-place ribbons back in high school. Your daddy was so proud he carried a cutout from the Gazette and showed anybody who would give him five minutes.”

Okay, Carl was clearly getting up there in years if he thought that had been her dad bragging on her. Yeah she and Prissy had won ribbons—first place in the regional rodeo her senior year— but Carl must be mixing her up with someone else’s daughter. If her dad ever had anything to say about her, it was complaining how she wasn’t keeping up with chores, no matter how hard she worked her butt off. It was never enough for him.

She leaned back into the seat and shut her eyes. Carl eventually got the picture and stopped talking.

She must have actually fallen asleep because it felt like only moments later when the car was pulling to a stop.

Calla sat up, looking around. The big ranch house was dark. Little wonder since most ranchers woke up before dawn. She pulled out her phone and glanced down. It was ten-forty-five going on eleven.

She tipped Carl and then got out. She’d moved her stuff in and gotten the key yesterday. It was probably foolhardy and sentimental to have gone back to her own place last night. But she hadn’t been able to say goodbye knowing she could have one more night there. It wasn’t any easier to do it today,

though, so she might as well have gotten it over with yesterday.

She shook her head at herself as she pulled her keys out of her pocket and unlocked the front door. Carl waited until she was inside before driving off.

There were a couple of nightlights that lit up the central staircase and she went up as quiet as she could. She didn't want anyone waking up on her account. Mel and Xavier had three little boys all under six years old.

To her relief she made it to her room at the end of the hall without her encountering anyone. She flipped on her light. And then groaned when she saw all her still-packed boxes. The bed looked inviting. First, a shower, though.

Calla paused on her way to the attached bathroom, noticing a note lying on the pillow. She leaned over and picked it up.

Left a plate of food for you in the fridge in case you're hungry. So glad you'll be staying here. There was a little heart and then *Mel*.

Calla smiled. She didn't know Mel very well, but from the few times Calla had interacted with her, she seemed pretty great. Food sounded good but still—shower. If ever she'd needed to wash a day off, it was this one.

She paused when she got in the bathroom, looking at her reflection. She pulled her hair out of the stubby little ponytail and ran her fingers through it. It was almost long enough to touch her shoulders.

She'd worn it short since she was a little kid. When Mom left, Dad started cutting her hair and gave her the same cut he did himself—he slapped a one-inch guard on the trimmers and mowed everything else off. In her late teens she'd started going over to Betty's to get it cut there, but she'd still kept it short. What did she know about having girly hair? Nothing, that's what.

She tugged on the ends and frowned at herself. She still didn't know a damn thing about it, which was why she kept it tied back under the cap she always wore.

But maybe she could wear it down sometimes. When she wasn't doing ranch work anyway. She frowned and turned away, turning the shower to hot and then stepping in.

The steam loosened her muscles but fifteen minutes later after shampooing and shaving, her mind wasn't any quieter.

Maybe if she...

Her hand dropped down her stomach. And then lower.

But her usual fantasies weren't quite—

Hey man, wrong bathroom. This is the ladies.

“Ugh!” She slammed the shower knob to the off position and stepped out, toweling herself brusquely.

She wrapped a towel around herself and then paused for her nightly ritual. She lifted up her left leg. And waited, concentrating hard to see if there was even the slightest tremor in the limb. Yeah, her dad’s Huntington’s hadn’t developed until he was forty-three, but plenty people experienced early onset. She dropped her left leg and lifted her right, going through the process all over again. Then her left and right arm.

She breathed out and leaned back against the bathroom door. And recited the alphabet backwards three times.

“E, D, C, B, A,” she whispered, lifting a hand to her forehead. Safe for one more day. She shook her head and pushed back out into the bedroom.

She grabbed her overalls off the ground and the fortune cookie fell out of the pocket. She went to throw it in the little trash by the toilet but then paused.

Rolling her eyes at herself, she ripped the little package and pulled out the cookie. Cracking it in half, she slid the little paper out and read the message.

Live every day like it’s your last.

She couldn’t help but laugh. Wow. Spot on, fortune cookie gods. Considering any day could be the beginning of the end for her.

As shitty as today had been, what the hell would she do if tomorrow she detected a tremor?

She rolled her eyes again. God, she was being an idiot, letting a goddamned fortune cookie get to her. It was just a stupid gimmick. Bubba had probably ordered the damn things from Fortune Cookies R Us.

Popping the stale cookie in her mouth, she munched on it while she gathered her dirty clothes and tossed them in her laundry bag. She pulled on an oversized University of Wyoming t-shirt.

Then her stomach rumbled. Hmm. She glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Probably not the best idea to eat at eleven-fifteen.

But Mel had gone through all the trouble of making her a plate. Who was she to deny the woman the opportunity to be hospitable?

Calla headed back downstairs. Mel had showed her around yesterday so she knew where the kitchen was.

She flipped on the light and went for the fridge. She was leaning over to look for the plate Mel had left her.

And only remembered she was just in a T-shirt that skimmed the top of

her thighs when a low, masculine voice said, “Well hello, gorgeous.”

Chapter Four

MACK

The first thing Mack knew was that he wanted her.

Whoever the woman with the sweetly curved ass currently pawing through the refrigerator was, he wanted her. Which made no damn sense because one, he didn't know her from Adam and two, he didn't go for that shit anymore.

He'd made it his business a long time ago not to want anybody ever again. Some people in this world were shit. They were born shit, and they'd die shit. He was one of those people. It had taken him a long time to accept it. He'd even tried going to college and pretending to be something other than he was. Lasted a whole four months. 'Cause fuck it. Truth was truth.

He tried not to spread his shit around too much. Kept to himself.

So wanting someone, anyone, but especially the owner of that particular sweet ass was a problem.

Then again, maybe this was just a dream. Maybe he was still upstairs, face down on his bed.

His sleep had been restless all week. It got like that sometimes. Too many ghosts came out at night. You didn't spend eight years in lock-up without getting jumpy when the lights went out.

He'd come down to the kitchen to do what he always did when he couldn't sleep. He plotted. He went through, step by step, his plan to take

revenge when the time was right.

“Well hello, gorgeous,” he said, still half-convinced he was talking to a dream.

The way she squealed and jumped about a foot in the air sure seemed fucking real, though.

Shit. Mack hadn't meant to scare her. He sat back in his chair at the little table near the bay window and held up his hands.

She gasped and spun around.

Mack expected her to recoil once she saw him. Covered in tattoos from his neck to his wrists, he knew he could be an intimidating bastard. That was generally the point—but never when it came to women.

Her body relaxed when she saw him though and she let out a shaky laugh. “I didn't see you.”

“Sorry,” Mack said, still eyeing her up and down and waiting for her to flinch away from his gaze.

Instead she let the refrigerator door fall shut and she walked toward him, hand extended. “Hi there, I'm Cal. I've seen you around but I guess we've never officially met.”

Chicks usually reacted to him one of two ways. Either they took one look at his tattoos and reacted like he was about to steal their shit and murder them. Or they saw him and thought sex. Couldn't say he minded either reaction, generally.

But Calla didn't flash him a smile or flip her hair or any of the other shit women of the second persuasion usually did. She just looked friendly, hand still held out.

Mack stared for a moment, then took her hand and gave it a shake. What was her deal? “Mack.”

“Good to meet ya, Mack.” Then she tilted her head and stared at him more intently. “So, you regularly sit in dark rooms ready to scare the bejesus out of people?”

He cracked a smile at that. She was cute. He held up his empty glass. “A glass of milk helps me sleep sometimes.”

“Milk?” The edge of her mouth quirked up.

He shrugged. “Ran out of tequila.”

She shook her head, the slight smile still in place. “Well good luck with that.”

Then she turned back to the fridge and resumed hunting for whatever it

was she'd been after in the first place. He watched her as she pulled out a plate that had aluminum foil covering it with a little post-it.

For Calla ONLY. He'd seen it earlier when he got his milk and smirked because Mel and everybody else knew that anything in the fridge was fair game unless marked. Which meant most the time the fridge was running on empty except right after the weekly groceries. Having six grown men on the property would do that.

Calla didn't look at him again as she pulled off the foil and then went over to the microwave, popping in the plate of meatloaf, potatoes and beans. It took her a couple tries to figure out the settings, but soon it was whirring and lit up as it reheated her food. She kept her body toward the counter, back to him.

Was she just pretending to ignore him? If there was one thing Mack could say about himself, it was that he provoked reaction in people. It was a little disconcerting to have her be so oblivious to him.

Unless it was an act. Chicks did that sometimes. At least the ones that were trying to play it cool.

Curious, he stood up, grabbing his milk glass and taking it to the sink. His path led him right by her.

She glanced his way and gave him a polite nod but then went back to watching her food cook.

All right, either this woman was the best actress he'd ever met or she genuinely didn't give a damn if he was there or not.

He should have walked away right then. Man he was, plans he had, he should have given her the silent treatment he did everyone else and forgot her existence. Forgot how her apple-bottomed ass had looked when she bent over to look in the fridge. He shoulda forgot how her clear, pale skin and moon eyes had looked at him so huge and innocent as she held out her hand to him.

But Mack was shit. Always had been and always would be. And if there was one truth about shit, it was that shit liked to stick. To dirty up clean things. To befoul them.

A thought which again, shoulda had him running the other direction.

One problem kept popping up in the way of sane, rational thought, though.

He wanted her.

He'd been feeling restless lately. He'd come out to this little patch of nowhere to kill time until... well, until he did what needed doing.

He thought he'd come out here and pass a few years under the radar. Wait it out.

It shoulda been enough just to live. To be a free man living in the world. When he first came to the ranch a couple years ago, just getting away from all the shit back in Jersey had been enough. He could go hang out with the horses when he got sick of people. The manual labor of the ranch was usually enough to clear his mind. He liked working with his hands.

It had been peaceful. Sort of. Until night came anyway. Then his hands were still and there was nothing to do except *think*.

Like tonight. He'd jolted awake with his fists clenched and his heart racing. Bone's goddamned voice ringing in his head. When he looked at the clock, he saw he'd barely been asleep for half an hour.

Losing himself in a woman could be just what he needed. Right after he got out, he'd fucked any woman that gave him half a glance. You didn't go without pussy for that long and not want to drown yourself cock-deep for a few weeks.

He'd needed to prove to himself he was normal, maybe. So there, he'd proved he could screw a chick no problem. Meant he hadn't been fucked up by all the shit that went down inside, right? Not permanently anyway.

But easy pussy got tiresome real quick. Plus, what did any of it mean except confirming he could still stick his cock in a hole, shut off his brain, and fuck till he came?

Great, his dick wasn't broken.

That had never been the problem though, had it? It was his *head* that had gotten fucked ten ways from Sunday in that place.

He moved out here and hadn't gone chasing tail since. His right hand worked just fine. Plans he had, he didn't need any woman getting caught up in his shit. Even if he was tempted, the town was so small and insular, well, he knew better than to shit where he ate.

Hadn't been a problem.

At least until now.

The woman said she'd seen him around and he wondered where the fuck she meant because surely, he would have noticed her.

He washed out his cup, looking at her out of the corner of his eye. She had a square face and strong features for a woman. Sharp cheekbones and an angular jaw. Pale, pink lips. Her chin-length hair fell over one half of her face and she tucked it behind her ear before looking over at him.

“You’re staring,” she said bluntly.

Mack cracked a grin. She was interesting. Mack couldn’t remember the last time anything had interested him. “I am.” He continued staring.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “It’s rude to stare.” The microwave beeped and she reached to pull the plate out but Mack beat her to the punch.

“Let me get that for you. Don’t want you to burn yourself on the plate. They’re ceramic. They get hot.”

He tagged a kitchen towel from the oven beside the sink and popped the microwave door. He had to lean into her side to do it. An intentional move. His chest brushed up against her side as he pulled the steaming plate from the microwave. He didn’t miss her quick intake of breath. So she wasn’t completely unaffected by him.

She kept her head down while he set the plate on the counter in front of her. He didn’t move away, though. He stayed right where he was, intruding on her personal space. It was a dick move but if she told him to back off, he wouldn’t push it.

The devil in him was too curious to see how she’d react.

She finally turned her face his way. Her eyes were a golden hazel and they flashed at him in a way that had his cock stirring to life.

“Am I in your way or something?” she asked. She started to slide to the left but Mack moved with her.

“No. You’re not in my way.”

She paused at his words, her head tilted toward him and her eyebrows furrowing like she was confused.

“I’m right where I mean to be,” he clarified. When she didn’t try to pull away again, he dropped his hands to the counter on either side of her, caging her in.

That got him another little breathy inhale as her eyes searched his. Fuck, but it made his balls tight when she did that.

“You are?” Her eyebrows went up slightly. Her surprise seemed genuine. Then her eyes dropped to his mouth.

“Fuck yes I am,” he all but growled. Her eyes flicked between his and then again to his mouth, like she couldn’t stop looking at it.

He was close enough he could smell the clean scent of soap on her skin. He would have known she’d just come from the shower even if her light brown hair hadn’t still been slightly damp. But it wasn’t any flowery shit. Just a crisp, clean smell. Her skin was tan and there was a scattering of

freckles across her nose.

Her chest rose and fell with each breath. Mack couldn't help his eyes tracing down her swanlike neck. Even in the shapeless T-shirt, he could see the outline of her pert little breasts, especially where the hard peaks of her nipples poked out. Was she just chilled? Or aroused?

Mack couldn't remember the last time he'd felt such an instant, animal attraction. And it wasn't just his cock responding to her. Even exchanging a few words as they had, he could tell she wouldn't be just another easy lay. There was more to her. She seemed *real*.

Had it been long enough, finally? Could he go to bed with a woman without all that other bullshit interfering?

One of her hands shot up to lay flat on his chest, over his heart. Like she meant to push him away. But she didn't put any pressure behind it. She just kept it there and the longer she did, the more it felt like a scorching iron of connection between them.

Mack couldn't help shifting his pelvis forward and her eyes widened when she felt his hardness through his jeans against her stomach. But they didn't widen in alarm. Instead, a flare of heat blazed.

That was the last straw. He was only a man for Christ's sake. Mack lifted his right hand from the counter and he cupped her cheek. He wasn't delicate about it either. He gripped her graceful jaw and traced his thumb over her bottom lip, tugging it down slightly. If he thought her little breathy noises from earlier were sexy, it was nothing to the way she gasped and leaned in to his touch at this. Jesus, she was responsive.

He'd just decided he needed to spend the next few hours exploring exactly *how* responsive when suddenly there was a racket outside the back door. Calla's face swung that direction moments before the door was shoved open and that bloody fucking Irishman's voice filled the kitchen.

"Not my fault I forgot me fecking keys at the bar. You're the one who thought a drinking game was a good idea. If you thought I was going to lose to some pansy-arsed American, well I fecking showed ya!"

Liam staggered into the kitchen, followed up by the twins, Tweddle dee and Tweddle fucking dumb.

Before Mack knew it, Calla had jerked away from him and tugged at the bottom of her shirt as the voices quieted. His housemates might be drunk as skunks but they were all brought up short at the sight of the beautiful woman all but in Mack's arms. A woman he'd been a hairsbreadth away from

claiming for the night before these fucknuts stumbled in.

“Who’s that?” one of the twins asked at the same time Liam took a lunging step toward where he and Calla stood.

“Hey, it’s you.” Liam pointed a finger toward her face. “You really aren’t a dude. Huh. When’d you get so pretty?”

Calla had pulled away from Mack, but he still felt it the instant her back went ramrod straight. Her mouth dropped open and she looked horrified.

Mack’s fist was flying toward Liam’s face before he could even think it all the way through. He didn’t know exactly what the fuck the bastard was on about, but it was clear he’d upset Calla.

And Jesus but it was satisfying when his fist connected with Liam’s jaw. He barely registered Calla’s small shriek or the other guys shouting. All he knew was he’d wanted to punch the fucker from almost the moment he’d met him.

Rich bastard parading around, playing at being a cowboy when the rest of them were here to earn a living. It made Mack fucking sick. So when Liam’s head was knocked sideways and he stumbled backward a few steps before falling on his ass, Mack felt only the glow of gratification.

At least until he saw Calla shrink away from him, her hand to her mouth.

He didn’t have more than a moment to register it, though, because the next second Liam was back on his feet and lunging for him.

“Ya cocksucker!” he yelled, fist swinging.

Mack blocked the first blow but when Liam followed up with a mean jab to his ribs, Mack wasn’t fast enough.

And fuck but the bastard could fight, even when he was drunk off his ass. Mack barely had time to recover from the fist to his stomach before Liam swung again. He jerked back but Liam still clipped his jaw.

Which just fucking enraged him. You didn’t survive super max for almost a decade without knowing how to fight, and he couldn’t believe this pansy-assed motherfucker had actually gotten in two hits on him. He could count how many times that had ever happened on one hand. With a roar, he charged Liam and took the bastard to the ground.

Mack was just about to get a choke hold on him when a pissed off voice demanded, “What the fuck is going on here?”

Shit. The boss was here. But even that wasn’t enough to stop him from trying to get the upper hand on the little Irish shit. He *almost* had him pinned

Suddenly a huge hand jerked Mack off Liam and tossed him onto his back. Mack scrambled to try to get at Liam until he finally registered a very pissed off Xavier Kent standing over him.

“You want to fucking explain what the fuck you’re doing fighting in my kitchen. I could hear you all the way from the stairwell.”

Mack blinked, the haze of rage starting to clear from his vision. He looked around. The twins had grabbed Liam’s arms and were holding him back. Calla stood behind the kitchen island, arms crossed over her chest, her features showing clear mortification.

“Well?” Xavier demanded, the mottled skin on the burned upper left of his face going all but white in his anger even while the other side reddened.

“Sorry boss,” Mack said, getting to his feet and looking at Xavier. “Won’t happen again.”

“Sure as fuck better not,” Xavier growled. “You two—” He pointed a finger at Liam, who was still on the floor although no longer being held back by Jeremiah and Reece. Next, he pointed at Mack. “—are on KP duty for the next four weeks. And I better not ever have to deal with this shit again.”

With that, the big man turned on his heel and was about to stalk from the room when he seemed to notice Calla.

“Cal.” When Xavier acknowledged her, his voice was still gruff but not angry. “Glad to see you made it here okay.”

She cringed, glancing between Mack and Liam. “Sorry for all this.”

She hadn’t been afraid of him when she’d first seen him but there was a wariness in her eyes now. Dammit. He was usually so good at hiding his monster. Out of all the times to lose it on Liam, it had to be tonight? In front of her? He’d just gotten so pissed when Liam had openly disrespected her. He clenched his jaw all over again just thinking about it.

Xavier shook his head, taking a second to glare over his shoulder at Mack and then Liam. “Not your fault these two are assholes who don’t know how to behave in front of a lady.”

Calla smirked. “No one’s ever accused me of being a lady before.”

Xavier shook his head, his hard face softening. “Well that just goes to show you,” he paused, glaring back at Mack and Liam, “if this little display didn’t already—what absolute fucking idiots the male population is. Get some sleep. Day starts early tomorrow.” He patted Calla on the shoulder and then pushed out through the door. She followed on his heels. A moment later, two pairs of footsteps, one heavy and one light, could be heard as they went

up the stairs.

“Hey, who’s food is this?” Reece asked as he pulled his blond dreadlocks into a ponytail and stepped toward the counter. “I’m starving.”

Mack moved and snatched the plate off the counter before Reece could touch it. “Not yours,” Mack growled, turning and leaving the kitchen without another word.

He knocked lightly on Calla’s door once he got upstairs. It had to be hers. Isobel used to stay there but it had been empty since she’d gone to live with Hunter.

“You forgot your food,” he said through the door.

No response.

Shit. Like she was gonna open the door to an animal like him.

He took a step back. Why the fuck did he even care? He’d come to terms with what he was a long fucking time ago. He’d done what he had to in order to survive. Become what he was. He knew there was no going back.

The image of her sweet, open face and how innocently she’d extended her hand to shake his flashed through his head.

“I’ll just leave it outside your door.” He set the plate down and then stepped back

He ran his hands roughly through his hair, then whispered a sharp, “Fuck,” before striding down the hall to his own room and shutting the door firmly behind him.

Chapter Five

LIAM

“J aysus,” Liam grumbled to Jeremiah, “no one should be expected to wake up at the arse crack of dawn every morning.” He pushed out the back door of the kitchen and they headed in the direction of the stables. “It’s just not bloody right.”

Jeremiah nodded, clutching his head.

Mack and Nicholas had gotten out the door ahead of them but Mack turned back, apparently having heard him. “Well maybe you shouldn’t go out drinking and whoring when you know you have to get up at five a.m. the next morning.”

Liam’s eyebrows narrowed and Jeremiah winced, hand still massaging his temple. “Would everybody stop shouting?”

Liam ignored Mack and grinned at his friend. His own head was aching a bit but he didn’t feel anywhere near as bad as Jeremiah looked. Then again, Liam hadn’t spent half the night throwing up. He clapped Jeremiah on the back. “That’ll teach you to go playing drinking games with an Irishman. Even the smallest of me kinswomen could drink you lot under the table any day of the week.”

“I think I’m gonna be sick again.” Jeremiah clutched his stomach and bent over, one hand on his knee.

Liam jumped back. “Don’t come anywhere near me. I’ve barely even

worn in me new boots.” They were black Lucchese cowboy boots, the best of the best. Just because Liam had given up playing billionaire didn’t mean he had to give up all his creature comforts.

“God help us if your pretty new boots get mussed,” Mack shot over his shoulder.

Liam lifted a thumb to his still aching jaw. Brawling at six in the morning would be a bad idea, yeah?

Didn’t stop his fists from clenching. Jaysus it had felt good getting that sucker punch in last night. It had been a long time coming.

Liam didn’t know what Mack’s fucking problem was. Liam was perfectly affable when he’d gotten to the ranch two years ago. But about three seconds after meeting him, Mack acted like Liam’s very existence was some great offense. Bastard thought he was better than everyone around him even though it couldn’t be further from the truth.

If Liam had met gutter trash like Mackenzie Knight in his old life, he would have gotten him thrown out of whatever club they were in and that would be that. He’d never have had to see the wanker again.

But part of this great experiment was seeing how the common people lived. Which meant living across the hall from the biggest douchebag he’d ever met. And constantly having to put up with his shite.

Nicholas hauled the stable door open, silent and good-tempered as ever. Liam liked the gentle giant. And the twins were great for a laugh. Xavier and Mel were top notch too. If not for Mack, he’d be totally happy with his new life.

All right, he could do without constantly having to muck horse shit, but apart from those two things, life on the ranch was surprisingly enjoyable. He’d only meant to spend a month or two here. But it had quickly grown on him... and well, he hadn’t been eager to face all the shite back at home.

Turned out not having your every step hounded by paparazzi was more refreshing than he’d expected. Plus getting away from the city. And his family. His last scene with his father had ended up with his fist in his da’s face.

He knew twenty-seven was too old to be running away from home. But fuck it, half the point of being a spoiled little shit was that you never had to grow up, yeah?

And his best memories had been spending time in the stables when he was a little kid. They used to spend summers in a cottage just outside

Kilkenny. To hear his ma tell it, it was where his da had first courted her. She'd been on the set of a movie she was shooting and he'd been passing through on vacation. Love at first sight, that's what Ma said. So they'd come back every summer.

Except ever since Liam could remember, his da never stayed more than a week or two. He was always traveling, running back to Dublin or flying to L.A. or London or God knew where.

So Liam and his ma would spend all summer riding horses and painting and eating lazy meals in the big cottage house on the hill. The brawny stablemaster, Craig, taught him how to saddle and ride his first pony when he was just four years old. He thought it was all magical.

At least until his parents got divorced and Ma started drinking and snorting whatever shite she could find to shove up her nose. Back when Liam believed in things like goodness and love and happy endings. Before he learned better.

Jaysus, why was he thinking about all this right now? It was barely six in the feckin' morning. If he was going to go wallowing, he might as well wait till it was late enough to justify a good stiff glass of whiskey.

"Calla. Hey. How long have you been up?"

Liam looked up at Mack's question and paused. It was the woman from last night. Liam cringed. The one he'd first mistaken for a lad.

She was wearing overalls again but instead of a shapeless flannel shirt underneath, she had on a form-fitting long-sleeved thermal that emphasized her small but toned arms. Her hair was pulled back in a tiny ponytail, little wisps escaping all around her face.

Damn, she *was* pretty. It hadn't just been his dick's drunken response to seeing a half-naked woman last night. Here it was, arse-o'clock in the morning and she was still pretty as a peach. He felt like even more of an eejit for mistaking her for a man.

She only glanced up momentarily from the stall she was mucking out. "Oh. Hey guys."

Jeremiah had finally joined them and several long moments of silence passed, everyone just staring at Calla. Mack finally whistled. "Damn, you've got five stalls done already. Trying to impress the boss on your first day?"

Liam was about to call him out for being a rude bastard but Calla only smiled and shook her head. "Just used to farm life. Been waking up at four a.m. for as long as I can remember."

Her voice was a low, soothing alto. And the more Liam looked at her, the more he realized that, fuck, she wasn't just pretty. She was *really* pretty.

Maybe not in an obvious way, with that square jaw and strong nose. More like a young Meryl Streep. As different as could be from the plastic fake-boobed betty he'd almost banged last night. This girl had a healthy tan like she was used to being outdoors regularly. And she was obviously used to hard work.

"You slackers gonna help me out or just stand there staring? I loaded up the hay nets a bit ago and have just started turning the horses out."

Nicholas nodded. "Mack and I will take the horses in the East Barn." He started toward the far barn door but Mack didn't move to follow.

"Why don't you take Jeremiah today?" Mack said. "I'm happy to stay here and help Calla."

She'd gone back to shoveling but looked up at hearing her name. Pink entered her cheeks as she locked eyes with Mack.

"I'll just get a pitchfork so I can join you." Mack's voice went almost soft as he said it. A small smile crossed her face before she went back to her work.

What the feck was going on? Mack hated everybody. And he didn't smile. Ever.

Liam felt his jaw going hard as Mack walked to the far side of the barn to grab a pitchfork and shovel.

Was Calla actually buying into his bullshit? Last night was a little fuzzy, but if Liam remembered right, the two of them had been cozied up by the counter when he and the twins stumbled in the back door. He knew some girls got off on the thrill of the whole bad-boy tattooed thing. One glance, though, and he would have guessed this woman wouldn't be pulled in by that shite.

Then he cringed. Well, he supposed on *very* first glance he'd already shoved his foot in it by mistaking her for a man. That would be hard to recover from.

But if there was one thing in life Liam O'Neill was good at, it was charming women. And the occasional man if the situation was just right, but that was neither here nor there.

What was important now was saving her from being screwed over by Mackenzie. Mack was an ex-con, for Christ's sake. He'd done eight years hard time.

For whatever reason Xavier didn't seem to have a problem with that but Liam sure as hell did. And if it fell to him to save the fair maiden from the bastard's wiles, well, sometimes sacrifices had to be made.

And suddenly Liam was determined to do just that. Liam put on his most charming grin and walked over to where Calla was still shoveling. "I wanted to apologize for me behavior last night. Bad lighting and too much whiskey." He gave a short, self-deprecating laugh.

She looked up at him, eyebrows furrowing like she didn't understand why he was intruding on her space. Damn, she was going to be a tough nut to crack, wasn't she? Liam couldn't remember the last time a woman had posed a genuine challenge.

And the fact that he'd be stealing her out from under Mackenzie, who obviously wanted her too?

Just icing on the cake.

"So, ya like horses?" Liam leaned a shoulder against the stall she was mucking out.

Again she just looked at him like, *what do you want?*

Damn, had he really lost his touch that much?

"Why don't you run along and start your own work, laddie?" Mack tossed one of the shovels his direction and Liam barely managed to catch the heavy-handed tool.

Motherfucker, if he—

"Aren't you two supposed to be on kitchen duty this morning?" Calla asked, wiping her forehead and propping an elbow on her pitchfork. She looked back and forth between the two of them. "What time is breakfast anyway?" She glanced out the stable door like she was trying to gauge the time by the sun.

Liam cringed. Shite. He'd forgotten about that.

"I did my half," Mack said with a shit-eating smirk in Liam's direction. "Waffle batter's ready and the fruit's cut up. What about you?"

Liam wanted to smack the smug smile off his face. "Guess I should go start me prep."

"Don't worry, pretty boy, we'll leave you plenty of stalls to muck out."

No one would miss one more dead ex-con in the world, would they? He wouldn't even have to do it himself. Just one call to his fixer back in Dublin and—

"Chop chop," Mackenzie said, clapping his hands right in Liam's face.

Liam stopped himself just short of lunging for the bastard, and only because Calla was right there. No, he'd show he could be the bigger man.

"Great to officially meet you, beautiful." Liam winked at Calla and noted, with no small amount of satisfaction, that the pink came back into her cheeks again.

"You, too," she said, then quickly averted her eyes. Was it his imagination or did she sound a little breathless? He grinned as he headed back toward the house, all his instincts telling him she was checking out his arse as he went.

Oh yeah, he still had it.

Chapter Six

CALLA

Calla wasn't sure how it was possible to burn *eggs*. But as she poked at the eggs that were slightly charcoaled along the bottom, she had to admit that apparently it could indeed be done. The unappetizing evidence was right there on her plate.

"What the hell happened to these eggs?" Xavier asked, his booming voice echoing around the open lodge area. The big man stood by the heating tray on the sideboard containing the ruined eggs. Everyone else was gathered behind him, plates in hand. They'd insisted Calla go first since she was new. She'd been grateful. She was ravenous after the long morning of hard work. Or at least she had been until she'd seen what was in the trays.

"Xavier," his wife Mel hissed, nodding toward the little boy she had cradled in her arms. "Language."

"They're not listening." Xavier waved to the other side of the room where their two oldest boys played chase. The twin with blond dreadlocks, Reece she thought his name was, would run after the boys and catch one every so often to swing them around until they got dizzy and fell giggling to the floor.

"What the hell!" shouted the younger of the two boys as Reece caught him again.

Mel glared Xavier's way and he tossed his hands up. "Blame whoever cooked this." He gestured at the tray. "How am I not supposed to react to

seeing that.”

“Sorry, guys,” Liam said, lifting a hand to the back of his neck. “I read on the internet and it said to cook protein slowly.” He frowned down at the tray of eggs. “But I guess I had the heat too high.”

“Just get the boys waffles,” Mel said, hiking the baby on her hip and heading toward her sons. “Hey guys, calm it down. It’s not even eight o’clock in the morning. You’ll have all day to roughhouse. But Mommy hasn’t had her coffee yet.”

“About that…” Liam trailed off when Mel jerked her head in his direction. “Well, the coffee was sort of the reason I forgot about the eggs. I remembered to set the timer on it last night, but I sort of forgot to put the carafe underneath it. So when I got back in the kitchen, the coffee had just spilled everywhere. I was trying to multitask and get it cleaned up while also cooking the eggs. Then I realized we were out of coffee and there wasn’t enough for another pot.”

“You can’t have coffee anyway, babe,” Xavier went over to her and lifted the baby out of her arms. Mel’s back slumped. “Dang it, you’re right.”

“Uh, is there something you forgot to tell us, Mel?” Jeremiah looked at Mel, eyes widening.

Xavier put his arm over Mel’s shoulder, a wide smile plastered across his face.

“We were going to talk to all of you about it this morning,” Mel said, a little flush taking over her cheeks. “But yeah, Xav and me are pregnant again.”

“You two Catholic or something?” Liam asked, looking from the two boys still screeching and horsing around on the other side of the room to the baby in Mel’s arms.

Jeremiah slapped him upside the back of the head.

“What?” Liam said. “Soon they aren’t going to need any of us around because they’ll have their own labor force.”

Mack came forward and landed a kiss on Mel’s cheek. “Congratulations, you two.”

“Yeah, congrats,” Jeremiah said, joining Mack’s side and reaching out to give Mel a hug.

“Thanks.” Xavier was grinning so wide it all but transformed his face. The burned half didn’t seem nearly so menacing when he smiled like that.

“It does mean that I won’t be able to compete in the Extreme Horse

Makeover competition this summer, though.”

“The ranch signed up for three spots,” Xavier said, his gaze moving over all of them, even Calla who was the only one already seated. “Mack and Liam are taking two, but there’s a spot for one more if anyone’s interested in the third.”

Calla’s heart leapt in her chest. She’d wanted to do the horse makeover challenge ever since she’d first heard of it. One hundred wild mustangs the BLM had rounded up were divvied up among volunteers who then had one hundred days to break and tame the horses. There was a competition at the end of the hundred days to see who’d trained their horse the best. Along with cash prizes. Serious cash prizes. Last year the winner got a hundred thousand dollars.

Plus it was for a good cause—the horses were auctioned so people could bid on them to give them a home.

Calla watched as Jeremiah and Nicholas looked at each other. But mainly Calla’s mind was stuck on the cash prizes. With a hundred thousand dollars, she could start over. Buy herself a patch of land. Not a big one, sure. But still something she could call her own. Maybe get a loan and set up a little boarding and training place like Chris Mendoza had. Plenty folks were being forced to downsize and needed places to board their animals. She could—

“I’m still too busy with my online classes,” Jeremiah said. Calla’s eyes jerked back to the table. Damn, she was putting the cart before the horse. There was every chance one of these guys would want to snatch up the spot.

Nicholas shook his head. “Not this year.”

“What about you, Cal?” Xavier asked. “It’s fine if you don’t want to take on too much since you just got here—”

“I’d love to,” Calla cut in before he even finished his sentence. Then she felt her cheeks heat. “I mean, if no one else wants the spot, that is.”

Jeremiah just held up his hands. “Like I said, I’m too busy.”

[Nicholas nodded. “I’m out too.”]

“Looks like you’re on deck then, Cal,” Xavier said. “We head out to pick up the mustangs after breakfast, so eat up. Only one of the trailers is hooked up and we need to be there by three.”

Calla stared down at her plate. The excitement tingling in her chest felt so foreign. It had been years since she’d competed and almost as long since she’d had a new horse to train. She’d wanted to set up one of her dad’s barns as a boarding and training stable. But like all the other options Calla had

raised as ways to bring in more income on the ranch, Dad had vetoed the idea.

After all, keeping the land as just a cattle ranch had been good enough for his parents and grandparents and he wasn't going to go and 'reinvent the wheel.' Lord how many times had he stubbornly kept to that line? No matter how hard Calla tried to convince him they had to join the twenty-first century and accept that cattle ranching couldn't go on as it always had. The land couldn't take it.

But trying to get her dad to embrace sustainable ranching was like trying to convince an atheist there was a God—he wasn't willing to even consider it and he'd only mock her when she tried. He wouldn't have some *green cowboy* ranching his lands. He refused to hear her out about how they could be as much as tripling their profits if he would just get his head out of his ass. They could have at least *tried* some of the land management and revitalization programs that had turned some rancher's fortunes around.

But then it was too late and they lost it all.

"Cal. Calla."

Calla jerked her head up to Mel calling her name. "You want a waffle?" She gestured toward Calla's untouched eggs. "If you don't grab one now, believe me, there won't be any left."

Calla nodded and started to stand up but Mel just waved her back. "I got it." She plopped two waffles on her plate and then came over and slid one off onto Calla's.

"Thanks."

"No problem," Mel smiled. "We girls gotta stick together." She sat down beside Calla.

Liam plopped his plate on the other side of her, hiking up one lanky leg to straddle the bench seat, body turned toward Calla.

"So, beautiful. Want to ride with me today on the way to get the horses?" He flashed a gorgeous smile. "I'd love to spend a few hours getting to know you better."

Calla's stomach flipped at having him so near. She didn't know what the one-eighty in his response to her was about, but she couldn't help being flattered by it.

Which was stupid. It was obviously Liam and Mackenzie had some kind of rivalry going on. Was Liam's sudden interest only due to Mack's attention to her last night and this morning? Or did he just hit on every female he came

into contact with—and seeing her in only her sleep shirt last night had finally convinced him that she was, in fact, female?

Neither option was especially flattering, but the more Liam smiled and leaned in toward her, the less she cared about his motives.

She'd had a crush on this guy ever since she'd first seen him. He was the kind of boyish handsome that Hollywood celebrated. Maybe that was shallow, but her attraction wasn't only about his looks. He always seemed to be the life of the party whenever he and his friends went out. His laugh was loud and contagious. He was everything her quiet, dour life wasn't and she'd been surprised by how much she wanted even a little bit of that shine to turn her direction.

“I promise I won't even bother ya by singing along with the radio. Unless a One Direction song comes on.” He bumped her shoulder. “Then all bets are off.”

Calla choked on a laugh, grabbing her water tumbler and sipping before her bite of waffle spewed everywhere.

“You a Harry Styles fan?” she asked, one eyebrow lifting.

Liam put a hand to his chest and pretended to pump it like a heart. “He's just so dreamy. That hair. How can you not want to run your fingers through it?”

His eyes lit up when Calla laughed again.

“You're a closet Directioner, aren't ya? Don't lie.” He held up his hands. “I don't judge. I'll even help you hang your posters later tonight.” He leaned in. “You don't mind inviting me into your room, do you?”

“Jesus Christ, some of us are trying to eat here,” Mack said, finally sitting down at the table across from them with a stack of three waffles piled high, syrup making a pool on his plate. “Your sad attempt at flirting is turning my stomach. Oh wait, nope, that was your eggs.”

Calla covered her mouth with her hand and coughed to cover her laugh. Then she cleared her throat when she saw Liam glaring at Mack.

“Do you want a little waffle along with that syrup?” Calla asked Mack, gesturing toward his syrup-drenched plate. “And maybe some oars to help you wade through it?”

The tiniest edge of Mack's mouth quirked up. “What can I say? I like things sweet and wet.” His eyes did a slow survey of her body as he cut off a huge bite of waffle and shoved it in his mouth.

Calla grabbed her water glass again as her stomach contracted at his

words. She rubbed her legs together under the table. The way Mack was looking at her... dear God but that was sexy.

She was used to being around men—she'd worked with ranch hands all her life. This was a far more comfortable environment for her than say, a room full of gossiping women. But she usually disappeared into the background, just another one of the guys. Being the object of focus was an entirely new experience.

Liam had certainly noticed that she'd ditched her flannel when he'd first seen her this morning in the barn. Being objectified, it was supposed to be a bad thing. But for a girl who'd never been looked at that way, she couldn't say she minded too terribly.

Was this what girls like Bethany felt all the time? No wonder women spent so much energy on their appearance. Cal's hand went to her hair, pushing some that had fallen out of her ponytail behind her ear. Did it look okay?

She almost rolled her eyes as soon as she had the thought. Dear Jesus, a couple guys looked her way and suddenly she was acting like Lady frickin' Godiva. What, was she gonna go to the salon in town and get her hair put in rollers next?

She took another few bites of waffle, feeling quickly full. The fact that Mack's intense gray eyes never left her might have had something to do with her nervous stomach. Liam was also impossible to ignore, his thigh brushing hers in a way she wasn't sure was accidental. She was glad when talk around the table moved on to other topics and off of her. She was all in her head and missed some of the conversation until a small piece of toast came flying across the table and hit her instead of the intended target, which was apparently Liam.

"Oh. Sorry Calla!" Reece said. He was sitting in the seat Mel had been in moments before. Calla looked down the long table and saw Mel sitting with her boys as they dug into their breakfasts.

"But you can't really think that," Reece continued. "It's so cynical."

"What is?" Calla turned to Liam.

He held up his hands. "I was just saying that I think all of life is a series of transactions. We're all using each other. We'll give but only if we get something back."

Calla frowned. "How do you mean?"

"In everything. From the biggest scale to the smallest. There's the

obvious.” Liam gestured around the table. “We’re giving time and energy here on the ranch in order to get money back. We pay taxes so the government will do shite for us. But even on the smallest scale. Say one woman complements another. It’s not just to be *nice*.” He put the last word in air quotes. “The one doing the complementing is trying to gain favor. Increase her social standing.”

Reece shook his head, scoffing. “What if she’s already the most popular girl there?”

Liam shrugged like it was no big deal. “Maybe it’s lonely there at the top and she wants companionship. Or she has a fear of not being loved or admired. Maybe she’s trying to create a comfortable atmosphere so she can manipulate the other woman more easily. People do shite for a hundred different reasons, but always because they’ve got something to gain.”

“That’s so cynical!” Reece said, getting worked up. Calla had to agree with Reece. There was a certain kind of logic to what Liam was saying, but it was an ugly logic.

“Okay,” Reece’s eyes lit up. “What about Mother Teresa?”

Liam waved a hand. “Easy. She either liked the endorphins she got from all that do-gooding or she expected a big tiara in heaven.” He shrugged, “Sure she was delusional about the heaven gig, but hey, to each their own.”

Reece was still shaking his head. “What about couples?”

“Pffff. You kidding?” Liam leaned in and lowered his voice. “Sex is the ultimate transaction. *Tit for tat*, if you know what I mean.” He winked and Calla felt her cheeks warm even though he wasn’t looking her way.

“I mean people in *love*,” Reece insisted. “Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it is not self-seeking—”

“Are you quoting the Bible at him?” his brother Jeremiah turned to him, incredulous. “Aren’t you Buddhist?”

Reece shrugged. “I don’t like labels when it comes to the mysteries of the universe.”

Jeremiah rolled his eyes but then Liam jumped back in.

“Romantic love is the most selfish of all. Think about it.” He stabbed a finger on the table top. “What’s people’s greatest fear besides death? And taxes.” A few people laughed. Liam looked around the table. “Being alone,” he answered himself.

Calla shifted on the bench, poking at her half-eaten waffle with her fork.

“Think about it—it’s nuts. When people get married, they’re trying to

contractualize their way out of one of our biggest fears. To make another person legally obligated to provide companionship to you? What a fucking joke.” He shook his head. “Of course, these days, you can just split when you stop getting what you want out of the deal. Is she not the pretty young thing she once was? Call the divorce lawyer. Is he still in the same dead-end job he had when you got married and you want to trade up? Call the divorce lawyer.”

Reece dropped his elbows on the table and interlaced his fingers, propping his chin on his hands. He stared straight at Liam. “I feel sad for you.”

Liam laughed, grinning. “Don’t. I’d rather live with me eyes wide open to reality.”

But all Calla could think was: *Did he get diagnosed with an untreatable condition that will ruin your life if you stay? Call the divorce lawyer.* Maybe there was more to Liam’s theory than she’d like to believe.

She wasn’t hungry anymore. She stood to take her tray to the kitchen when Mack sidled up alongside her.

“You should ride with me today,” Mack said, voice only low enough for her to hear. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since last night.”

Her breath caught and she jerked her head sharply toward him. Was he making fun of her? She saw Liam still sitting at the table, frowning in their direction. Was this some sort of game between Mack and him?

She felt her blood heat. “Are you fucking with me?” She didn’t flinch from Mack’s gaze.

He glowered at her and she was almost sorry she asked. Still, she stood her ground. “What do you mean, fucking with you?”

God, was he going to make her explain? She pursed her lips and looked at her feet. “Is this just some... joke? Or prank between you and him?” She jerked her head over his shoulder in Liam’s direction.

Mack’s head whipped back and his jaw hardened. “Did he say it was? That son of a—”

Calla winced and shook her head. “No. God.” She took a step back from him. “Forget about it.”

She felt her face flaming and she turned to go. Mack put a hand on her arm to stop her, stepping close again. “Look, Calla. I’m interested in you. I think we could have some fun together.”

Her mouth went dry as she looked at him, absolutely floored. “You don’t

even know me.”

“Well, isn’t that sorta the point? I wanna get to know you.” His grey eyes flashed. “And I know life’s too fucking short not to grab ahold of something good before it’s gone. And I think you and me could have something special.”

Have some fun. Special. Her heart pounded wildly as she tried to clarify. “You mean like... sex?” she whispered.

He burst out laughing. Several heads turned in their direction at the sound. Crap. She was making a scene. Calla Carter didn’t make *scenes*. She was about to get the hell out of there before her mortification reached truly epic proportions, but again Mack’s hand on her arm stopped her.

Her jaw worked as she looked at the floor. She could really do with it opening up right now to swallow her. “I don’t like it when people laugh at me.”

“Sorry gorgeous,” he said, his hand dropping to her hand where his thumb moved in little circles on her wrist. Oh wow, that felt nice. Really, really nice.

“You just took me by surprise there. You’re so fucking direct.” He ran a hand through his hair and laughed again. “It’s refreshing.”

Then he leaned down so that he was speaking right in her ear. She shivered at the warmth of his breath. “And I guess yeah, if I’m being honest I do mean sex.”

“Can I take your plate, Cal?” Liam’s voice was short as he stepped up right beside them. He flashed a glare toward Mack before his eyes gentled.

“Oh.” Calla blinked and handed over her plate of half-eaten waffles.

“Not much of an appetite,” Liam said, his gaze on her like Mack wasn’t leaned over, his face still inches from hers. “I can understand that. I didn’t find those waffles very appetizing either.” His eyes flicked to Mack for just an instant.

Mack scoffed. “Did you eat any of your eggs? No wonder. Pretty sure they would have put me off food all day long.”

Liam’s head snapped toward Mack.

Okay, as nice as it was to be squeezed in between their two big warm bodies, the tension between them was getting to be too much. She wasn’t interested in being the dog bone in some tug of war.

“I think this is my cue to exit stage left. See you two later.” She patted Liam on the chest and touched Mack’s arm as she took her leave. Then she

called, “Mel?” toward the end of the table where Mel was cleaning up after her boys.

“What’s up?”

“Is there space in your truck to ride with you?”

Mel glanced at the two men beside Calla, a small frown crossing her face.

“You bet.”

“Great. I’ll go help get the trailers rigged.”

Calla left the room without a glance back to either Mack or Liam.

* * *

“You just let me know if any of the guys get out of hand, okay?” Mel said as she and Calla drove down the highway toward Denver. They were alone in the truck—Xavier and Liam were riding in another and Mack in the third. “I don’t know what’s up with Mack and Liam, but the last thing in the world I want you to feel is uncomfortable while you’re staying with us.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I’m fine.”

Mel glanced over at her from the driver’s seat. “I’m serious. I’ll kick their asses.”

Calla couldn’t help grinning at the picture that put in her head. “I’d love to see that, actually.” She laughed. “But no, I’m fine. Believe me, I grew up around cowboys. I can do any ass-kicking I need to all on my own.”

Mel smiled but it didn’t fully erase the line of concern in her forehead. “I don’t doubt that.”

“So where are you from again?” Calla asked, changing the subject. “I think I heard Xavier mention once you were from New York.”

Mel laughed and shook her head. “About a million years ago, it feels like. But yeah. That’s where I grew up.”

“In the city?”

Mel nodded. “Lived there all my life till I was twenty-six. Moving here was a bit of a…” she paused before another slow smile crossed her lips, “a bit of an adjustment, that was for sure.”

“So how’d you find yourself in Hawthorne, Wyoming?” Calla asked, more than curious about the beautiful and obviously sophisticated woman beside her. Truth was, Calla had admired her from a far for a long time. Ever since news spread around town that Xavier Kent had got himself a wife,

Calla had been as eager as anyone else to catch a glimpse of the woman.

Xavier had been the talk of the town since he took over the old resort. A giant of a man like that, especially disfigured as he was, taking over one of the town's biggest properties was bound to make waves. The fact that he'd gotten it out from underneath Ned Cunningham's fingers was just a bonus for Calla. But the town gossips really hit the roof when they learned he had a woman out there in addition to all those horses, that he'd married her and even renamed his horse rescue after her.

It all seemed so romantic. Something special in a town that was full of a whole lot of dull, hard living.

"That's a bit of a long story." The way her eyebrows lifted, Calla could just bet.

"I'll take the CliffsNotes version."

Mel flashed her a smile before moving her attention back to the road. "Let's just say..." her voice dropped off like she was thinking of the best way to simplify something complicated. "Xavier helped my family out when we were in a rough spot. In return, I came out to help him with the rescue."

"And then you fell in love?"

Mel laughed. "Yeah, well, it wasn't exactly a smooth transition. We didn't get along at first. There *might* have been a few days that I wanted to gouge his eyes out. But we got there in the end."

Calla felt her own eyebrow arch at this. "Now *that* sounds like a story."

Mel grinned. "No doubt. Some other time. What about you? You got someone special in your life?"

For the umpteenth time that day, Calla felt her cheeks warm. She shook her head. "Hasn't been much space in my life for that."

Mel's face softened. "I was so sorry to hear about your dad." She reached out and gave Calla's arm a gentle squeeze. "How is he? He has Parkinson's?"

Calla swallowed and looked out the passenger window. Rolling hills covered in scrub brush whizzed by. "Huntington's."

"I haven't heard of that."

"It's sort of like Parkinson's," Calla said, fidgeting with a fingernail. "He's constantly got the shakes and is starting to get pretty forgetful."

"I'm so sorry, hon. I might not see my dad very often, but we were close. I can't imagine." Her eyes were full of sympathy when she glanced at Calla again.

Calla swallowed and looked down at her hands. "Yeah, well. That's life.

What are you gonna do?”

“Just keep going,” Mel murmured, like she’d had some experience with the punches life could throw. “One day after another.”

Calla nodded. “Pretty much.”

They didn’t say anything for a long while. Just drove in companionable silence and watched the landscape roll by.

“So, Mack and Liam?” Calla asked, her mind always circling back to the two guys no matter how much she tried not to think about them. “What’s their deal?”

Mel let out a huff and rolled her eyes. “Lord knows. They’ve been like fire and ice since they first met each other. It’s funny too, because as different as their backgrounds are, they actually remind me of each other.”

“How?” Calla asked, more than interested. She pulled her foot up into her lap as she focused on Mel.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Mel waved a hand. “Nicholas and the twins are pretty mellow. Well,” she amended, “Reece more than Jeremiah. But Liam and Mack,” she shook her head. “They’re both passionate guys. You might not think it when you first meet Mack, he’s so shut down all the time.”

Calla was surprised at that. “He hasn’t been shut down around me.” The total opposite, in fact. One of the things she liked about him was his bluntness. He wasn’t afraid to speak his mind.

Mel looked at her, a smile curving her lips. “That’s the other thing. They’re both these alpha tough guys on the surface. But they’ve got gooey centers. I’ve seen it.” Then she sobered, her hands shifting on the wheel. “I don’t think things have been easy for either of them in their lives. Sometimes I think about the ranch as our own little island of misfit toys, you know?”

“Well then I guess I’ll fit right in,” Calla joked.

“Welcome to the club.”

They were quiet again, just listening to the radio. *Welcome to the club.* Calla had felt like an outcast all her life, out of step with her classmates and peers. And that had been all right because she had her dad and the ranch.

But what had all that self-sacrifice, putting everyone else’s needs over hers, ever gotten her?

A big fat wad of nothing, that’s what. She was a twenty-four-year-old virgin. She’d never even been drunk. Couldn’t risk having a hangover when there was always so much work to be done the next day.

Screw. That. She was done with living like a nun. She was going to have

sex. A lot of sex.

Live each day like it's your last.

Okay, universe. She was ready to listen. She was going to have sex, and get drunk, and she was going to learn what it meant to *party*.

If Liam and Mack were being genuine in their interest, well, goddammit, she was going to take one of them up on their offer.

It was time to let it all fly.

“There’s a big party tonight after the mustang assignments are handed out, right?”

Mel looked her way. “Sure. Most ranchers live so isolated that whenever we get together, everybody lets their hair down.”

Calla knew Mel had been speaking metaphorically, but her hand still went to her own hair. She didn’t know what else to do with it other than the awkward ponytail. She looked at Mel, who’s long hair hung in attractive curly waves.

“Do you think you could help me with... Maybe we could go shopping or something before the party? I’m not really good with, you know,” she waved down her body and the overalls that had become her uniform for, well... forever, “being a girl.”

“Sure,” Mel said, looking her way with eyebrows raised in surprise. “But I think you do a fine job at being a girl. From what Xavier says, you singlehandedly held onto your dad’s ranch for years, not to mention you’re a talented horse trainer. If I ever have a daughter, I could only hope she’d be half so dedicated, hard-working, and loyal.”

Calla looked down at her short grubby nails, embarrassed at Mel’s words. “Yeah, well, we lost the ranch. So what does that say about me?”

Mel’s face softened. “That you’re the kind of person who never stops fighting and sticks it out until the end.”

Calla gave a short laugh. She wasn’t sure that fighting her whole life for a losing cause meant much in the scheme of things. They were getting off track anyway. “So you’ll help me get ready tonight?”

Mel gave her a long look but then just nodded before grinning and putting her attention back on the road. “Those boys aren’t gonna know what hit ‘em.”

Chapter Seven

MACK

“**Y**ou’re gonna lose a few fingers with that one,” Mack said, leaning over the fence and watching Liam try to feed an apple to the mare he’d been assigned.

Liam barely had a second to shoot a glare his way before yanking away when the spirited mare took a snap at him.

“Whoa, girl!” Liam said, managing to dance out of the way just before the giant horse teeth chomped down on his hand.

Mack didn’t hide his laugh. Well, this was going to be more fun than he’d thought.

He’d only signed on in the first place because the day in day out grind of the ranch hadn’t been doing the trick anymore. He thought routine would be good. Like he could just lose himself in his work and not think about shit.

Problem was, the opposite had happened. The more rote daily life on the ranch got, the more space his mind had to linger back in the past. He’d only done an eight-year stretch but sometimes he thought it might as well have been a life sentence. Part of him would always be stuck in that six by eight cell.

The restlessness got worse and worse till he actually thought about moving on. It’d be years before he could do what needed getting done—the fucker who needed dead was still in lock up and would be for four more

years.

He thought about going to work on one of those ocean rigs. He'd heard it was grueling work that left a man so spent at the end of the day you'd fall asleep standing up.

Then, before he could decide one way or the other, Xavier mentioned the mustang makeover competition. Said he hoped some of them would go for it.

Liam immediately held up his hand. And Mack thought, what the hell, maybe it was just the distraction he needed. And if he could show up that privileged little Irish prick while doing it, all the better.

They'd gotten into Denver a little after two o'clock and headed straight to the Bureau of Land Management facility.

It had been organized chaos with the trainers from all around the country lining up to see what mustang they'd been assigned. Once given a mustang, the trainer then either loaded them up and headed home if they lived close. If they didn't, then the horse stayed in the holding pens until the next morning.

Xavier didn't like them making the six-hour drive there and back home on the same day. It looked like most folks felt the same from all the horses still in the holding pens. The hundred days to train the mustangs started tomorrow.

Mack had been assigned a mid-sized gelding. The horse was jumpy as any wild horse would be, but Mack felt good about him—he was certainly calmer than some of the ones he'd walked past. Including the she-devil Liam had landed.

Liam glared at him after jumping over the fence of the pen. "Where's yours?"

"Torpedo's over there." He pointed to the small cluster of brown horses hovering near the hay trough. "With the white patch between his eyes. Sweetest little gelding you ever saw."

"Poor fecker doesn't realize he got stuck with a gammy mog from the wrong side of the tracks," Liam shot back. "Frankly I'm shocked anyone would put a living creature in the hands of an ex-con who knows more about carving shivs than taking care of horses."

Mack's blood went hot. "You think you're going to do any better? Growing up with that silver spoon up your ass?"

"Better a silver spoon than all the cock I'm sure you took while you were a prison bitch."

Mack's blood lit on fucking fire.

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.” Mack got toe to toe with the Irish bastard. “And if you’re so confident, why don’t you put your money where your mouth is? A hundred bucks says my mustang goes for more green than yours at auction.”

Liam’s eyes flashed and he stepped into Mack’s chest, knocking him backward several steps. “You’re on, you ruddy bastard. But let’s make it interesting. One grand says my mustang kicks your’s arse come September.”

“Does it make you feel like a big man being able to flash your cash around like that?” Mack leaned in. “Makes it a little obvious you’re overcompensating. But hey, we can’t all be born stallions. I wouldn’t worry, though.” He clapped Liam on the shoulder. “I’m sure your bank account is enough to blind most women to whatever you may be...” He glanced down toward Liam’s belt. “Otherwise lacking.”

Liam’s jaw went rigid and Mack let the edge of his lip curl up.

“I don’t mind being a thousand bucks richer. You’ve got a deal.” He reached out for a shake and Liam gripped his hand with a bone-crushing force.

Mack kept grinning and squeezed back just as hard. Liam thought he could intimidate him? He’d eaten little shits like this for dinner back in lock-up. He was an enforcer for one of the nastiest bastards on the inside. You didn’t get that far up the food-chain without being one ruthless motherfucker.

Couldn’t deny who he was even if he didn’t like to think about that period in his life—he hadn’t been sure for a while he still had a soul after all the shit he’d done. Wasn’t till he started working with the horses at Xavier’s that he actually found a ray of hope he might still be more man than monster.

Then he shut that shit down.

He needed the monster for the plans he had.

But this rich Mick wouldn’t know a thing about making the hard choices in life or what kind of man it took to come out the other side. Mack had known people like Liam before.

When Mack had gotten a full ride scholarship to Harvard, he’d dated a couple rich kids who’d never known a hard day’s work in their life. Blaire was old money on her mom’s side and her dad was a famous hot-shot lawyer. When she paid attention to Mack, he thought it proved he wasn’t just white trash from Jersey. That he could move up in the world. Be more than the nothing he’d been born. He didn’t see it for what it was even after Blaire pulled him into those fucked up games with her boyfriend.

Wasn't until shit hit the fan and he got arrested that he realized the only reason they'd ever looked his way was because they got a thrill out of fucking who they considered to be 'the help.'

The same way Liam looked at Calla.

Mack's jaw hardened. "While we're on the topic of shit you oughta know better than to step in," Mack continued, voice hard, "back off Calla. She doesn't need some worthless user like you fucking her over."

"Worthl—?" Liam's nostril's flared. "She certainly deserves better than *you*. You were born trash and you'll die trash. How long till you end back up in prison? They got a bed still nice and warm with your name on it?"

"You wanna say that ag—?"

"What's going on here?" Xavier's booming voice made Mack's head jerk to the right.

Shit, the boss was heading toward them and he didn't look happy. Mack stepped back from where he'd been in Liam's face.

"Kitchen duty for a month still not enough to teach you two to play nice?" Xavier stopped between them, glaring at one and then the other. "I'm not going to be embarrassed by two of my men acting like jackasses, am I?"

"No, boss," Liam said, looking at the floor. Mack liked that. Cowed was a good look on him.

"Mackenzie?" Xavier growled and Mack shifted his gaze away from Liam.

"Sorry." Mack respected Xavier. The man had given him a job even knowing he'd done hard time. It was a rare second chance in a world that didn't often give them. "No problems here."

"Good," Xavier bit out. "Better not be." With one more glare in both their directions, he turned and kept on his way.

As soon as he was out of ear shot, Liam just had to open his mouth again. "How about we let Calla decide who's the better man?"

Mack gritted his teeth, shaking his head as he turned to follow Xavier. The only way this wasn't going to end with his fist in Liam's face was if he left now. "You stay away from her. Stay away from me too if you know what's good for you."

"Sounds to me like someone's afraid he won't measure up."

This mother fucker was just begging for it, wasn't he? Calla was Mack's kind of people. He wouldn't let Liam fuck with her or fuck her over. Mack turned back to Liam and put his finger right in his face. "I don't play games

with good women. But I can guaran-goddammed-tee you that if she's heading back to anyone's hotel room tonight, it'll be mine."

Shit. He hadn't meant to say that. If he really had Calla's interests at heart, he'd forget he ever met her. He might be a better choice than Liam, but not by much. Besides, Mack wasn't in the market. Calla didn't need him spreading his shit on her. The days of thinking he could change the cards he'd been dealt were long gone.

Liam grinned, obviously happy to be getting under Mack's skin. "We'll just see about that."

This time Mack turned and didn't look back. He had to get out of here before he did something he'd regret. Liam O'Neill would get what was coming to him eventually, and if there was any justice in the goddamned universe, Mack would be there to see it.

Chapter Eight

LIAM

Liam stood near the bar that had been set up at one end of the hotel ballroom and watched the door for Calla.

The party had been in full swing for almost an hour but she and Mel had yet to make an appearance. At least Mack was staying well away from him. Liam'd only glimpsed him once since he'd been down here. Best move that wanker had made all year. Liam was surprised he'd showed at all. Mack wasn't exactly famous for being sociable.

Liam took another swig of beer. He had to give it to them, these people knew how to party—they poured Guinness by the pint.

He glanced around the packed space. A live band was set up at the far end of the room. The fiddler sawed away like the devil himself had lit a fire under his arse. Another line dance had broken out. Liam couldn't help watching on in amazement. All these grown damn men and women stomped and swung and clapped in almost perfect synchronicity as the music barreled on.

He'd just emptied his second pint as the song finished and a loud round of applause and whistling filled the room. The dancers broke off into couples or headed toward the sidelines as a slower tune started up.

And that's when she walked in.

Liam blinked, thinking his mind was playing tricks on him again. For the past half hour he'd been looking up and down every jean-clad, big shiny-

belted woman.

So he was not prepared for the siren that walked in sporting a cleavage-bearing red dress with a giant slit up the side showing off so much leg it'd make a grown man cry. He might not have even recognized it was Calla if not for Mel walking beside her, holding her hand and urging her forward.

He was still blinking back his surprise as Mack walked right up to her and grabbed her hand from Mel, lifting it to his lips.

Liam's fists clenched. Where the fuck had that bastard been lurking? Liam jumped up from his barstool, about to make a beeline toward them, when his path was suddenly blocked.

Liam barely managed to stop from barreling into the woman in time. He was about to step around her and continue toward Calla when she put a hand on his arm.

"I thought I saw your name on the registry."

Liam looked down, frowning at the blonde who held his arm possessively.

Well shite, it was the betty from the bar last night.

"Looks like we'll be competitors. If you need any help with your mustang, I'd be happy to come out and we could work her together. And any time you want to practice your riding technique..." she smiled at him coyly. "I'm happy to oblige."

Aw Jaysus. If he'd known she was the clingy stalker type, he never woulda feckin' touched her last night. Time to shut this down. "Look, Betty —"

"Bethany," she corrected, eyes flashing for a moment before she went back to batting her lashes.

"Yeah, well," he didn't hide his grimace. "Let's just call last night what it was. A mistake." He tried to pull away from her but she just giggled and latched onto his arm harder.

"Don't be silly. We were both just a little drunk. Tonight I'll *really* show you a good time." She tried to pull him toward the dance floor.

Now she was just pissing him off. She was pushy, had a face that looked the same as a million other girls, and he felt like he was choking from the cloud of hairspray from her overly puffy blond hair.

Add that to her stalker tendencies and she was one hundred percent not attractive. He was about to tell her just that, but a little voice at the back of his head whispered it might not be the smartest idea. It was a small

community and she knew who he was. Letting his inner asshole loose probably wasn't a grand idea, much as he was tempted.

Dammit, he hated this being a responsible lad shite.

"Sorry, miss." He pasted on a disingenuous smile and peeled her arm off him. "I'm not interested."

But she just kept smiling at him, leaning over to no doubt bare her cleavage in the little tube top she was wearing. "You can run now, but you can't hide, Mister," she said in a baby voice. "I'll be here when you realize just what you're missing." Then she tapped him on the nose with her forefinger and he jerked away.

Any of Liam's responses to that delusional statement definitely wouldn't count as gentlemanly. So he bit his tongue and walked away without another word. In his experience that was the only way to deal with crazy.

But when he looked for Calla, he couldn't see her anywhere. She and Mel weren't by the entrance anymore.

Shite. Liam scanned the ballroom for any sight of them. Okay, there was Xavier. Hard to miss a man who stood a head taller than most. The only way Xavier would be at a party like this was if Mel had dragged him. And where there was Mel, he'd find Calla. Time to get this night back on track.

Liam smiled and made his way around the edge of the dance floor until he came up to Xavier. Just as expected, Mel stood right beside him.

But Calla was still nowhere to be seen. He was about to ask where she'd gone when he heard a loud peal of laughter behind him.

Which was when he turned around and saw her at the edge of the dance floor. Apparently trying to teach Mack to two-step.

Son of a cunt.

At least from the clumsy way Mack was fumbling around it was obvious he was a shite dancer.

Small compensation, considering it only seemed to charm Calla more. She grinned as she yelled out instructions, her arm linked with Mack's as they stomped and then started forward again. Well, they were *supposed* to be going forward, but Mack was still backing up. Which just made Calla laugh more as she tugged on his arm to try to get him moving with the rest of the group.

Jaysus, Liam had only been caught up with that blonde leach for a couple minutes, and here Calla and Mack were already looking as chummy as if they'd known each other for years and not days.

Enough of that.

Liam was about to head to break into their little dance lesson when Mel suddenly caught his arm. Her face was serious so he stopped instead of just blowing her off. It was loud with the blaring music and noise from the crowd, but he leaned down to hear what she had to say.

“You guys need to take it easy with her. She doesn’t have much experience with men.”

Liam nodded and was about to pull away because every second he wasn’t by Calla’s side was another that Mack was wheedling himself into her good graces. Mel’s grip just increased on his arm.

“I’m serious, Liam.”

He paused at that. She did look serious. Deadly so. Was he missing something?

“I just want to show her a good time, that’s all.”

Mel’s look didn’t soften. “What I’m telling you is that she’s not used to men like you.” She leaned in so she was talking directly into his ear. “Or any man. You get what I’m saying?”

Liam pulled back sharply so he could look her in the face. Did she mean

—
“Tell me you get what I’m saying.”

Liam’s gaze went to the lovely woman on the dance floor and then back to Mel. He leaned down, glancing around to make sure no one else would hear him. “Are you saying she’s a virgin?” Calla had to be in her mid-twenties. Surely there was no way that she wouldn’t have had—

“I’m seriously breaking the girl code by saying anything about it. But I’ve seen how you guys operate and—”

“I’ve never done anything with a woman they weren’t fully on board with.” Liam couldn’t help his sharp tone and Mel winced.

“I’m not saying that you have. Or would.” Mel huffed out a breath. “I don’t know what I’m saying.”

Liam didn’t know what to do with this information. Staying away from virgins was one of Liam’s hard and fast rules. He looked out over the dance floor at Calla laughing and leaning into Mack.

Jaw tightening, he bent back down to Mel’s ear. “You tell Mackenzie this?”

She shook her head. “No chance. She let it slip while I was doing her make up and I probably shouldn’t have even told you, but—”

“I’m glad you did.”

She nodded, still looking uncertain.

He gave her arm a squeeze and then started through the crowd to get to Calla’s side. If Mack hadn’t been in the picture, he might have left well enough alone. Getting tangled with a virgin was usually the last thing he would have been up for.

But Mack *was* in the picture. He might not know her well yet, but the last thing she needed was to be seduced by some fucking ex-con. Liam was more determined than ever to get her away from the bastard.

Chapter Nine

CALLA

“**Y**our *right* foot. No, your other right.” Calla laughed even harder as Mack stumbled along to the line dance steps, his face an adorable mask of concentration as he stomped a beat after everyone else. At least he was finally moving back and forth *with* the crowd, even if he didn’t seem to be able to catch onto the simple step-kick, triple step pattern of the dance.

“Step, kick, tri-ple step,” she said, overexaggerating each syllable as she tried to demonstrate.

He seemed to finally get it, but then came the part where they were supposed to shuffle forward and he was still stomping and kicking. She grabbed his arm and dragged him forward, laughing so hard her stomach was starting to hurt.

God, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d had this much fun. Maybe never?

She’d been so nervous while Mel was doing her hair and showing her how to apply some light make up. The dress alone had been so daring Calla hadn’t been sure she’d be able to go into public in it. So she hadn’t said no when Mel offered her a shot of tequila before they headed downstairs to the ballroom. She *might* have snuck a second while Mel went to the bathroom, barely able to hide her scrunched face before Mel came back out.

Calla was usually a strict beer drinker. But she couldn't say she didn't like the way the tequila heated her chest, burning all the way down. Then there was how, just moments later all her limbs went nice and loose and suddenly she'd been eager to get down to the party. To Mack and Liam.

Maybe it was wrong of her not to have chosen one over the other yet.

Then again, screw that. It wasn't like she was looking for marriage. She just wanted to have *fun* tonight without stressing over all the shit she usually did.

Mel had tried to get her into a pair of heels but it took about zero point three seconds to determine that nope, there was no way she'd be able to take two steps in the damn ankle breakers. In the end, Mel agreed that Calla's good cowboy boots—as opposed to her daily work ones—with the dress did look pretty cute. Cute wasn't a word that had ever been applied to Calla before, so with Mel's encouragement and one more shot of liquid courage, they'd come downstairs.

All her old anxieties came back the second they walked into the crowded ballroom. God, people she *knew* were going to see her in this get up.

Before she could start hyperventilating and running back to the exit, though, Mack had come up to her. It was impossible to miss the appreciation in his eyes as he looked her up and down. She was sure she'd gone beet red, but he pulled her out to the dance floor.

The song came to an end right as Mack started shuffling the right direction. She held onto his arm to hold herself up she was still laughing so hard.

“Glad I'm entertaining you,” Mack said gruffly, but she could tell by the twinkle in his eyes he wasn't actually put off.

On impulse, she went up on tiptoes and planted a kiss on his cheek. She meant it to just be a quick peck but he wrapped an arm around her waist, his other hand slipping around to cup the back of her head.

His gray eyes were more intense than she'd ever seen as he leaned down. He wasn't aiming for her cheek, either. Calla dropped her eyes closed, waiting for their first kiss with bated breath. She'd only kissed one other boy her whole life and it turned out Tommy Shelton had been dared to kiss the class tomboy for five bucks.

But a hairsbreadth away from Mack's lips touching hers, a voice cut in loudly. “Can I have the next dance?”

Calla pulled back from Mack in surprise to see Liam standing right beside

them, a broad grin on his face. He held his hand out toward Calla. Calla could feel Mack's body stiffen, they were standing so close.

But Calla could only smile back at Liam. He looked more handsome than ever in his tight jeans, black shirt and shiny black cowboy boots that had silver embellishments. He might not be from this country but damn, he wore Western well.

"Now the Sleazy Slide," the band leader called out and everyone around them hurried to line back up.

Calla stepped away from Mack but she grabbed his right hand. "Let's dance!" With her other hand, she took Liam's, then she pulled them both into the line, one on either side of her.

"Watch me," she squeezed Mack's hand and he looked at her with an expression that said, *help*.

"Left slide," she called out as the whole line started shifting that way. This one was more complicated than the Cotton-Eyed Joe.

Liam picked it up quickly and when he did the little shimmy along with the slide, she couldn't help appreciating his ass in those tight jeans. The next second, though, she was distracted by trying to help Mack figure out how to do the half-turns. She'd abandoned trying to get him on the beat a long time ago, but the whole crowd was facing a new wall and Mack was still trying to slide.

Mack stumbled his way through the song and Calla continued laughing harder than she ever had in her life. Liam was hamming it up on her other side, making sure to wiggle his ass in an overexaggerated manner.

When the song was over, Calla clapped and whooped as loud as anyone else. She fanned herself with her hands. With all the bodies in the room plus the dancing—not to mention the tequila earlier—she was definitely past comfortably warm.

She lifted her hair off her neck as the band started up the next song. Couples around them started pairing off for the two-step.

"May I have this dance?" Liam asked, taking hold of her hand and pulling her toward him. Calla glanced over her shoulder to see Mack glowering so she reached back and squeezed his arm. "Next one's yours!"

But then Liam had her pulled up against his body, one hand in hers and the other tight around her waist. And damn, it was like the man was born to two-step. He took command as he led her around the floor and Calla felt her body sinking into his. While she had plenty experience line dancing, she'd

only two-stepped like this a handful of times—and when she had, she was usually standing in for the guy because there were too few of them at the dance. She'd certainly never been able to just lose her body to the rhythm and follow the lead of a man with a strong, firm grasp on her waist.

As they rounded the edge of the dance floor, Liam spun her out. She shrieked and laughed as the next second, he was spinning her back into him. Her hands rose to his chest as he pulled her snugly against him. Her breathing was erratic and not just because she was short of breath from the dancing.

Liam O'Neill had her in his arms. When had she stumbled into this alternate universe and when was reality going to come smashing back down like it always did?

Liam grinned and rolled his hips into hers before pulling them back into the whirling crowd of dancers.

When they got around to the side of the room where they'd left Mack, Calla looked around for him. She felt bad. It was probably bitchy to just leave him and dance off with Liam. She didn't know what the hell she was doing. She was just going with whatever felt good in the moment—probably a disastrous way to go about things.

When had she ever not thought out everything she did from ten moves back? That was the only way to run a ranch. She had to be on top of all the everyday tasks in addition to putting out whatever inevitable problem cropped up, whether it be a sick cow, a broken section of fencing, hiring and firing ranch hands, or the hundred other things that went wrong on any given day. She'd dropped into bed each night exhausted but unable to sleep because she was worrying about the list of everything she needed to see to the next day.

It was non-stop, dawn to dusk, seven days a week, three-hundred sixty-five days a year. A night like tonight, with no responsibilities and going out just to have *fun*? Unheard of. She hadn't been out dancing in years and tonight reminded her just how much she'd always loved it. The most she ever socialized these days was hitting Bubba's a couple times a week before evening chores so she could actually be around humans other than her ailing, taciturn father and the ranch hands she'd been in charge of.

Liam spun her again and her stomach swooped as he grinned at her and pulled her back into him.

God, every time he did that he drew her even closer to his body afterwards. Her chest bumped his in a way that made her nipples tighten and

her sex clench. She gasped and Liam only grinned bigger. He knew exactly what he was doing to her.

And if she was living each day like it was her last, she damn well sure didn't want to head to the great beyond with her virginity intact. It'd be best to lose it to a man who knew exactly what he was doing, wouldn't it? There wouldn't be any awkward fumbling with a man like Liam. If the way he led her so confidently around the dance floor was any indication, he'd be right at home taking the lead in bed. Didn't they say how a man danced told you a lot about how he was between the sheets?

The second she thought it her cheeks burned but Liam was spinning her out again and banishing any other thought except what it felt like in his sure grip.

That was, until she glanced over and saw Bethany in Mack's arms.

Her ebullient mood popped like a balloon and her feet got tripped up with Liam's when he stepped into her and she didn't step back.

She yelped as she almost went down. Only Liam's hands gripping her waist saved her from toppling ass over head.

"Sorry!" Liam said, almost shouting to be heard over the music. Then he followed her train of sight to where Bethany was urging Mack into a two-step. The song finished and Calla stood there lamely attempting to get her breath while also forcing herself not to stare at Mack with Bethany. She tried to flash a smile up at Liam. Hadn't she just been contemplating losing her virginity to him? So why was she reacting so strongly to seeing Mack with her arch nemesis?

Was it just because it was Bethany or would she feel that way if Mack were dancing with anyone? Because as much as she'd admired Liam from afar, it was Mack who'd come up to her first. Him who'd she had the intense moment with at the kitchen sink last night. Him who'd said he wanted to explore things with her. *Sexually*.

Or maybe she was just stupid, reading far more into all that than he'd intended. Of course when he was presented with a far more tempting option like Bethany he'd jump at the chance.

"Hey asshole."

Calla's head jerked to Liam. He was walking up to Mack. Oh crap.

These two guys already obviously hated each other. She was just driving a deeper wedge between them, making everything worse.

She moved to grab Liam's arm, ready to tell him... What? That she had a

headache and was heading to bed for the night?

God, what was she even doing here, wearing this ridiculous dress? It felt like a Halloween costume. She'd had fun playing dress up, but she was *not* this woman. What the hell had she even been thinking?

Mack's head swung to look at Liam and then Calla. He dropped his arms from around Bethany.

"You owe this beautiful woman a dance." Liam's voice was biting as he addressed Mack. He moved Calla toward Mack with a hand low on her back and it took all her wits not to stumble over her own feet again.

"I do," Mack said, stepping away from Bethany.

Calla didn't miss the way Bethany's eyes narrowed and then went wide with surprise, like she was just recognizing who Calla was. Fair enough. She'd barely recognized herself when she looked in the mirror earlier.

"That I do," Mack said, smoothly pulling Calla into his arms. The band had switched to a slow song and Mack urged her closer. Calla looked over at Liam even as she raised her arms around Mack's neck. What exactly was going on here? Was Liam passing her off so *he* could dance with Bethany?

But Liam turned his back on the other woman, still with a wide smile for Calla. Then he came up behind her until she was sandwiched between the two most gorgeous men she'd ever known.

Calla's breath caught as Liam's hands gripped her waist from behind, just above where Mack held her.

It wasn't until they both started moving in tandem that Calla completely lost the plot of what was going on.

Mack pulled her closer to him so that, like earlier with Liam, her breasts brushed his chest. And then there was Liam's heat at her back, his hands slipping around the front of her waist as he moved his hips forward until they made contact with Calla's ass.

Her eyes shot wide and she looked over her shoulder at Liam. There was a wicked gleam in his eye as he looked down at her. She couldn't hold his gaze and turned her face back toward Mack's chest. It wasn't a second until she felt Liam's breath hot on her ear. "Tonight is all about making you feel good, baby."

She blinked, feeling light-headed. Her arms tightened around Mack's neck. Then Mack's hand was on the back of her head, urging her to lay her cheek against his chest. Turned out she was wrong earlier when she'd thought Mack had no rhythm.

He had plenty, it turned out, when he was dancing in a way he was used to. And damn was he good at it. He notched his legs between hers until the red fabric of her dress strained at the slit. So close that it was almost like she was *riding* him.

And Liam was still just as tight at her back, his thumbs rubbing tiny circles on her waist as all three of them swayed back and forth to the music.

She swallowed hard and her fingers gripped the collar of Mack's shirt. Why were they—? What did this even mean? Were they trying to get her to choose between them? She'd just wanted to come have a night of carefree fun. Maybe join a few line dances. Try out getting drunk for the first time. But this felt like some game she didn't know the rules to.

When Mack danced back and forth with his leg between her knees, she couldn't help her breath hitching. Oh God. Did he realize that with their height differences, his upper thigh was rubbing against *that* spot?

Instead of Mack reacting, though, it was Liam's fingers who clenched on her waist. Almost like he could sense the spike of heat at her center and knew exactly how turned on she was. Which was so embarrassing she was glad her face was buried in Mack's chest.

"You're so hot, baby," Liam whispered in her ear.

Oh God, he knew. He knew and Mack probably did too.

She felt like the stupidest girl in the world to be getting so riled by a *dance*.

And suddenly, it was all too much. What the hell was she doing? All but grinding down and getting herself off on Mack's leg while they freaking danced? Right here in front of God and everybody else?

She jerked away from Mack, backing into Liam until he stepped to the side.

"What's wrong?" Mack asked, his face instantly registering alarm. "Are you okay?"

Calla lifted a hand to her forehead. "I'm hot." Then she realized just what she'd said and her eyes widened in mortification. "Like dizzy. It's so hot in here."

Liam joined Mack in a twin look of concern.

Oh God, she was being a total freak, wasn't she?

"I'm not feeling so good." And then, not able to stand their concerned expressions for another second, she spun on her heel and bolted for the exit.

"Excuse me," she said as she pushed through the crowd. "I'm sorry."

Excuse me. Pardon me.”

She thought she heard her name called from behind her but she didn't look back. If she hadn't looked like a crazy person before, she definitely did now.

Tomorrow she'd just tell them she was sick. That was all. And she'd wear her normal overalls and flannel and never try anything this stupid again. Who was she kidding? People never changed, she was such a goddamned *idiot* to even think for a moment that she could—

She finally made it out of the ballroom and then she was high-tailing it through the lobby of the hotel for the elevators.

“Calla. Cal!”

Okay, one of them was definitely behind her, calling her name. Calla cringed and moved from fast-walking to all out jogging.

“Hold it,” she called out when she saw an elevator door closing. She *had* to get on that elevator or she would die in a puddle of embarrassment. The doors started opening again and she slipped inside.

It was only as she spun around and punched the button for the third floor that she saw both Liam and Mack closing in.

Oh God, if she had to face either of them right now she would absolutely die. She punched the *close door* button furiously until the doors closed right as Mack was reaching toward her.

Chapter Ten

MACK

“**Y**ou fucking idiot,” Mack spun right as the elevators shut on a freaked as hell Calla. He shoved Liam as soon as the bastard caught up with him, slamming him against the wall. “What the fuck were you thinking, dancing with her like that?”

“What was *I* thinking?” Liam shoved him back and stumbled away from the wall, still glaring. “You were the gobshite dry humping her in the middle of the fecking dance floor.”

Mack got right up in his face again. “And you think coming up and double-teaming her like that wasn’t going to freak her the fuck out?”

If he was honest, he felt like punching himself just as much as he wanted to smack Liam. Why had he asked Calla to dance? He’d only meant to go down to the ballroom to redeem the two drink tickets they’d given everyone doing the mustang makeover.

But then he saw Calla standing there in that bombshell dress beside Mel. Her face had been uncertain, though. She’d crossed her arms awkwardly, looking vulnerable and unsure of herself. So he’d asked her to dance. The smile that lit up her face was bright as the fucking sun.

He shoulda walked away right then and there. He wasn’t anyone’s knight in shining armor. But he’d ignored the voice of reason shouting in the back of his head and taken her arm.

Just like he was ignoring good sense now as he watched Liam look up at the numbers above the elevator doors. The elevator skipped the second floor and stopped at the third. Then it continued up to the fourth and paused again. The hotel was only four stories tall. Calla was either in a room of the third or fourth floor.

Liam must have had the same thought as Mack because he jerked open the door to the stairs right before Mack could reach for it himself. The bastard could run, Mack would give him that. He jackrabbited up the stairs and Mack had to push it to stay on his heels.

“You try the third, I’ll check the fourth,” Liam called over his shoulder as he hit the landing for the third floor and continued up.

Fine with Mack. He jerked open the door to the third floor just in time to see Calla’s back retreating down the hallway. She stopped in front of her door. As Mack got closer he could hear her swearing.

“Son of a bitch, where did I—”

She must have heard Mack’s footsteps because she whipped around to look at him, one hand down the top of her dress. She jerked her keycard out of her bra, then froze. Her cheeks were flushed a pretty pink.

She cringed before turning back around and dropping her forehead to her door like she was defeated. Mack almost reached for her but stopped himself just in time. Fuck, he didn’t want to spook her more than she already was. It was another long moment before she said anything.

“I don’t suppose we can all just forget the last half hour?” Her voice was so quiet, the only reason Mack heard it at all was because he took a step closer in spite of his determination not to make her any more skittish.

A racket behind him had Mack turning just in time to see Liam barreling through the stairwell door. “She wasn’t on the fourth, did you find—” he cut off, obviously seeing Calla. “Oh. Hi.”

“Oh my God,” Calla whispered under her breath, hand going to her eyes. “I’ve never been more embarrassed in my entire life.”

Fuck that. She had no reason to be embarrassed. She was beautiful and sweet. Having her in his arms downstairs had felt like the best thing that had happened to him since he got out of that fucking hellhole where he’d rotted for eight long years.

She’d made him laugh. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed like that.

So he reached for Calla’s elbow and spun her to look at him. Her eyes

were wide and if he wasn't wrong, almost teary. God-fucking-dammit if there was one thing he couldn't handle, it was seeing a woman cry. He'd watched his mother weeping over one bastard or another his whole life. He always swore he'd never be the kind of man that made women cry.

But here he was. Spreading his shit. Dirtying up a girl who was as poor as Mack had ever been but still hadn't let it turn her bitter or ugly. Fuck. He shouldn't have followed her. He shouldn't have ever touched her.

All these thoughts flashed neon in his brain but he proved yet again exactly how much a shit he was—because none of that stopped him from dropping his lips to hers and stealing the kiss that should have been his earlier.

Her lips were warm and trembling. And soft. So fucking soft. He couldn't help a low moan as he stepped into her, pulling her body flush against his as he kissed her deep, then deeper still. She was so much soft, warm, sweet woman, he went instantly hard.

When his tongue teased at the seam of her lips, she opened them on a gasp. Mack didn't hesitate for a second before dipping his tongue inside and kissing her in a way that made his intentions clear.

Because suddenly he had to have her. He felt like a starving man presented with a feast.

When she went pliant in his arms, he felt like roaring in triumph. She wanted to be claimed as much as he wanted to do the claiming.

“Why don't we take this inside her room?”

Calla jerked back at Liam's voice like she'd just remembered he was there. Ha. Take that, you Irish bastard.

But then he saw Calla's face as she looked toward Liam. Like she was stricken.

Mack's chest tightened. Did she look like that because she was worried about hurting Liam? Or because she wished it was him kissing her instead?

Before Mack could figure out one way or another, Liam was asking, “Where's your key, beautiful?” and running his hand down her bare arm.

Son of a bitch. Mack would make him regret ever—

But then he realized Calla was trembling at Liam's touch. From the look of longing on her face, it wasn't from fear, either.

She felt something for Liam. Mack's jaw tightened. Fuck. Double fuck. He should leave them to it.

But his insides rebelled even at the thought. And then he saw Liam

looking at him, his eyebrows raised in question.

Mack hadn't missed how Liam had handed Calla over to him earlier on the dance floor. Sharing her. Because Liam had seen the same thing Mack was just now realizing—she wanted both of them.

And Mack wanted her.

Fuck but he wanted her. He hadn't wanted anything other than revenge in so long he'd forgotten what it could feel like. The feeling was such a revelation that, no matter how much he fucking hated the Irishman, Mack would make sure Calla got what she wanted. Anything she wanted.

Mack nodded to Liam's inquiring gaze.

"Let's go in," Liam said, lifting the keycard Calla had been clutching in a trembling hand and pressing it against the door censor. Calla looked confused for a moment until Liam said, "All of us."

Calla's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open slightly. But when the door unlocked, she looked back at Liam and then Mack. She pushed the door in and then kept going until she held it open wide. An invitation.

Fuck him. Mack felt it in his chest and his balls—the wanting.

She doesn't know what she's inviting in.

Liam stepped right over the threshold, brushing his chest against Calla's as he passed in a way that was anything but unintentional.

Still, Mack hesitated. *Get the fuck out of here. You're a shit stain and you always will be. She deserves a million times better than either of you horny fucks.*

He was about to turn around and leave. He really was.

But then Calla reached over and took his hand. With her other, she reached out to Liam. When she started tugging them inside, Mack let himself be pulled forward.

He didn't know if he was heading into heaven or hell. But as the door closed behind him, Mack knew there was no other place he'd rather be.

Chapter Eleven

LIAM

Calla's eyes were wide as she backed up against the closet door, looking back and forth between him and Mack.

Shite, had he made the wrong call here? Did he forget what Mel had told him not even an hour ago? Calla had zero experience with men.

And now, what, they were going to have a threesome? Jaysus, talk about running before you could fecking walk.

"Nothing happens in this room except what you want, gorgeous," Mack said.

Liam looked over at Mack, annoyed he'd said it before Liam could.

"He's right." Now there was a phrase Liam never thought he'd say in reference to Mackenzie Knight. "We can just stay up all night watching TV together if you want."

Time to take control and make sure that anything that happened tonight went at a pace Calla was comfortable with.

Calla's eyes flicked to the TV and then to the king size bed. Her eyes stopped on the bed. Then her tongue peeked out and she licked her lips.

Did she have any idea the kind of thoughts that gave a man?

Her eyes tentatively bounced between him and Mack. "I don't want to watch TV."

It was just a whisper but it was more than fecking enough. Liam had

never been happier to not watch TV in his life.

He started but Mack blocked his path, stepping forward and taking her in his arms just like he had outside the door. He kissed her deep again.

The strangest combination of jealousy and arousal hit Liam. He wanted to taste those fucking lips. But watching the way Mack took control of the kiss so masterfully... fuck, it made Liam's dick jump in his jeans. For a second all he could do was stand and watch.

Mack ran his hands down Calla's arms until he grabbed hold of her waist and pulled her into his chest. Was he hard already too? Liam caught himself just as his gaze dropped to the front of Mack's jeans where he pressed into Calla.

He jerked his eyes away. Jaysus. Sure, he'd been open to all sorts of experimentation in his life, but *Mack*? For feck's sake, he hated the wanker.

Then again... some of the hottest sex Liam had ever had was hate sex. There'd been Sean, his mate from Uni. Sean had lost Liam's respect when he came wheedling for cash for some shite pyramid scheme. He was happy to prostitute himself, and his girlfriend, Brigid, for the money. Taking Brigid while she took it out on Sean's arse had been simultaneously one of the most satisfying and empty moments Liam had ever experienced.

It wouldn't be empty if it was with Calla and Mack, though. Liam didn't know how he knew it, but he was as sure of it as he was the fact that the sun would rise tomorrow morning.

Liam stepped toward the two locked in their heated embrace. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to lift the hair off the back of Calla's neck and start kissing her there.

Jaysus but her skin was soft. His cock got even harder as he leaned down and traced his tongue along the delicate shell of her ear. He could hear her and Mack's mingled breathing as they kissed.

Calla let out a gasp against Mack's lips when Liam sucked and then bit down lightly. That was right. He smiled against her skin as a shiver went down her spine. He'd play her body so well she'd be singing his name by the end of the night.

Mack too, the lanky fuck. Maybe this was where they were always meant to end up. Tonight it would be settled between them. Once and for all.

Liam pulled back just enough so he could unbutton his shirt and pull it over his head along with his undershirt. He needed skin to skin contact.

Calla turned to look at him and he'd swear her pupils dilated at seeing

him shirtless. He kept his grin to himself. He was in better shape than he'd ever been in his life. Amazing what getting regular exercise and not living off a diet of whiskey and pub food could do for a lad. He'd been knackered every night for the entire first month he'd worked the ranch, but two years later and he was sporting a solid four-pack.

Mack urged Calla to turn her whole body so that she faced Liam. "Touch him," Mack whispered in her ear, taking over where Liam had left off kissing down the back of her neck. Liam frowned. That was supposed to be his line. He was the one directing this show.

But when Calla licked her lips again in the way that made Liam fecking crazy, he decided it wasn't worth making an issue of. She reached out a trembling hand toward his chest. Liam stepped in to her touch and he swallowed at the way her fingers felt like a blazing brand against his skin.

"Jaysus you don't know how good that feels, baby," he hissed out between his teeth, urging her other wrist forward so she was tracing down the lines of his pecs with both hands.

Calla's eyes shot up to his like she was surprised at his words. She was so innocent.

Liam's eyes flicked up to Mack but his face was buried in the back of Calla's hair. Liam could still hear the other man's low voice when he next spoke.

"Now reach inside his pants. Feel how hard he is."

Calla's whole body jerked as she looked at Mack. Jaysus, didn't the gobshite know she might need to take this slower?

He was about to remind her she didn't have to do anything she wasn't comfortable with but the next second her hands glided down from his chest to his stomach. He hissed out, totally mesmerized as he watched her hands jerk at his belt.

"That's right," Mack murmured in her ear. "Now reach in and feel how hard you've made him."

Liam almost couldn't breathe when Calla did exactly what Mack told her to. Her hand wasn't tentative as she slid it underneath his boxers. Her fingers closed around his shaft in a firm grip. Liam couldn't help thrusting his hips against her because, fecking Christ, that felt good.

Calla's eyes shot up to Liam as she gripped him and he'd have sworn he'd never been so hard in his whole goddamned life.

"You ever touched a cock before, baby?" Liam asked. He knew the

answer, of course, but he needed Mack to know just how inexperienced she was. Because Christ, all the hard-won self-control he'd tried to develop over the last year and a half was flying right out the fucking window. He wanted to toss Calla back on the bed and bury himself hilt-deep inside her. To feel her virgin little pussy squeezing around him while he pumped in and out—

Her hand froze at the question. “No.” Her answer came out whispered and she dropped her head like she was mortified to have admitted it.

“Don’t hide your face, baby,” Liam said, reaching one hand to her chin and raising her face. “You’re perfect just as ya are. Christ, I’m hard as stone knowing me cock is the first one ya ever touched.”

When Liam’s eyes flicked up toward Mack he saw the surprise on his face. He’d pulled back from Calla’s neck, eyes wide. But then, as Liam watched, Mack’s nostrils flared and he shifted his hands to trace up her stomach from behind.

“You mean no one’s ever held these sweet as fuck tits of yours before?” Mack asked.

Mack went slow enough that Calla could have stopped him if she wanted. Apparently she didn’t want because she stood still while his hands finally reached her breasts. Mack’s hands dwarfed her as he cupped her in his hands.

Mack swore as his fingers squeezed her little nipples between his thumb and forefinger until they were visible peaks through her silky dress.

“Let him know how good it feels, baby,” Liam murmured.

Calla let out the hottest fucking moan Liam had ever heard. The next second she reached for the straps of her dress. Mack helped her shove them down, along with her bra.

Slow. You need to be taking it slower.

Liam’s cock jumped as he heard the distinctive noise of a zipper being unzipped. Suddenly the front of Calla’s dress went slack and with jerky motions, she pushed her dress down to her waist. Her breasts were only exposed for a second before Mack had his hands on them again. He squeezed them in a way that didn’t look gentle at all, but had Calla reacting like she’d just been sparked with a live wire.

With one hand Mack guided her to look over her shoulder where he took her mouth as he squeezed those sweet as fuck little titties.

Enough. Liam hadn’t even gotten a taste yet. He stepped into Calla and he lifted his hands to gently direct her face back to him. Mack let her go, though he did flash Liam a dark look he couldn’t quite read.

Didn't matter because he was finally kissing Calla's soft lips. He shoved his tongue in her mouth. Maybe not the most suave kiss, but Jaysus she had him riled. He pressed his pelvis up and into her without qualm.

Virgin. She's a virgin, he tried to remind himself. *Slow the fuck down*.

But the next second her hand was between them reaching for Liam's cock again. The second her hot little hand closed around him, he thrust into it.

"Get on the bed," Mack growled. Liam wasn't sure if the command had been issued to him or Calla, but when Calla pulled away from his lips with a gasp and started toward the bed, Liam wasn't going to be anywhere else except right by her side.

Mack pulled his own shirt off his head and threw it to the floor. Liam couldn't take his hands off Calla and he followed her onto the bed, crawling right on top of her and kissing her deep again. He kissed down her chin to her neck, then further down to those sweet as fuck little tits of hers.

She wasn't big, maybe a generous size B or a small C, but she had plenty to cup and squeeze and damn, that was all Liam needed. Better yet, she was all natural.

The next second he had his mouth on her little rosebud nipples. He sucked them and then teased the rock-hard tips with his teeth. She let out another one of those hot as hell moans and her legs opened to him.

Liam immediately rocked his groin into her hot center. There was too much material between them, though. The fabric of her dress kept her legs from falling open fully.

Liam's hand dropped down between them. He shoved her dress up. He had to touch her there. He had to be the fucking first.

But then another hand, not Calla's, knocked his out of the way.

"I'm gonna feel you now," Mack said. "You want me to stop, you just say so." And then Mack's hand slipped between Calla and Liam, brushing Liam's cock as it went.

Liam squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to react and fucking resentful as hell that Mack got to touch her first.

But he didn't want to overwhelm her so he moved off her and watched as Mack's hand disappeared underneath the fabric that was now shoved all the way up to the top of her thighs.

Calla's back arched almost the second Mack made contact, pushing her breasts up into the air. She gripped the pillow behind her head as her pelvis moved against Mack's hand, her face screwing up in pleasure.

“Jaysus Christ.” Liam’s cock was painful still confined like it was in his jeans. He reached down and shoved his jeans off. The fucking things were so tight he had to lay back on the bed and wrestle to get them off his legs. He couldn’t get them off fast enough. He finally kicked them to the floor and then he turned so he was laying sideways. He sucked Calla’s nipple into his mouth again as he reached down to stroke his cock.

“Get your hand off your goddamned dick.”

Liam was so surprised by Mack’s demanding voice that his hand dropped off his cock. Mack seemed almost angry as he glared Liam down. “Only Calla gets to touch your cock. She’s the only one who can get you off. Now get your ass up the bed and let her see it up close.”

Liam laid there frozen for a moment. Who the fuck did that wanker think he was? Liam wasn’t the one who got ordered about in scenes like this. He *did* the ordering. He wanted to grab Mack’s balls and crush them in his fist until he dropped to the ground in front of him and offered to suck him off as way of apology.

But then he saw Calla’s eager eyes searching down his body.

Damn, she was a total ride. And she wanted exactly what Mack said, didn’t she? It turned her on to follow directions like that. Fuck that was hot.

So Liam crawled up the bed, cock jutting out toward her mouth.

Calla’s hand immediately grabbed for him and he put one hand to the headboard to support himself while he hovered over her. At first she just held his shaft, lifting his cock and hesitantly stroking it while she looked him up and down. Was she trying to tell if his cock was manky?

“I’m clean,” he assured her.

“Oh.” Her eyes came up to his. “I wasn’t even thinking about that...” She paused and blinked a couple times. “So if you’re clean, then it’s safe to do this?” She leaned up on one elbow to get even closer. And then the very tip of her tongue peeked out to lick just the very tip of his cock where his little slit was.

“Jayyyyyysus,” he groaned. Was she trying to fucking kill him?

“Did I do it wrong?” she asked, worry clear in her voice.

“Oh no,” Mack answered for Liam, “I think you did it very, very right. Taste him some more, gorgeous. Suck on his cock while I explore this sweet little pussy down here.”

Mack pulled Calla’s dress the rest of the way down her legs, tossing her underwear and bra to the floor.

And then she was just laid out naked on the bed like a sacrificial virgin set out for the monsters to devour. And devour her they would.

Mack bent over her lower body, his thumbs pulling her folds apart to expose her wet, juicy pussy. He wasn't trying to just jam his cock in her. Liam would have ripped the fucker off her if he'd tried that. She needed to get used to the feel and idea of sex—what it felt like to have a man's hand on her body. Or rather, *hands*.

Calla's eyes were wide as she looked down her body, gaze flicking between Liam's cock and Mack's head descending to her sex. She bunched her legs together and Mack looked up, eyes meeting hers.

"Open up for me, honey." He slid a hand down her thigh, nudging her legs back open. "Focus on Liam's cock. I like seeing it in your mouth."

Liam's shaft jumped at Mack's words. Shite. He was usually the talkative one in situations like this, but he had to say, it was fucking hot with Mack narrating.

"What do you like about it?" Liam asked, his eyes meeting Mack's for the first time since they'd come in the door. He felt stupid the second it was out of his mouth. His focus should be entirely on Calla. He was only putting up with Mack's presence because he was following Calla's direction. He'd give her whatever she wanted without making her feel bad for her desires, no matter—

"I like the way she's fascinated by your big dick. That's right honey, move your hand up and down and pop just his head in and out of your mouth. See how he responds each time?"

Jaysus.

Calla nodded almost imperceptibly, her mouth still around Liam's cock.

Liam hissed and his fingers gripped the headboard. Mack kept his gaze locked on Liam's even as he kept talking to Calla. "That's one of the most sensitive places on a man's cock. We love it when we get friction over the head. How's it feel, honey?"

Liam's breath caught. Because he wasn't sure if the honey was addressed to Calla or him. He blinked hard a couple times as Calla came up for breath. "It feels good." She obviously thought it was meant for her. Christ, of course it was. Liam shook his head.

"Am I doing okay?" Calla asked, her clear hazel eyes coming to Liam's. And there was such... openness there. Hope for approval, but also excitement, and lust, and energy. The mix of emotions from the past minute

and a half made Liam feel knocked on his arse.

“You’re doin’ perfect, baby.” He cupped her cheek and she smiled brilliantly. Then offered him a devilish wink and sucked his cock back into her mouth.

“Jaysus,” he swore, shifting forward as she tugged him closer. Then she lifted off the bed the last few inches and took the crown of his cock in between her lips.

Liam dropped a hand to her head. Her hair was soft. But the second her mouth closed around him she started sucking like a goddamned vacuum. Liam’s eyes dropped closed as he thrust ever so slightly forward.

She let out a startled cry and Liam looked down to see Mack’s head buried between her thighs. Christ, he was eating her out. What did she taste like? Sweet? Bitter? Sweet mixed with salty?

Goddammit, he needed to know. Besides, what the hell was he doing waiting for direction from Mack? He wanted to taste Calla, he was going to taste Calla.

He pulled his cock out of her hot mouth, but only for a second as he crawled down her body, arranging them in a sixty-nine position.

“Suck me in again, baby.” He grabbed his shaft and directed it back toward her mouth. Her tongue eagerly swirled around his tip the second he made contact and Liam had to clench his jaw against the impulse to blow his load right then and there.

But no, he was going to take his time. For a lad who’d always been given whatever he wanted growing up, it was a hard lesson learning that things were so much sweeter when you earned them. But goddammit, he had learned it.

“Bob up and down on his cock,” Mack said. “That’s right baby. Really pop those lips around his ridge every time he goes in and out.”

Fuck, Calla was a fast learner. He squeezed his eyes shut as he kissed down her stomach. Until his head banged into Mack where he was eating at her pussy.

Mack looked up sharply and Liam took the opening. “Make room,” he grinned.

Then he latched onto Calla’s clit. It was already swollen and glistening from Mack’s attention. He was sucking on the flesh Mack just had his mouth on. His cock jumped in Calla’s mouth at the thought and he drew on her little bud with even more suction.

He expected Mack to try to shove him away, but instead Mack just started kissing down Calla's thigh.

Liam smiled into her pussy. Good. He'd put the wanker in his place. He didn't know what had happened with that weird moment earlier, but he and Calla were doing just fine without Mack thinking he could call the shots. Sixty-nine was a two-person position. No third wheels need apply.

He'd barely had the thought before Mack's head started moving back up Calla's thigh. Then before Liam even registered what Mack was doing, he licked a long line up her inner thigh all the way to her dripping cunt.

If Mack thought he was getting back in the driver's seat, he had another thing coming. Liam suckled Calla's clit, nipping it with just the edge of his teeth. Her suction on his cock stuttered and Liam growled with satisfaction.

He pulled back to lick the tip of his tongue all around her clit.

And that was when Mack dove back in, forehead bumping into Liam's.

What the— Did he think he could just knock Liam out of the way?

Okay, so sure, that was what he'd done to Mack. But that was just him establishing the proper power dynamic. The world worked a certain way. There was a particular pecking order. And if Mack thought he could have Calla's pussy back, he had another thing coming. This clitoris was fucking his.

So when Mack's rough cheek scraped against Liam's as he ate at Calla, Liam barely even flinched. No way was he giving up his ground.

That was when he heard a wet slurping noise. He blinked and looked Mack's direction. His face was so close it was hard to even see what he was doing. He could just make out Mack's tongue before it plunged into Calla's wet opening. *While* Liam was sucking her clitoris.

Liam was about to draw back and tell him to move the fuck off but Calla's hands lifted to grip the backs of Liam's thighs that were braced on either side of her head. She groaned a long, low rumble around Liam's dick.

Fuuuuuuuuuck. That was— Jaysus Christ, maybe she'd just been pretending to be an amateur at all this. Because that felt like a fucking pro move.

Mack repositioned his head so he was eating Calla out so close to Liam that again, their cheeks grazed one another.

It was just because he didn't want Mack to have control over Calla's pussy that he didn't pull away at the repeated contact. That was all. It didn't have anything to do with the way his groin tightened every time their faces

brushed.

If Mack thought he could intimidate Liam with a game of chicken—seeing which of them would pull away first the nearer their faces got—Liam would just show him. Liam couldn't count the number of men he'd been with in his life. His preference usually ran to women, it was true, but there'd been more than a handful over the years to break up the monotony.

Liam tilted his head sideways and then licked down the inch and a half from Calla's clit to where Mack was tonguing her sex. Liam didn't pull away when his tongue made contact with Mack's.

Mack jerked back and Liam buried his grin of satisfaction by shoving his own tongue up Calla's opening.

Liam thought that would be it.

Surely Mack would back off now.

Or... not. Because the next second Mack moved his face even closer and his tongue clashed with Liam's, tangling as they both tried to get at Calla's slit.

Fuck.

Fucking *fuck*.

Liam's breath got shorter and shorter the more he battled Mack's tongue to drive in Calla's cunt. The way they were angled, mouths fighting it out over the same hole... it was almost like they were...

Kissing.

Liam's stomach tightened and he shut his eyes hard. But fuck, when he thrust his tongue forward and felt Mack's mouth kissing and slurping, he—Jaysus Christ but that felt. So. Goddamned. *Good*.

And when Mack grabbed the back of Liam's head, urging him back up to Calla's clit, Liam didn't fight it. Mack didn't let up his grip, though. He kept a firm hold on Liam's neck, pulling him back so that they took turns licking and sucking on Calla's clit. Mack directed it all, pushing Liam's head into position and yanking him back when he wanted his own turn.

Taking turns was good. Far better than his mouth being so fucking close to Mack's.

They repeated the move until Calla's legs shook crazily, the little whimpers coming from her throat growing louder and louder.

"She's almost there," Mack murmured, then he dug his fingers in the back of Liam's short hair and dragged him down at the same time shoving his own face into Calla's pussy. The sides of their faces cemented together and

Christ, when Mack's tongue darted in and out of his mouth to lathe at Calla's clit, it felt— Shite, that was so fucking hot—

Liam abandoned himself to it. He didn't flinch when his tongue touched Mack's. And when the tip of Mack's tongue accidentally encountered the tip of his, he lost it.

He pulled his hips back from Calla's mouth because fuck— He was gonna—

He reached his hand down and jerked at his cock while he and Mack kept up their assault on Calla's slick flesh. Mack's tongue touched his again and again and—

“Jaysus.” He jacked himself even faster and his orgasm hit so hard it felt like an electrical jolt slammed into the bottom of his spine. His tongue stuttered but Mack just seemed to go even crazier, his grip on the back of Liam's neck never letting up. He was French kissing Liam and Calla's cunt at the same time.

Liam grunted hoarsely as cum pumped out of his cock and sprayed all over Calla's tits. Once. Twice. Fecking *Christ*.

His hand stayed on his half-hard cock and he rubbed it in the slick trail he'd made between Calla's breasts. He pinched her nipple and exhaled into her pussy.

When Mack's hands came to his shoulder to shift him off to the side, Liam didn't have any strength to fight him. He fell sideways onto the bed and watched with a sort of haze over his eyes as Mack kept eating Calla out for several more long moments until she was quivering again and her cries reached a high-pitched fervor.

Jaysus, she was about to come. Again. It had been so long since he'd been with a woman even half as unfettered with her pleasure.

His hand still on his cock started stroking even though there was no way he could go again any time soon. As he watched Mack crawl up over Calla's body, his cock stirred back to life. Well Jaysus, if they kept this up, maybe he'd be back at full mast sooner than he thought possible.

He was so lost in the idea of trying to come again, he missed Mack's intention until he heard him ask, “You ready?”

Ready for what? *Shite*. Liam tried to scramble to shove Mack off. “No, wait, she's a—”

But it was already too late. Mack jerked his hips forward and he thrust his condom-covered cock into Calla's sopping pussy with one quick push.

Chapter Twelve

CALLA

Oh God. Mack was inside her. That pressure deep inside her was his cock. She was having sex. She was actually having sex. With Mackenzie.

“Get off her, she’s a fucking virgin,” Liam yelled, shoving at Mack.

Mack’s eyes shot to her and widened in sudden horror.

“No, don’t,” she said.

“You heard her,” Liam said. “She said fucking *no*.”

“No!” Calla wrapped her legs around Mack’s waist when she felt him withdrawing. “Don’t go.”

Mack’s cock pulsed inside her and her eyes dropped shut as she tried to memorize the feeling. Being stretched like that—God, she didn’t even know how to describe it. It didn’t hurt. She’d expected there to be pain. But there was the slightest pinch as Mack’s cock pushed in. How big was he? As big as Liam? Liam had felt huge in her hand and even bigger in her mouth.

God, she’d had Liam O’Neill’s cock in her mouth. He’d been so hard. Like, obviously he was hard. She wasn’t that dumb about sex. She’d even watched porn a couple times out of curiosity. But in the videos she’d seen the sex had been rough. Nothing like the exquisite care Mack and Liam had taken when their mouths were both on her driving her to the edge of sanity. She shuddered both at the memory and the way Mack’s cock felt inside her

when he slid out a little further and then pushed in again.

“Are you okay, Calla?” Liam asked, his voice concerned.

Calla swallowed and reached out a hand for him. Liam clasped her fingers and came close so that his face was only inches away. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to prop herself up on her elbow so she could kiss him. She wrapped her arm around his neck and pulled him down with her when she lay back.

“That’s right, sweetheart,” Mack said, his tone gentler than it had been all night. “You’re doing so good. Do you know how good it feels to be inside you? I’ve never felt anything so fucking good.” He hissed through his teeth as he pulled out and then slowly pushed back in. Aching slowly.

His groin made the barest contact with her clit as he moved and she shifted restlessly against him. Nice that he was being a gentleman and all, but dammit, she needed him to *move*.

“I’m okay,” she said, breaking from Liam’s kiss to look at Mack. “You’re not hurting me.”

Mack’s face was ruddy with color and she saw a vein straining at his neck. Calla reached out and traced it with her finger. “I’m not going to break.”

“We know,” Liam dropped down to kiss her deep again. “You’re our strong girl.”

Our.

Why did her blood race at hearing him say that? *Theirs*. She wanted to be theirs. God, she hadn’t even known such a thing was an option, but now that she’d glimpsed it, she wanted it bad.

Which was ridiculous. This was just one night. They were obviously so much more experienced than her. If she had any space left in her head to question things, she’d probably be freaking the hell out right now. Two guys at once? She didn’t even know people *did* that.

But it had just felt so natural when they were both at her door. They’d looked at each other and apparently shared some unspoken signal because the next thing she’d known, they were both kissing her and she was shoving down the straps on her dress.

“Does me fucking you feel good?” Mack asked, his hips shoving up against her pelvis.

Liam let up from kissing her long enough for her to nod and manage a shaky, “Yes.”

“I can make it feel even better,” Liam said, blue eyes flashing. He snaked a hand down between her and Mackenzie’s body until his middle finger was strumming her right where they’d had their mouths earlier.

“*Oh,*” she gasped, one hand clutching Liam’s shoulder, the other holding onto Mack. Mack leaned down and kissed her. Gentle at first. And then harder and harder as the rhythm of his thrusts picked up.

“She’s so fuckin’ tight,” Mack murmured.

“I bet she is,” Liam responded. “Is she clenching on you?”

“You have no fuckin’ idea.” Mack twisted his hips, grinding into her and bearing down on Liam’s hand between them. Did Mack feel him there? When he slid his cock out, did Liam’s hand brush his length? Why the hell was that thought so arousing?

Mack’s tongue thrust deep in her mouth, echoing the movements of his hips. Oh God, she’d never— She didn’t know it would feel so—

Her eyes squeezed shut as her back arched into Mack’s chest. Oh God, it was hitting. So much deeper and harder than before. Her toes curled and she buried her hand in Liam’s hair as he swooped down, sucking on her neck while Mack kissed her.

Her high-pitched cry pierced the air as the blinding wave inside her went up.

Up.

Up.

UP.

And then all the weight of gathered pressure released in one heart-stopping crash of pleasure. Like every ounce of her being was fulfilling its purpose perfectly, stretching out to the edges of her toes and out to her fingertips as she hovered at the apex for—one heartbeat. Two heartbeats. Three—

And then the breath swooshed out of her as she collapsed backward on the bed as the wave finally receded.

Her eyes drifted open only to see Mack’s exquisite face as it contorted in pleasure. His mouth was dropped open and his gray eyes burned as he looked down at her. Then he thrust his hips forward and planted himself so deep she knew she’d never forget the feel of him. Ever. Not until her dying day and probably not even then. She’d remember this feeling for eternity.

Mack collapsed on top of her, holding his hands on either side of her so he didn’t crush her. She looked down at the top of his head, wondering what

he was thinking. And Liam. She reached for him again and drew him down so that he was lying in the crook of her arm. Then she ran her hands through Mack's dark hair and he bowed his head into her collarbone.

The room was completely quiet except for the noise of all of them catching their breath. And Calla thought there hadn't ever been a more perfect moment in all of existence. She'd never felt more connected to a human being, or more fully alive than she did right at this moment.

Until Mack pulled off her. The next second, he rolled so that his feet were on the floor. Calla blinked up in surprise to see him walking away from the bed. He didn't look back at her. He turned only enough so that his face was in profile, his gaze fixed on the door. His voice sounded raw when he said, "Get her cleaned up."

And then he slammed out the door.

Chapter Thirteen

MACK

Mack skipped the elevator and went to the stairs. He had to get the fuck out of here. It wasn't until he was down the stairs and out the front hotel doors that he stopped to even breathe.

"Fuck," he yelled, grabbing both sides of his head. What the hell had he just done?

She'd been a virgin. A fucking *virgin*. She had no clue what she'd been getting into. But he'd pulled her into it. And then, ordering Liam around, just like he had with B—

Fuck. He slammed the brick wall closest to him with his palm. Several people walking by on the sidewalk jumped and then held their purses tighter once they got a look at him.

Calla had never looked at him like that. She'd never once seemed scared of him. Her eyes had held complete trust. Even when he was taking her fucking virginity.

She'd been an innocent.

Until him.

He shut his eyes and immediately he saw Ben. It was seven years ago and his new cellmate was looking up at him just like Calla had.

Ben was no innocent though. No, Ben's innocence had been stolen the first night he was in lock up.

“You got me away from him.” Ben had looked at him reverently.

Mack had turned away, not able to take the way the kid was watching him. “It was nothing.” He said it in a tone meant to discourage further conversation.

Ben made an incredulous noise. “Nothing?” Mack could feel him take a step closer even as Ben’s voice dropped to a whisper. “That monster raped me every night, sometimes twice a night, for nineteen months, three weeks, and two days. When I was told I was changing cells, I thought it’d just be more of the same.”

Mack spun around at that. “I’m *nothing* like that fucker.”

Ben didn’t flinch at Mack’s shout. “I know. I been your cellmate for a week and you ain’t even looked at me sideways.” He took another step closer. “I thought I just got a lucky break. Till I ran into Bone in the yard this afternoon.”

Bone. Mack’s back went rigid at the name. Danny ‘Bone’ Jones. The sadistic fuck who had been Ben’s previous bunkmate.

“He said you must have traded in all your markers to get me reassigned to your cell.”

Mack’s jaw went rigid. “What else did that fucker say?”

“A bunch of other shit, but for the first time in nineteen months, he didn’t lay a finger on me. ‘Cause of you.” Awe was clear in the kid’s voice. “He’s afraid of you.”

“He’s afraid of Pres,” Mack quickly bit out.

“Same thing,” Ben said, and he wasn’t wrong.

Mack had spent the first two years in lock up working out and bulking up until he was the biggest, baddest motherfucker on the block. The President of the Devil’s Spawn MC had noticed. Offered him protection in exchange for pledging.

Considering his only other option were those Aryan motherfuckers, Mack had agreed. He spent every day of the next year enforcing for the Devils. Well, at least he did when he wasn’t in the hole for fighting. No one knew it but he looked forward to his time in solitary. Meant he didn’t mind busting up whatever motherfucker Pres aimed him at. Gained him the nickname Torpedo. Pres pointed and *boom*, whoever it was wished they’d never gotten in the Devil’s shit.

Mack had never asked for a thing in return. Until last week when he requested Pres make Ben’s transfer. Pres hadn’t even blinked. Even though as

vice president, Bone was way higher up than Mack, and Pres had to know that stealing his favorite toy would piss Bone off, he still made it happen. Mack asked for the transfer last Tuesday and by Wednesday night, Ben, skinny, shivering, and eyes full of terror was escorted to his cell.

“What I don’t get is *why*. You ain’t even looked at me sideways,” he repeated, shaking his head.

“Ever heard the saying don’t look a gift horse in the mouth?”

Ben’s eyebrows furrowed. “Naw, I ain’t heard that.”

“It means just be happy and don’t question shit.”

Ben went quiet at that. Mack turned toward his bunk and yanked down the ratty blanket.

“You could, ya know.”

“Could what?” Mack looked over his shoulder.

“I wouldn’t mind if ya... *ya know*.” Ben’s head lowered but he kept his eyes on Mack. “If ya wanted somethin’ in return. Like I said, I’m real grateful. I can tell you’s a different sort than Bone. I wouldn’t mind it if ya wanted to—”

“I don’t.” Mack’s voice was sharp.

But over the next weeks and into the second month, Ben didn’t let up. He’d take any opportunity to touch Mack he could. He stayed right on Mack’s heels whenever they left the cell. Tried to give him half his food every day.

“Everyone already thinks you’re husbanding me,” Ben said one night, sitting on the edge of Mack’s bunk.

“Well I’m fucking *not*,” Mack bit out, not much passion behind it. He was tired. So goddamned tired of all of it.

“I wish you was,” Ben’s voice sounded wistful and Mack glared at him.

“Plenty folks go wolf when they’re inside. Don’t mean you’re gay or nothin’. Just that you got needs.” His voice dropped even quieter. “Everybody got needs. Even you. I hear you at night taking yourself in hand when you don’t think anyone else’s awake.”

“Get the fuck off my bed,” Mack said, shooting to his feet.

It was already lights out but he could see by the dim glow from beyond the cell when Ben dropped to his knees in front of him.

Mack shoved him so hard he toppled backwards, head cracking on the concrete.

Shit. He hadn’t meant to hurt Ben.

He stopped himself right before he could apologize. Maybe Ben would finally get the fucking message.

Still, Mack listened anxiously and only breathed out in relief when he heard Ben shuffling across the floor to his own bed.

He thought it would be done then. He'd made his position more than clear.

So when he jolted awake in the middle of the night to a hot mouth sucking his cock, Mack assumed he was still dreaming.

He pumped his hips back and forth because *fuck*, it was one good dream. Brianna had come and begged for forgiveness. She'd even bribed the prison officials in order to get a conjugal visit to show him just how sorry she was.

Mack reached a hand down toward his cock. And his hand landed on a head that wasn't fucking Brianna's.

As soon as he realized that, *shit*, he was awake, and *double shit*, Ben was giving him a blow job, he jerked his hips back. He had to grit his teeth against the pleasure firing down his spine when there was an audible *pop* as he came out of Ben's mouth.

"Get the fuck off me," Mack growled. He was about to reach down and shove him off when Ben said six words that had Mack freezing.

"You was Bone's before I was."

"Shut up," Mack hissed. He grabbed Ben's shoulders and took him to the floor in a headlock. "Don't you ever fucking say that again."

"It's true though, ain't it?" Ben gasped, hands going to Mack's arm at his throat. "You was his for two years. I hear you shoutin' in your sleep. You're still there back in his cell. In your head. I know 'cause I am too." Ben's voice got high and thin, like he was just holding back tears. "He tried to break ya but he can't. You're too strong to ever break."

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about." Mack gripped Ben's throat even tighter. Anything to shut the fucker up.

"I do," Ben wheezed. "And more than anything I wanna help you." Ben stopped struggling underneath him. "Help... us... both."

Mack dropped him and moved away, backing into the wall.

Ben didn't say anything else. The sound of him gasping, trying to get his air back, echoed around the cell.

"Fuck," Mack whispered, kicking the wall. Which hurt like a bitch. Everything fucking hurt. All the fucking time.

Because goddammit, Ben was right. No matter how long he was free of

Bone. Some part of him would always be locked in that cell with the sadistic motherfucker.

Two and a half years. Every night. No matter how big Mack got. No matter how hard he fought. Every *night*.

Till one day he stopped fighting. He'd barricade himself inside his head and let Bone do what he was going to do.

Two weeks after that, he was transferred to cell block D where the Pres and most of the Devil's lived. At first he thought it was because he'd finally proved himself. Things had been heating up between the Devils and the Mexican Mafia. Mack took every opportunity to back the Devils, trying to show how useful he could be.

Then he saw the young guy shrinking and following at Bone's heels. Ben. Poor bastard hadn't even turned twenty yet. The large black eye and way he walked with a limp told Mack everything he needed to know.

Mack hadn't gotten moved to D block because he'd proved he was worth something to the Devils. Bone had just gotten tired of him and replaced him.

Not two weeks after he'd stopped fighting back.

Mack had barely made it to the trashcan to puke up the entire contents of his stomach. He hadn't known which was worse—knowing he could have gotten out from under Bone months, maybe even years earlier if only he hadn't fought him every night. Or how fucking happy Mack was that it wasn't him locked in a cell with the monster anymore. Even though the only reason Mack was free was because some other poor fuck had taken his place.

Every day he saw Ben for the next year and a half, the guilt ate at him. Till he finally made his play to get him free of Bone. Knowing even as he did it that Bone would just start up again with some other kid. Fresh meat arrived each week.

But it wouldn't be him. And it wouldn't be Ben anymore.

"Please," Ben cried in the dark. "I need you. He made me— and I can't —" Ben's voice kept breaking off with sobs. "You saved me. You're all I can think about. Just pretend I'm a girl. One hole's as good as another. *Please*. I'll make it good for you. I love—"

Before he could finish that fucking sentence, Mack went for him. He lifted him up off the floor and then shoved him face down into his bunk. "You want it?" he asked furiously.

"Yes," Ben cried. "I need it. I need you." Ben's hand reached for him again but Mack knocked it out of the way.

Then he yanked Ben's pants down, spit on his hand, rubbed it over his cock, and shoved home up Ben's ass.

And just look how that had turned out. Just like all those years ago, Mack kicked the wall. And just like all those years ago, pain spiked through his foot. He didn't fucking care. Mack kicked the wall again.

People walking by jumped back and scattered. The hotel wasn't downtown, but there were still a few restaurants around.

"Fuck!" Mack shouted, kicking the wall one last time. That was when he saw a couple cell phones come out, their bright screens illuminated. Shit. Just his luck they were calling the cops. The last thing Mack needed was to get in trouble with the fucking law.

So he turned and limped as fast as he could down the sidewalk, hopefully in the direction of a fucking bar.

Chapter Fourteen

LIAM

“**H**e’s a total arse,” Liam said as he washed Calla’s chest with a warm washcloth. “Forget about him.”

Calla’s eyes moved from the door Mack had slammed out of and then back to Liam. They were wide with bewilderment. And hurt.

The next time Liam got his hands on Mack, he’d fucking kill him. It was Calla’s first time. And then for him to just fuck off like that— Liam gritted his teeth.

“Did I do something wr—?”

“Fuck no,” Liam said, throwing the washcloth to the floor and gathering her in his arms. She was shaking.

“Shh,” he said, holding her head against his chest and rocking back and forth. “Shh, it’s all right. Don’t cry, baby.”

“I’m sorry,” Calla said, swiping at her eyes and trying to pull away from him. “I’m being stupid.”

“No ya aren’t,” Liam said, running his hand through her hair. “Come on.” Liam moved to the edge of the bed and tugged Calla with him. “Up we go.” He stood and pulled Calla to her feet.

She clutched for the bedsheet but Liam gently pulled it away from her and tossed it back on the bed. “You’ve a beautiful body. Be a shame to hide it.”

Calla's cheeks went pink as she held one arm over her breasts to cover them. Cute. Didn't she remember how not very long ago he'd had the nipples she was covering in his mouth?

He just shook his head at her, then took her arm in his like they were entering a movie premiere and led her to the bathroom. He didn't let her go even when he reached to turn on the shower.

He eased her into the shower and then stepped in behind her. She swung her head around and looked at him with wide eyes, water beading on her lashes. Damn she was a striking woman. He felt like even more of a gobshite for not seeing it sooner. Then again, he was usually just looking to dip his mickey in easy pussy. Calla was a lot of things, but easy pussy wasn't one of them.

Which made Mackenzie even more of a bastard, to use her like that and then leave.

Liam laid his hands on Calla's shoulders as she faced the shower spray and started massaging. She sank back against him and his chest tightened. She was so goddamned trusting. Didn't she know she'd get flattened in this world if she kept that up?

Not if you protected her.

Liam blinked against the thought. He'd sure as fuck never been anyone's protector. All his life he'd only taken care of number one—himself.

He frowned as he reached for the small bottle of hotel shampoo. "Close your eyes," he said to Calla softly. He barely recognized his own voice. When he looked over Calla's shoulders, he saw she'd listened and shut her eyes.

Liam angled her forward so the water soaked her hair. He turned her by her shoulders so that she was facing him. Her eyes were still shut. As water sluiced down her face, she looked like the most perfect, pure thing he'd ever seen. That clear, creamy skin. Her long neck and softly rounded shoulders.

When she reached out for Liam, he stepped into her. "I'm here." There went his voice again, sounding all odd and strangled.

He turned to the side and squeezed shampoo into his hands. Then he worked his fingers into Calla's hair. He couldn't remember the last time he'd done this for a woman. If ever. He'd had shower sex before, sure, but he didn't think he'd ever washed a partner. The intimacy of it had his chest squeezing again. Especially when Calla dropped her face so that her forehead laid on Liam's chest.

She let out a contented sigh as he continued working the shampoo through her hair. After he'd finished soaping up her hair, he ran his hands down her back. All the way to her buttocks, which he couldn't help squeezing.

Calla giggled and turned her face up toward his, eyes still closed since her hair was foamy with shampoo and some of it had slid down onto her face.

"You ticklish, baby?" Liam grinned.

She shook her head.

Liam glided his hands back up to her waist. He pinched her and she let out a giggling little shriek, pulling back from him.

Liam wasn't having that. He stepped with her, pulling her into his arms as the shower spray started rinsing the shampoo from her hair. She kept her eyes squeezed shut but she had the most gorgeous smile on her face.

Liam could only stare for a moment. He wanted that beauty. He wanted to taste it. To breathe it. To own it.

He leaned down and kissed her before all the suds had washed off. Her lips tasted like shampoo. He didn't care.

Calla gasped in surprise when his lips made contact, but then she wound her hands up around his neck, fingers burying in his hair. With her leaning against him like that, her breasts thrust right up to his chest. Liam broke from her mouth only long enough to draw one of her nipples in his mouth. It was warm and wet and immediately went hard as his tongue flicked back and forth across it.

His cock went hard against her stomach. Calla gasped again, and Liam didn't know if it was from pleasure or surprise because she'd just felt his cock too.

He kissed up her neck, drinking the water that dripped down her throat as he went. Most of the suds had washed from her hair and Liam wanted to drink her in, every single bit of her.

His arms around her crushed her closer. "I want you," he growled against her lips, even knowing as he said it that he shouldn't. She'd just lost her virginity for Christ's sake.

But it hadn't seemed to pain her much when Mack had taken her. And there wasn't any blood. Liam had glanced down to see, wanting to know if Calla would be hurting or not. She rode horses—didn't they say horse riding could break a woman's hymen? Then she wouldn't be *that* sore if he—

"Then take me," Calla said, blinking her eyes open in spite of the shower

spray.

Liam shook his head at the same time his cock jumped against her belly. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

She smiled like she was amused at him. “You won’t.” Then she bit her lips like she was embarrassed. Her eyes dropped as she murmured. “I’ve um, you know, used a…” She waved a hand in the small space between them. “I have a BOB.”

“A beeyobi? What’s that?” Liam asked. Was this some American term he didn’t know?

She laughed again before clapping a hand over her mouth.

“What?” Liam smiled but pulled back, searching her face. “What is it?”

“A B. O. B. Like the letters.” Her eyes dropped again before meeting his gaze. “It stands for battery operated boyfriend.”

Battery operated— Did she mean, like—

Liam arched an eyebrow. “You’ve got a vibrator.”

Her eyebrows scrunched like she was waiting for some sort of judgement.

“Baby, that’s sexy as hell.” And it meant he could have her without hurting her. As soon as he thought it, his legs flexed, his hips seeking her entrance.

“Shite, you’ve got me so hard.” He hissed through his teeth, pressing Calla against the back wall of the shower. He gripped the back of her head and dropped his forehead to hers, struggling for control.

“Are you… um. Clean?”

Liam pulled back, startled at Calla’s question. “Yes. I get tested twice a year. Just got the results and I’m clean as a whistle.”

“I’m clean,” she said. “Well, obviously. But you know—”

“You on birth control?” Fuck, he was getting harder and harder with every word that came out of her mouth.

“No,” she shook her head, “but I only get my period every few months and it just finished so—”

Liam’s hips dropped and he grabbed his cock, rubbing it through her folds. “Are you saying you want me to take ya bare?”

Her eyes shot to his and she nodded. “I want to know what it feels like.” Her eyes searched his. “I want to feel you.”

Well fuck Mackenzie fucking Knight. He might have gotten *one* first, but Liam was taking this. He’d never gone without a condom with any woman. Ever. It was crazy for him even to consider. Even when using condoms, he’d

had that woman try to claim her baby was his.

But Calla wasn't those women. She didn't know how rich he was. She wasn't wanting this for any other reason than she wanted him. Wanted *him*.

Liam didn't shove in like Mack had. He went slow. She'd feel every inch of him. Since he had her against the far wall, the spray of the shower was hitting his back. And sinking into Calla while steam spun all around them, it was sexy to the point of fucking magical.

He lifted one of her legs for better access and then groaned as the head of his cock passed through her lips. Jaysus she was tight. She might have already been fucked that night, but she was still tight as a fecking drum.

And this wasn't fucking. Liam had fucked a lot of women. He wasn't a complete manwhore but he had a fair handful of partners each year.

None of them had felt like this. The only other woman he'd even considered going bare with was Brigid. He'd considered a lot of things with Brigid, until she'd turned out like all the rest.

Calla lifted a hand to his cheek. "Are you with me?" Her eyebrows were furrowed. Like she could see him dwelling on the past. Screw that. He wasn't going to let his shite history fuck up this moment with Calla. He put his hand over hers, then flipped her palm to kiss it. His other hand dropped under her ass, clutching her as he slid in another inch. And then another.

Calla's eyebrows went high and her mouth dropped open. She was the goddamned picture of ecstasy.

He'd take her there. Jaysus Christ but he'd take her there, and then follow her over. He pushed the last of the way inside her until their hips were flush together. He rocked his pelvis so his groin rubbed her clit. That might not be enough. It wasn't with some women.

But before he could even think about dropping his hand between them to ensure, Calla's own hips rolled into his, rubbing just the spot she needed. Liam could tell because her eyebrows arched further up each time she ground against him. They'd be at her hairline soon but fuck, he loved how expressive she was.

He dragged his cock out and then in again and she clenched around him. "Baby," he hissed out.

"Is this real?" Calla whispered, dragging her cheek across his before kissing him again. "Is any of this real? Earlier, with... And you." Her eyes were bright with wonder as she looked at Liam. "You're *you* and I'm just the town tomboy." She clenched on him and bit her lip.

But Liam's stomach had soured. "What do you mean I'm *me*?" Did she know who he was? How much he was worth? Fuck. Was she playing him like everyone had his whole life?

If she was then she was one hell of an actress. But Jaysus, hadn't he overheard Xavier talking to Mel about how Calla had just lost everything? She was totally broke and then here comes the rich billionaire—fucking Christ how was he stupid enough to be barebacking with—

"Liam?" Calla's voice was colored with concern. "I lost you again. Where are you?" Her eyes searched his back and forth.

"What did you mean by sayin' you're *you*?"

She blinked like she was confused. "You're Liam O'Neill. The whole town knows you."

What? He knew that witchy little blonde had found him out, but—

"Everyone talks about you guys at the ranch. And you," her shoulders lifted in a small shrug. "Well, you're the fun, sexy one. You're always making people laugh. I'd see you, at the bar sometimes. And whoever was with you was always laughing." Her eyes scrunched and she tilted her head. "You've just got this *shine* about you."

Shine. He had a *shine* about him? Him? Not his money or the gold and diamond jewelry she thought he'd shower her in?

But the more he looked at her, those eyes of hers so open, the more he believed her. She wanted him. Just him.

She thought he had shine.

He covered her mouth with his. Christ, she tasted sweet. The instant the tip of their tongues made contact, she started writhing against him crazily. Like she couldn't get enough of him. Like she'd never felt anything so good in her life.

Liam pulled out and shoved back in, hiking her up by both her legs and pinning her against the wall.

Her features went soft with lust and he leaned in to nip her gorgeous throat with his teeth. She clutched his head and held him to her, all the while making little high-pitched gasps. The octave seemed to rev higher and higher the more he thrust.

And then she let out a keening wail as she shuddered around his cock. Liam leaned over and drowned the noise with his mouth on hers. His balls drew up—it was coming. Jaysus fuck it was coming. The tip of his cock—Fuck, it was so insane without a condom. He could feel everything. Fucking

everything.

His cock bottomed out and he kissed her crazily as his cum spurted deep inside her. Holy fuck. Holy— He pulled out and thrust back again, spilling the last of his load. Still he kept moving. She felt so fucking amazing.

He dropped his head to her chest, breathing like he'd just run a marathon. He felt her lips on his temple and her arms and legs clenched around him tighter than ever. They stood there for one breath. Then another. Until finally his legs started shaking from holding her up.

She laughed as he awkwardly set her down. But he pulled her back into his arms as soon as her feet touched the shower floor. The spray was still hot around them. The beauty of hotel showers. If they were back at the ranch, there would have been pounding at the door for using up so much hot water at once.

He kissed her again, a short, sloppy press of lips. He couldn't decide if his body felt light or heavy. The moments after orgasm always left him feeling emptied out. Not just physically. There was a coldness that usually stole in the second he recovered from coming.

But having Calla in his arms, the way she clutched him back... He looked down and her features were relaxed and happy. Satisfied.

And damn if that didn't have his cock hardening all over again.

Liam pulled away from her reluctantly. "Come on," he said, running his hand through his wet hair to get it off his forehead. "Let's get you cleaned up."

He soaped his hands and caressed down her stomach and then between her legs. She grabbed hold of him, her whole body shaking. He needed to get her to the bed. He hurried at his task and soon they were both stepping out of the shower.

Chapter Fifteen

CALLA

“Dad, have you seen these statements from the bank?” Calla chased her father down as he walked to the barn. She shook the papers from the envelopes she’d uncovered from the very back of Dad’s filing cabinet. “Why didn’t you tell me the ranch was having money problems?”

“Cause it’s none of your concern,” her father bit out as he leaned on his cane and took another step. The tremors that had started out in his hands a couple years ago had worsened until his whole body now shook. Which made even simple tasks like walking the uneven dirt lane out to the barn difficult.

“None of my concern?” Calla’s mouth dropped open. How could he— She’d cut her sophomore year at college short to come back and help with the ranch. She’d only known the ranch was in trouble because Harris, her dad’s ranch manager, called and told her what was going on. About how her dad’s condition was worsening more rapidly and about all the debt. Harris had been working at reduced wages for six months out of loyalty to her dad since he’d been with them for almost a decade. But he had a family and couldn’t afford to keep it up.

When Calla got mad and asked Harris why he hadn’t called her earlier, he said her dad forbid him to.

So she came home and was doing her damndest to save the legacy that

had been her family's for three generations. Four, counting Calla.

"That's right," Dad turned around and snapped at her. "I didn't ask you to come back here. I've run this farm for twenty-two years. Then you come home from your one year of college—and suddenly you think you know everything about *my* business? Tryin' to tell *me* what to do." He pointed one trembling finger at Cal. "We just hit a spot of bad luck. Happened before and it'll happen again. Us Carters always come out just fine."

Calla breathed out heavily. "You levied a second mortgage on the ranch." Why wouldn't he just listen to reason? "And you can barely pay back the *interest* on the loans each month, much less start chipping away at the principal. Dad," she pleaded, "the bank's gonna take the ranch unless we—"

"You don't know what you're talking about!" her dad yelled, his face going red as he spun toward her. He lost his balance as he did it. He took one stumbling step forward to try to stay up but it only sent him crashing to the ground with more momentum.

"Dad," Calla cried. She'd tried to lurch to catch him but wasn't able to get to him in time. She leaned over to help him up.

He just swatted at her hands.

"How many times I gotta tell ya to leave me be. The ranch was fine before you got here. *I* was fine."

His legs jerked back and forth in the mud with the uncontrollable shakes. He tried getting to his feet by propping his cane and hefting himself up. But his cane slipped in the mud and his butt hit the ground with a splat.

Ignoring his protests, Calla got her hands underneath his armpits and lifted him up. Until he started shouting in her ear, "Don't need no help getting to my damn feet!"

He pushed her away even though he was collapsing back to the mud by doing so.

Calla finally pulled back, heartbroken as her father glared her down. "Get on," he waved a hand toward the barn that was still half a field away. "Animals won't feed themselves."

He didn't really mean for her to just leave him there, did he? "They can wait a few more minutes." She reached for him again. "Just let me help you —"

"Dammit girl, am I not speaking English?" He jerked his tremoring arm away from her. "Get on your damn way."

"Daddy, just—"

“GET!”

Calla turned away and jogged toward the barn, tears stinging her eyes.

“Calla. Calla, it’s just a bad dream. Shh, you’re here with me, baby.”

Calla blinked and startled awake.

There was a warm body at her back. Arms around her. Holding her.

“Liam,” she managed, swallowing and swiping at the tears running down her cheeks.

“Shh, gal, I’ve got ya.” Liam rolled her so that her face came against his chest. Calla hid her face from him. Dammit. She hated crying.

The dream had felt so real. Probably because it wasn’t just a dream. It was a memory.

Dad never would listen to reality when it came to the ranch’s finances. He’d gotten more and more distant every time she’d tried to talk to him. She didn’t know if that was because he just didn’t know what to do about the debt or if it was because of the Huntington’s.

Getting less communicative was one of the symptoms. Memory loss, too. It about broke her heart when her dad would repeat something he’d said just a few minutes earlier. Even when she did manage to get him talking, it was like he wasn’t tracking the conversation in real time. He’d respond to something she’d said five or ten minutes before as if she’d just said it.

Heart. Breaking. Like a machine had come in and bulldozed little sections, one chamber at a time. She’d left little pieces of her heart all over that ranch.

One piece with Prissy. Another chunk lost the day she had to drive her dad to the nursing home. More when he refused to speak to her the whole way except to point a tremoring finger at her. “I’ll never forgive you for this.”

Another tear crested and fell down her cheek. She swiped at it angrily.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” Liam asked.

“Nothing.” She gave what was probably a weak smile and tried to pull away from Liam. He didn’t let her go.

“It’s not nothing. Talk to me. I know I’m usually just a pompous asshole, but I swear I can listen.”

Calla balked. “I’ve never thought of you as a pompous asshole.”

One half of Liam’s mouth quirked up. “What can I say? You bring out the best in me.”

His words made Calla’s chest warm. She still pulled away and Liam let her. She swallowed and looked at the ceiling the moment her back was to

him. How much more of her heart had she lost last night? How long before there was nothing left of her to lose?

“Calla?”

She felt Liam sit up behind her. She tried to shake off the dream. She’d just spent the night with Liam O’Neill. *Her*. Calla Carter. She’d woken up in his arms. And last night, with Liam... and Mack. Where had he gone when he tore out of there like a bat outta hell? Would it be awkward the next time she saw him?

Pretty sure, yeah, it would be. *He had his cock inside you*. She didn’t know how you just smiled and pretended that never happened.

“I’m not sure how to do this morning after thing,” she murmured. She’d been serious but Liam laughed, his arms coming around her waist. He dropped a kiss to the top of her spine in between her shoulder blades and she shivered.

“What time is it?” she asked. She looked back at Liam and he leaned over to grab his phone off the nightstand.

“Seven-fifteen.”

Calla jerked her feet to the edge of the bed. “Shit. Xavier’s gonna be pissed. He wanted to get out before morning traffic.”

She looked around for her clothing, leaning over and snatching up her bra from the ground beside the bed.

“Shit,” she said again, stubbing her toe on the frame of the bed and jumping up and down.

“You’re fecking adorable, you know that?”

She glared at Liam. “Did you hear the part about how we’re gonna be skewered like breakfast sausage if we don’t get our butts moving?”

Liam just continued grinning at her with that wide smile of his.

She rolled her eyes and hurried over to her suitcase, dragging the sheet with her to cover herself.

She pulled on a fresh pair of panties and then pulled her sports bra overhead. “Dammit,” she swore, the bra getting stuck on her face as she tried to wriggle into it.

This was met with a loud chuckle.

She was about to snap at Liam again but then his hands were on her. He helped get her bra over her head and down over her breasts. He also used the occasion to give both her breasts a good squeeze before letting her go and smacking her ass.

“Get going, woman,” he said. “What do you think? We have all morning for me to spend ogling you and inspecting your assets?”

She spun around and pretended to be annoyed. “You’re one to talk. I actually have my underwear on. You’re still—” She gestured up and down his body. His naked body. He stood there for her and God to see, completely unabashed. Wow. Was his cock always that size or was he aroused right now? What did dicks look like when they weren’t—

Suddenly Liam swooped down on her and landed a kiss. A leisurely, lingering kiss. All thought of them needing to hurry flew from her head.

There was only Liam, his hands in her hair, the heat of his bare chest as it brushed hers. When he finally pulled away, she felt dazed.

Never in her life had she felt such crazy joy. Happy to the point of silly. It was too much. Too fast. She was gonna come down hard from this and the crash was gonna be *brutal*. But for at least one more minute, she basked in everything that was Liam O’Neill.

“You keep staring at me like that, woman,” Liam growled, eyes dark, “and we won’t get out of this hotel room before noon.”

Calla knew she was definitely lingering in an alternate universe when all she wanted to say was, *Yes, screw it, let’s lay here and make love all day.*

There was today. Today, today, and only today.

Exceeeeeeeeeeeept, what about her *job*? And Xavier? And the mustang that even now was waiting to be trailered?

With a sigh of reluctance, she gave Liam one last peck on the lips and then pulled out of his arms.

“I hear reality is waiting for us outside that door,” she said ruefully and gestured toward the door.

Liam frowned, eyes scrolling up and down her body like he was trying to memorize what she looked like without clothes on.

Then he strode forward, eliminating the small bit of distance she’d put between them. When he pulled her into his arms again and she heard his growled, “Fuck reality. It can wait another half hour,” she didn’t even put up a token resistance.

All she could do was shriek with laughter when Liam picked her up in his arms and carried her back to bed.

* * *

“Wow, you’re the last one I would have thought would turn out to be the town slut.” Bethany’s shrill voice cut across the parking lot and Calla froze in her tracks. After she and Liam had finished one last energetic round of sex—seriously, she’d heard of doggie style and reverse cowgirl, but she never thought she’d ever have an adventurous enough sex life to experience them firsthand. Well, after this morning, those were another two bucket list items she could cross off.

Then she’d checked her phone and found a text from Mel saying Mack was too hungover to drive and would Calla mind driving the last trailer back? Mel would be driving Mack’s.

Calla’s heart had hiccupped at reading it. Mack was hungover? He’d been perfectly sober when he joined her and Liam in their hotel room. Was the experience with her really so bad that he’d had to go out and get drunk? *Really* drunk if he didn’t even feel well enough to drive home.

Calla hurriedly texted Mel back that it was no problem. She’d been hauling trailers since she’d gotten her driver’s license at sixteen.

Mel immediately messaged back: *Great. Keys will be at the front desk. We’re heading out, see you at home.*

Calla had just pulled the truck and trailer into the BLM’s holding facility where they were picking up Liam’s horse—the one they’d be hauling. Liam had jumped out to go in to see about the mare’s status in the lineup and Calla was out double checking the rigging and lights on the trailer when Bethany’s words stopped her cold.

“Guess you never can tell about a person. But really, taking both of them up to your room?” Bethany made a tutting noise through her teeth.

Calla turned around and barely stopped her hands from clenching into fists. Bitch said *what*?

Bethany stopped right in front of Calla. It was eight in the morning but Bethany was in full make-up and hair, skintight jeans and a halter top that exposed her midriff. She cocked her head at Calla. “Then again, your mom was the town whore, so I guess it’s not that surprising. But not even she had two at once. Tell me, did they fuck you at the same time or did you make them take turns?”

It wasn’t premeditated—Calla genuinely had no idea what she was doing until her fist connected with Bethany’s face. Her nose, more specifically.

Bethany howled and stumbled back, grabbing her nose. Calla could already see it was bloody. Wow, it was a sight that really *shouldn’t* feel so

goddamned satisfying.

“Usually I’d say violence is never the answer,” Calla said, for once in her life giving the devil on her shoulder full reign, “but in this case, I gotta say—red looks good on you.”

In the distance, Calla saw Liam waving his hands at her. His mustang must be up next for trailering.

And with that, Calla climbed back in the cab of the truck, ignoring the slew of expletives pouring from Bethany’s mouth. And for once, she had the rare joy of doing and saying what she felt, exactly when she meant to. Seize the fucking *day*. She’d never felt more liberated in her life.

“You’ll pay for this, you whore! You broke my nose! I’m going to file assault charges. You’re going to be sorry you ever—”

Calla turned the engine over then held a hand over her ear when it roared to life. “What’s that? I can’t make out what you’re saying.”

Bethany screamed and gesticulated wildly. Calla genuinely couldn’t hear her over the engine though she thought she made out a couple words. “... sue... arrested!”

Calla glanced around the lot. She didn’t see any cameras. “Good luck with that,” she called out her window, then revved the engine and left Bethany in her dust.

Chapter Sixteen

MACK

Mack clutched his head. “Jesus, can you turn down the music?” Xavier just swung his head to look at Mack, then his eyes were back on the road. He didn’t say a thing, just reached a hand over and turned *up* the volume on the blaring country station.

“What the fu—”

“Watch your tone in my truck,” Xavier said low, eyes cutting briefly back to Mack. “I had half a mind to leave your ass back in Denver. The one thing I asked was that none of you embarrass me or the horse rescue. You think I named the rescue after my *wife* so my employees could start a fucking bar brawl at last call? Or that I came all the way down here just so I could get up at two in the goddamned morning to smooth things over so you didn’t end up with another strike on your record? You trying to make me sorry for taking a chance on your ass?”

Throughout Xavier’s tirade, Mack’s head sunk lower and lower. This must be what it felt like to get chewed out by a father. The way the pain in his head spiked with every angry syllable, he was actually glad he’d never had a dad. He hated feeling like an errant fucking schoolboy. Then again, he’d fucked up last night. He knew he deserved this and far worse. Plenty of folks woulda cut his ass loose after the shit he’d pulled last night.

“No,” Mack said quickly. “No sir. You know I appreciate everything you

and Mel have done for me—”

“Do you?” Xavier cut in, hard eyes glaring at him again. “Cause you sure got a funny way of showing it.”

Mack swallowed and looked out the passenger seat window. “It won’t happen again.”

“It better fuckin’ not,” Xavier muttered. Then his hand moved to the dial for the music again. He turned the volume up even louder.

Mack groaned and slumped further down in his seat.

* * *

That day and the next were not fun ones for Mack. Xavier had let up on the radio, turning it off an hour outside of Denver when the signal started failing. Too bad the raging headache Mack was sporting had grown to epic proportions during the hour-long high-volume blast.

And he’d swear, every time his hand went to his aching forehead, Xavier smirked.

Suffice it to say, it was a long six and a half hours.

Then when they’d gotten back to the ranch, he was supposed to start training his mustang. Right away. From the second the horse stepped out of their trailer into one of the round pens.

After a year and a half on the ranch, Mack wasn’t clueless about what needed to be done. He’d watched Xavier break two mustangs the previous year.

But after almost seven hours in the cramped cab of the truck, paired with the worst hangover he’d swear he’d ever had in his life, all that training flew out the window.

Patience. That was what Xavier always instructed them when dealing with a new horse, wild mustang or not. You had to listen to the horse. That’s what he was always saying. *Listen to the horse. They’ll speak loud and clear if you let them.*

Well all Mack heard when he finally got Torpedo to step out of the damn trailer was a whole lotta pissed off horse. Didn’t seem like Torpedo had enjoyed the ride any better than Mack. He was twitchy, nervous, wouldn’t stand still long enough for Mack to even put his hand near him, much less to touch him.

Meanwhile, in the circular paddock in the distance, he saw Calla up and *riding* her horse. The first day. *Riding*. What the fuck type of juju magic did that woman have?

She'd certainly had him under her spell. When he wasn't cursing his killer hangover, the night he'd shared with Calla and Liam kept coming back to him on endless loop.

The look on her face when he breached that tight little pussy of hers—Christ, there hadn't been an ounce of fear on her face. How the fuck was he supposed to have guessed she was a virgin?

And then you just fucking left her there.

He cringed every time he thought of how he'd stormed out of there like the world's biggest asshole.

He felt the shame of it even as he slammed the hotel door behind him and all but ran down the hall. He did shot after shot at the bar in an effort not to feel it. Not to feel anything. And when that dumb redneck got up in his face near closing, well, it was the perfect opportunity to take out some of his fury. Punching the bastard in the face did feel good. At least until two of the guy's buddies joined in and Mack was dodging fists from all sides. He could have handled three guys back when he was at his prime. But three years of working with his hands instead of his fists plus a shitload of tequila and they got in several hits.

He made them regret it, at least. Until Xavier showed up to pull him off the fuckers and they got out of there right before the cops were called.

Just one more thing he owed to Xavier. It chafed. He didn't like being in debt to anyone.

After spending the day failing to make any progress with his mustang, he grabbed his dinner and jogged up the stairs to eat in his room. He'd felt Calla's eyes on him as he went. Liam's too.

He ignored them and spent the rest of the night in his room. He felt on edge as he got in to bed that night.

Sleep didn't come.

His ghosts were too restless.

Ben. His mother. His years spent as Bone's bitch. The feel of Ben's slim body slipping onto his bunk each night.

Ben was always too skinny. He'd have skipped meals if Mack hadn't been there ordering him to eat.

Sometimes Mack had resented Ben's neediness. There were days Ben

would go all but catatonic unless Mack was there giving him commands. Near the end, there was a six month stretch where Ben only came alive at night when they were alone together in bed.

“Master,” he’d whisper as he reached for Mack in the darkness. “How do you want your slave tonight?”

It was a game Ben liked to play. Mack balked at first until he felt Ben’s distress when he refused. He didn’t know why Ben liked it that way. His devotion to Mack was probably unhealthy. Then again, they were in a fucking super max prison—healthy wasn’t really an option on the table. So Mack played along.

“On your knees,” Mack ordered, swinging his legs over the side of the bed as he sat up. “Suck my cock.”

Moments later, he felt Ben’s trembling hands reaching to pull his cock from his pants. Then a hot mouth sucking him in.

Mack’s hands went to Ben’s head. He always kept his hair so short it was almost shaved. Mack massaged Ben’s scalp as Ben went to town on his cock.

“Deeper. I want to come down your throat,” Mack growled.

Ben pulled off just long enough to whisper, “Yes, Master. Whatever you say, Master.”

Mack hissed out through his teeth as Ben swallowed his cock. He could deep throat like no one Mack had ever met.

He had to fight from coming right there on the spot.

“Fuck your hand while you suck me off.”

Ben’s head shook back and forth on Mack’s cock. Mack gripped Ben’s head harder.

“Fucking do it. Master will punish you if you don’t.”

Ben moaned and Mack leaned over until he was whispering close to his ear. “You don’t do what I say and I’ll take your ass, little slave. I’ll fuck you so hard you’ll feel me into next week. Now grab your fucking cock.”

Ben lifted both his hands to rest them on Mack’s thighs.

Mack’s cock swelled at his refusal. Some nights Ben was only up for giving him a blow job. More often than not actually, these days.

Maybe him wanting more meant that he was coming out of whatever funk he’d been in lately. Mack hoped so. He hated seeing him so listless.

Mack grabbed Ben’s shoulders and pushed him back. Ben’s mouth made a loud *pop* noise as his lips slid off Mack’s cock.

Mack didn’t hesitate. He dragged Ben up onto his bunk bed, shoving him

face down into the mattress.

“On your knees.”

“No, Master. Don’t. I swear I’ll be good. Don’t fuck my ass.”

“I told you the consequences if you didn’t suck my dick.” Mack gripped Ben’s hips as he positioned himself behind him.

“No, don’t,” Ben said, getting on his knees and shoving down his pants in the same motion. “Don’t, Master. I can’t take your big cock.” He leaned back, brushing his ass back and forth against Mack’s dick. “You’re too big and hard.”

“Spit,” Mack said, shoving his hand in Ben’s face. Ben obeyed and Mack rubbed it up and down his cock. Then he positioned his crown at the entrance of Ben’s anus. He paused there a moment, listening in the dark for the sound of Ben whispering his safe word or snapping his fingers. But there were only Ben’s heaving breaths.

Mack pushed inside Ben’s ass and *Jesus*, it felt good. Ben’s little whimpers only drove him forward. But not too fast. Or too hard. No matter how riled up he got, he never lost himself so much that he didn’t remember he always had to be careful with his little Ben.

Mack pushed in inch by inch until he was finally seated all the way up Ben’s ass. He leaned over his back and kissed the nape of his neck. “Look at you gripping my cock like such a good little slave. Are you hard yet? Admit it. You love being fucked by Master.”

Ben shook his head back and forth but the more Mack kissed along his neck, the softer Ben’s body went.

“You dream about it all day long, don’t you? You were hard at dinner, weren’t you? Thinking about how Master was going to bury himself inside you.”

“I’m your slave,” Ben whispered, his back moving up and down with each heaving breath. “I have to do whatever Master says.”

Mack pulled out and then shoved slowly in again. Ben trembled underneath him. “Don’t lie,” he whispered, his voice harsh. “If I grab your cock, I’d feel just how much you love it. Your eyes have been begging for me to fuck you all day long.”

“No,” Ben started but Mack reached around and grabbed his cock, rubbing his thumb across the precum that was beaded on the tip and massaging it up and down Ben’s shaft.

Ben’s breath hitched and he bucked back against Mack, driving Mack’s

cock further up his ass.

“That’s too bad.” Mack let go of Ben’s dick and he immediately whimpered. “Slave boys who don’t do what they’re told don’t get treats.”

“No, Master. I’ll be good, I swear.”

“Too late. Fuck your hand. Show me how much you want to please me. Make me believe it.”

Mack dropped his lips back to Ben’s neck, kissing around to the side and then sucking hard enough to leave a mark. Ben loved being marked. He said it showed everyone who he belonged to.

“You’re mine and you’ll do whatever I say,” Mack rasped into Ben’s ear before latching onto his neck again.

“Yes, Master,” Ben gasped, his voice reedy with need. “I belong to you.”

Mack felt the moment Ben gave in. This was the moment every night built toward—Ben resisting until he finally consented out loud. Only then would he see to his own pleasure. For whatever reason, Ben needed it that way. Every time. Mack suspected it had everything to do with that fucking bastard, Bone, but he never said that out loud.

“Then show me,” Mack said. “Fist your cock. And tell me who you belong to.”

“I’m yours,” Ben gasped, and even though Mack couldn’t see, he knew Ben was jacking himself off. “Forever.”

Mack’s cock surged and he grabbed Ben’s hips while he tried his damndest not to fuck Ben as hard and quick as he wanted.

Especially when Ben moaned his name. “*Mackenzie.*” Not Master. In the last moments it was always Mackenzie.

Mack felt it hit his balls.

“Come,” he ordered harshly. Ben squeezed on Mack’s cock and bucked before letting out an agonized gasp. Mack forced himself to keep fucking Ben slowly.

He’d learned how to come this way. Slow and steady. Feeling the moment of Ben’s pleasure and his cock inevitably responding. He felt the cum lighting up his cock and he grunted as he shoved to the hilt again. Then it hit and he pumped in and out. Once. Twice.

Ben all but collapsed beneath him and Mack rolled them so they were on their sides, spooning.

Mack yanked the sheet over them. Nothing made him sleep better than coming hard. He was almost asleep when he heard Ben’s voice.

“I’d die in here without you.”

Mack stiffened. “Don’t fucking say that.”

“It’s true,” Ben said. And then quieter. “I love you. More than I’ve ever loved anyone. I’ll love you to my dying day.”

Mack’s stomach clenched. “Stop talking about dying.”

Ben went quiet after that.

Mack felt the words left unsaid. He knew Ben did too, though he never complained that Mack never told him he loved him back.

Mack snaked his arm around Ben’s stomach and pulled him close.

Not knowing how much he’d come to regret not telling Ben he loved him that night.

Because the very next day, Ben was shanked in the yard.

By Bone’s newest cellmate. Mack had been inside on assigned kitchen duty. He had to hear secondhand about how Ben had bled out right where he fell in the dirt. All alone in his last moments. He was dead before the medic even got on the scene.

The day following, Bone grinned at Mack from across the room. It was then Mack decided that if it was the last thing he ever did on earth, he’d put that motherfucker in the ground.

Chapter Seventeen

LIAM

“Come here, horsey horse.” Liam held out his hand and approached his mare for what felt like the hundredth time in the past few hours. “Come on. You can do it.”

Just like every other time, the horse watched him sideways as he came toward her. Then, right before he got within touching distance, she bolted to the opposite side of the circle pen.

“Fecking Christ!” Liam took off his hat and hurled it at the fence.

And immediately his da’s voice was ringing through his head.

“How is a son of mine so goddamned worthless?” his da shouted, storming into his bedroom with some shite gossip magazine in his hand.

Liam had been nursing a hangover and grabbed his pounding head. “Can you keep it down, da? I’m still langered somethin’ awful.”

Well that just seemed to set his da off. “I will not keep it down. You’re a twenty-four-year-old man still living with his father. You barely graduated and only because I donated an extremely generous endowment to the university your senior year. You have no skills, no ambitions, and are an embarrassment to the O’Neill name! Look at this.” His father pointed at the headline on the front page above the picture of Liam being hauled away in cuffs by the Garda. “Playboy Billionaire Arrested for Brawling...Again.” Then he opened the magazine and began reading. “Liam O’Neill, son of

Prism Media Group mogul Ciarán O'Neill was yet again caught brawling in the streets of Dublin, this time outside a pub in the—

Liam flopped back on his bed and pulled his pillow over his head to muffle the sound of his father's voice.

The next second his da had ripped the pillow away. "You listen to me when I'm speaking to ya, ya useless, poxy little shite. I pulled meself up from nothin' to give you everythin' you could ever want—

"Don't give me that shite," Liam said, launching off the bed and getting in his da's face. "Everything you've ever done in your life has been for yourself. Not for me or ma. Christ knows you scraped her off quick enough so you could go scuttle women half your age. Not that I imagine havin' a ring on your finger stopped ya from gettin' your knob polished by skanks all around the world on those business trips you took all the time even when ya were married."

That was when his da punched him so hard he was knocked to the floor.

"Hey there."

Liam spun around and put his hand to the back of his neck as he saw Calla standing just outside the fence behind him. Shite. The only thing worse than failing so bad at this was having a witness. Especially Calla.

"Xavier mentioned you were having a little trouble with her." She gestured behind him in the direction of his mare.

"It's been two days and she won't even let me touch her." Liam shook his head, squinting in the setting sun at the mustang. "She's banjaxed, I'm telling ya. The organizers have to recognize that some horses are just too far gone. If I had meself a nice foal from a reputable breeder, well, I know I'd really be getting somewhere. But this one—" He shook his head again. And realized that, shite, he was rambling. Like an insecure idiot. He was never insecure around women.

They'd barely had time to spend more than ten minutes together alone since driving home from Denver. The last two days, Calla had spent almost all her time not doing morning chores with her mustang. Yesterday he'd hoped to have some time with her after dinner, but when he got downstairs after cleaning up, Mel told him she'd borrowed their truck to go visit her dad in a nursing home.

He hadn't known her dad was even sick. Then he realized exactly how little he actually knew about her. Which made him feel like a selfish scumbag. It was an uncomfortable sensation. He wasn't used to all these...

feelings.

Wanting to shag a girl, sure. But, like, comforting someone with a sick da? He'd considered staying up to see Calla when she got back. But then he tried to imagine how that would go.

Sucks about your da... So, wanna go up to my room and let me make you feel better?

That was something the old Liam might have done. And now that he was trying to be a better version of himself?

Staring at Calla now, trucker's hat on her head, in a loose tank-top and jeans—obviously not concerned with primping or showing off her figure to its best advantage to lure him in—well, he still didn't have any fucking idea what to say to her. In the circles he'd lived in most his life, appearance and status were everything. Calla broke every rule he'd always lived by.

Calla just smiled and leaned over to slide through the fence posts and into the pen with him and the mustang. "I've been watching a little while. You've been really patient."

"Oh." He lifted his hand to the back of his neck again. The last thing he'd expected was a compliment. He felt like a huge fuck up. "Thanks." And then he blurted, "I heard about your dad yesterday. I'm really sorry."

The smile faded from Calla's mouth and she looked into the distance. "Yeah." She was quiet a moment and then seemed to shake herself out of it. "So. About the mare. What'd you name her?"

"Satan's Mistress."

Calla laughed. "Aw, poor baby."

Liam didn't know if she was talking about him or the horse.

She came a little closer. "You're doing good but maybe I can share a little technique that will help."

Liam held out his hands. "Please. Anything." Then his eyes narrowed as he looked across the pen at the mustang. "Not that it will do anything." He hadn't been joking about her being defective.

Calla just laughed and shook her head. "Come on," she gestured for him to come with her. She walked slowly toward the horse.

"Make sure you always stay on her left side so she can keep an eye on you as you approach."

Satan's Mistress was looking in their direction as they made it halfway across the pen. Liam was about to take another step when Calla held out her arm to his chest.

“Now back.”

Liam looked at her in surprise. They weren't anywhere near the horse.

But when Calla backed up, her front still toward the horse, Liam mirrored her movements. “Just keep taking deep, calming breaths.”

Again, Liam wasn't sure if she was talking to him or the horse. But he stayed quiet and did as Calla did.

Once they got back to the fence-line, Calla stood there a second before heading back in the horse's direction. This time they took a step or two past the center of the paddock before backing up again.

“Like boiling a frog,” Calla said. “You gotta go slow. By small degrees or she'll bolt.”

Liam nodded even though he wasn't sure about it. Calla didn't know *this* horse. The only time he'd gotten close in the past couple days after getting her home, she'd almost taken off his fingers. And she had big damn teeth.

It took another fifteen minutes before they came within five feet of the horse. “See how she's tensing up? Watch her ears.” Calla said, nodding at the mare. Liam observed her ears flicking back and forth.

“She's telling us back up, she's not comfortable. Horses have a herd mentality. They want to be dominated. You just have to show them who's boss, but at the same time you can't force it.” She took several steps backward and Liam followed suit. “It's a dance between you and her to establish your dominance.”

Calla held one hand out as she started approaching the horse again. “You find the line...” They reached the same spot they'd been in a moment before, about five feet away. “Then you take one or two steps over it.” Calla took another step closer. Now that Liam was watching more closely, he saw Satan's Mistress's ears twitching and the way she shuffled back and forth at their nearness.

“Then we reward her by taking the pressure off again.” Calla started backwards and again Liam followed.

It was an infuriatingly slow process, but to his shock, fifteen minutes later, Calla was reaching out her hand to the mare's nose for her to sniff. Calla still didn't make contact. She just took another step closer and blew lightly at Satan's Mistress's nose.

“This is how horses greet each other in the wild. Let her get to know your scent.” Satan's Mistress shifted uneasily and Calla pulled slowly back. “Then you reward her by stepping away again and leaving her alone for a little

while.”

“Like playing hard to get. Are you sure this isn’t dating advice?”

Calla laughed softly, still never taking her eyes off the horse. “Can’t say I know much about that.” Her eyes flicked his direction and Liam wasn’t sure, but he thought her cheeks reddened.

After retreating to the fence again, Calla gestured at him. “You try saying hi to her this time.”

She stayed by the fence while Liam headed toward Satan’s Mistress. He felt his heartbeat thudding in his ears. Ridiculous. It was just a fucking horse.

Worthless.

Useless poxy shite.

“Remember to breathe,” Calla said from behind him. “She’s reading your body language. So make sure you’re giving off calm with every step you take. You might not make it all the way on the first pass. That’s okay. Find her line and take just one step beyond it.”

Liam stopped and watched the horse. She leaned down and took a bite of grass but the way her head was cocked, it felt like she was still watching him.

He took a step forward. When she just kept chewing grass, he took another. Then another. Her head came up and she shifted nervously a few steps.

Liam backed away just like Calla taught him. And to his astonishment, the next time he approached, Satan’s Mistress let him come all the way up to her. Liam had only made it this close a couple times before—both of which had ended with Satan’s Mistress snapping at him with those big teeth of hers.

Liam took a deep breath in and out and held out his hand toward her nose. But unlike in the past, he didn’t keep pushing to try to touch her. He left his hand about a foot away from her. Then, when she didn’t move, he took another step in. Her ears flicked at this.

One step past the line. Okay. Liam took a tiny step closer and then blew at the horse’s nose. Which felt frankly ridiculous.

But instead of snapping, the mare nosed a little closer to him. Like she was curious. A thrill shot through Liam’s body.

He was doing it. He was actually doing it.

“Now back,” Calla said.

Liam wanted to take that last little step so he could touch the mare. Maybe even try seeing if he could get her to take the bit.

Then he considered his failure rate before Calla had shown up. Baby

steps. He backed off.

When he got back to Calla, her eyes were shining as she beamed at him. “You’re doing so good. You’re a natural at this.”

His chest flushed with warmth like he’d just had a shot of whiskey on a cold day. “I don’t know about that.”

Calla scrunched her eyebrows together. “Wait. What’s that?” She bumped him on the shoulder before looking up at the sky. “Did I miss the pigs flying? Is Liam O’Neill actually being modest?”

Liam barked out a laugh. No one ever took the piss out of him. And everything was just so natural with her. They’d had sex—not just that, but she’d lost her *virginity*, maybe not technically to him, but as good as. And yet here she was, not making a big deal about it or pressing anxiously for more.

He’d been joking earlier when he said the tactics she was using on the horse would work for dating but maybe there was something to it after all.

He wrapped her in his arms, lifting her up off the ground and spinning her around. She shrieked and hugged his neck. He set her back on the ground and nudged the bill of her cap back until it fell off her head. Damn she was pretty. Those flushed cheeks. The adorable freckles sprinkled across her nose. The way she looked at him like he was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her.

He leaned down and kissed her hard. He probably should have taken it slower. But for once he was letting go of all his normal calculated moves and just going with what felt right.

From the way she kissed him enthusiastically back, he’d say it was the right way to go.

At least until she pulled back. She was still grinning at him as she pulled out of his arms, though. “I still want to work with Painter a little more and get him groomed. See you at dinner.”

“You bet your arse,” he said. Then, before she could turn to go he stepped forward and kissed her again.

She was laughing as she pulled away. “I’ll see you.” Then she turned and slipped back out through the fence. She walked away but looked back at him a couple of times, that radiant smile still on her face.

He frowned. What if she *was* playing him? This innocent, not immediately available, hard to get act could just be that—an *act*.

It wouldn’t be the first time a woman had tried games to capture his attention. There was nothing he hated more than people trying to fecking

manipulate him. For a long while there he hadn't thought there was any other way to interact.

Wasn't he the guy who believed no one ever gave anything without expecting something in return? So what was Calla's angle? If she didn't want him for his money, what *did* she want? Maybe his body. She'd certainly seemed to enjoy everything he'd done with her.

He stared in the direction Calla went long after she'd disappeared around the corner of the barn.

Jaysus, he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so in over his head. With a horse or a woman.

* * *

"What do you think happened with Mackenzie?" Calla asked. They were sitting on the porch swing after dinner, her in his lap with her head nestled in the crook of his shoulder.

Usually when he had a woman in this position, he'd be quickly shifting her other leg over him and hiking up her skirt so they could get on with things.

But he and Calla were just... talking. Well, occasionally they'd make out for a while, but then it would calm down again and she'd just curl up into him like a contented kitten.

Liam paused from where he was running his fingers through her hair, finally registering her words. "Um. He's an asshole?"

Calla shoved his shoulder lightly. "I'm serious."

Liam had been serious too. Mack was a bogger asshole and that's all there was too it.

"Have you seen him the past couple days?" Calla lifted her head from his chest to look at him.

Liam shrugged. "Just the back of his head after he's grabbed his food and heading up to his room."

Calla sighed. "Exactly. I think something's going on with him." She dropped her head back to Liam's chest but she pulled away moments later to look at him. "Do you not want me to talk about him? Is that..." she glanced down. "Is it not okay to bring him up?" Her eyes were anxious.

Liam squeezed his arms around her. "You can talk to me about anything.

I don't want you holding back." He was just starting to trust that she wasn't a fake. He certainly didn't want her to think she should put on a show of any kind.

She swallowed and smiled tentatively. "I've just never done anything like..." she waved a hand. "You know." She lifted and dropped her eyebrows significantly. "And he was part of it with us."

Liam felt a flare of pain in his chest. Was he not enough for her?

It faded quickly at seeing the distress on Calla's face, though. "Do you still want him?" His tone was more even than he'd expected it to be.

Calla glanced down again before taking a deep breath and meeting his eyes again. "I don't really know him. But I didn't know you either. And then... that night." She pursed her lips and shook her head. "It felt, I don't know..." she looked around like she was trying to find the right word. "*Important*. Like all three of us were connecting in this really special way." She turned her head to look out at the dark night. "That's probably stupid and naïve. I don't know what I'm talking about."

"Don't say that." Liam's arms tightened around her. "Don't doubt your instincts." It might not be his favorite thing to hear that she was still thinking about Mack, but here she was, telling him up front. Being real with him. No matter what she was feeling, it was right there on her face.

"What did you think about that night?" she asked. "Did you like it when he... When you two were..."

"Sure," Liam said, then he felt Calla stiffen at his clipped tone.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have ask—"

"It wasn't the first time." Liam took her hands so she didn't feel like he was cutting off her line of questions. He wasn't used to being open with people, but if she could do it, so could he. Well, he could try, anyway. "I've done things like that before. With both a man and a woman."

"Oh." Her eyes widened as she looked up at him. "Like, both at the same time or, you know," her cheeks went pink.

Jaysus she was cute. So innocent. He smiled, enjoying her reactions. "Both. Together and individually. Does that shock you?"

"I don't know," she blinked. "So are you, what do they call it? Bisexual?"

Liam shrugged. "I don't put a label on it. I usually say I'm a trysexual."

Her brow furrowed.

"As in, I'll try anything once."

She chortled out a short laugh at that but then sobered again. "Do you like

one better than the other?”

Liam traced his fingers along the back of her neck underneath her hair, liking the way she shivered at his touch.

“I’ve slept with more women than men. But I didn’t really expand my horizons until college.”

She propped her hands underneath her chin as she looked up at him. “So how do you know?”

“Know what?”

“How do you know if you’re attracted to someone? Like, what makes the difference between a guy or girl you’re just friends with and someone you want to, you know, sleep with?”

Liam laughed. “There’s no science to it. I’m either attracted to someone or not.”

She tilted her head. “So how long have you been attracted to Mack?”

Liam choked. “I’m not,” he hurried to say as soon as he could speak again. “Not to him.”

“Oh.” She frowned. “But I thought you just said—” She squinted her eyes at him. “And with how the two of you were—”

“I was just going with the situation as it presented itself.” He shook his head so violently Calla had to pull back. “But Jaysus, I’m *not* attracted to that wanker.”

“Oh.” She sounded disappointed.

Shite. Why? Did she want a repeat of what happened in the hotel room?

Liam had been doing his best to block it from his memory. When he replayed that night, he only focused on the time after he got Calla into the shower.

“I just...” she trailed off again before continuing, her eyebrows scrunched, “I think he’s really lonely. And I know what that’s like. Feeling like you’re all alone in the world.” She shook her head, her eyes going distant again.

Liam didn’t know what to say to that. Whenever he thought about Mack, it was usually just to cuss him out. In his head or out loud if the occasion warranted.

But then he focused on the rest of what she’d said. About feeling lonely. “Yeah,” he swallowed. “I know the feeling too.”

Calla’s eyebrows went up as she looked back at him. “You? But you’re always so,” she waved a hand. “You’re so good with people. Everybody

loves you.”

His chest went tight. That was how she saw him? “I don’t know if I want you taking off those rose-colored glasses, beautiful.”

She scoffed at that. “Hardly. I just call it like I see it.” Then she paused, her brows lowering. “Tell me about it. How does a guy like you feel lonely?”

Liam shrugged. He wasn’t going to play the poor little rich boy card. If there was anything he’d learned the last year and a half, it was how fucking entitled he used to be. He wasn’t about to start whining about how hard he’d had it.

Calla lifted her hand to his face. “Tell me. I want to know everything about you.”

“Me da and I weren’t that close. He worked constantly. And Ma was checked out most the time. Drinking and pills. They got divorced when I was nine. The nanny raised me. She’s still the one who calls me on me birthday and Christmas.”

Calla tilted her head, her eyes going soft.

“Don’t do that.” He couldn’t help his voice going stiff. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” Her eyebrows went up again.

“Like you pity me.”

Her eyebrows met her hairline. “I’m not pitying you. Believe me,” she huffed, “I know how shitty that feels. I was just thinking about you when you were a kid. I wish I could have been your friend back then.”

Liam laughed. “You would have hated me. I was a complete shite. I’m shocked Mrs. Owens put up with me as long as she did. None of the nannies before her lasted six months.”

“Oh no, don’t tell me you were the kind of kid who would snap girl’s bra straps?” Calla groaned.

Uh. So now probably wouldn’t be the time to admit that from the ages of fourteen to seventeen his opening line when he met a pretty girl was to tell them to blow him. Or the fact that, more often than not, they’d actually done it.

“What?” she asked, obviously seeing something on his face.

He shook his head, not wanting to meet her eyes but doing it anyway. “I wasn’t a nice person. For most of me life, actually, I was a complete—” *bastard*. He stopped just short of saying it and instead finished, “—arsehole.”

Her brow scrunched up. “So what changed?”

Liam shifted her in his lap. He'd had a hard on for most of the half hour they'd been snuggled up together, but it was quickly deflating at this conversation. "I don't know. I guess I grew up."

That was a copout and he knew it. But he couldn't tell her the truth. Not if he didn't want things to change.

Calla was the first woman who wasn't with him just because of his money or what he could give her. Well, apart from orgasms. He hoped to give her plenty of those in the near future. But if she knew who he was, it would ruin everything before it even had the chance to really start.

Calla's brow was still narrowed. Like she could sense there was more to the story. She didn't press it, though. "Well, I guess I'm glad I met you now and not then."

"Me too, baby," he whispered, then leaned down and kissed her. "Me too."

Those were the last words they said for a long while. Jaysus, she tasted sweet. His cock quickly re-inflated but he didn't push for anything more than kissing. For once in his life, he wanted to do the right thing by a girl.

Which wasn't to say when Calla finally pulled away, her pupils blown, and asked, "You wanna go upstairs?" he didn't jump to his feet and all but drag her in the house and up to his room.

She giggled the whole way. At least until he closed the door behind them in his room and he pressed her up against it.

"Liam," she whimpered between kisses. Fuck but he liked the sound of his name on her lips. Right then and there, he made it his mission to have her gasping it all night long.

Chapter Eighteen

MACK

It was the third day since Mack had gotten home with Torpedo and it wasn't going any better today than it had yesterday or the day before. He wasn't making any progress with the mustang. If anything, he felt the horse was getting jumpier around him.

He finally gave up for the day and went in the house to take a leak. After he went to the bathroom, he stopped in his room to check his phone messages before he went back out for evening chores.

Bone's parole hearing was today. It had him on edge, he couldn't lie. Xavier always said horses could sense your mood. If the way Torpedo had bolted away from him all day was any indication, Xavier was spot on.

Mack grabbed his cell and saw he had one voicemail. His throat got tight even as he shook his head at himself. Stupid to be so fucking anxious about it. Of course Bone wouldn't make parole.

Still Mack felt his heartbeat in his ears when he listened to his old friend Sammy's voice come over the line.

"Hey bro. Hope everything's good out there in the prairie. Still can't imagine you ridin' a fuckin' horse."

Mack smiled. He and Sammy had gotten to know each other during a nickel Sammy had spent on the inside. He'd joined up with the Devil's Spawn for protection just like Mack. Mack had tutored him and helped him

get his GED and he was doing good now that he was out. Had a good job in customer service, a wife, a new baby. Living the fucking dream. He always said if there was anything Mack ever needed, to consider it done. Mack never thought he'd cash it in. Till he realized how helpful having someone with their finger on the pulse would be in keeping tabs on Bone.

“Yeah, so, bad news about Bone. I know you ain't gonna want to hear this, but he's gettin' out. He made parole. Good behavior or some shit.”

Mack's hands clenched into fists.

Parole?

What the *fuck*?

“I guess it takes two or three weeks for all the paperwork or whatever to go through. But yeah. By the end of the month, he'll be out. Sorry, man. I'll keep an eye on him for you and give you regular updates.”

“Fuck!” Mack barely stopped himself from throwing his phone across the fucking room.

He raked a hand through his hair and stood up, pacing across his room. The Devils must have paid someone off to get Bone out early. Motherfuckers. Bone had been in for a double homicide he'd committed when he was nineteen. Sentenced to twenty years. And they were gonna let the bastard out after sixteen?

Mack kicked the frame of his bed and it screeched as it moved across the floor. It wasn't enough. He felt like ripping apart the whole damn room.

He leaned over with his hands on his knees. Calm down. He needed to calm the fuck down. So he thought he'd have a few more years to prepare. So what? Nothing had changed, not really. He'd gone over his plan a million times in his head. He'd just have to act sooner rather than later.

And in the end, Danny 'Bone' Jones would still be dead.

In the meantime, Mack needed to smash the fuck out of something. He leaned over and yanked his boxing gloves out from underneath the bed. Then he jogged down the stairs and toward the back barn where Xavier had let him set up a bag.

He wailed on the bag for half an hour or more. Instead of releasing his tension like it usually did, though, each hit only seemed to make his blood burn hotter. In two or three weeks that murderous, raping bastard would be back on the streets. Mack slammed the bag again, immediately pulling back for another punch.

“I saw you training Torpedo earlier.”

Mack startled at the soft voice. He jerked around and saw Calla standing a few feet away, leaning against the wall of the barn.

“You’ve got a gentle touch. You were good with him.”

Sweat poured off Mack’s brow and down his chest. He leaned over and grabbed his shirt from where he tossed it earlier to mop himself off. He didn’t look Calla’s direction again.

“Can we talk?” she asked.

“Got nothing to say.” He tossed the shirt back down and reared back for another swing at the bag.

“Well I do.” She sounded impatient. “I didn’t like how you just left like that the other night.”

Mack didn’t respond, just let loose a series of jabs.

“Liam says you’re a coward and we should forget about you.”

Mack’s hand fisted tighter in his gloves. Of course that’s how that fucker would spin it. Mack stretched his neck to try to ease some of his tension. Still he didn’t look at her. “Guess he’s right,” he said.

“Bullshit.” Her voice was like a whip and he felt her take another step toward him. “I was there that night. At the dance. I saw you laughing. Having a good time. Then it’s like some switch flipped. And I haven’t seen the guy I first met that night in the kitchen since.”

Finally he turned to her. She was back in her overalls with a skimpy little tank underneath. She’d tried to tie her hair back but it was escaping all around her face. Her cheeks were pink, probably from the heat. Mack’s cock twitched remembering how her cheeks had looked the same when he was burying himself inside her. And the look on her face—that mixture of shock and pleasure, everyone of her reactions playing out on that expressive face of hers.

Mack clenched his jaw and he swung for the bag again. “So now you want to stand around and talk about feelings? We had fun the other night. Then I moved on. End of story.”

“Is it?” She took a step toward him and put her hand on his forearm to stop his next jab. “Because that guy I first met? The man I danced with? I really liked him. He was someone special.”

Mack felt her words in his gut. Special? She didn’t know what the fuck she was talking about. The only special he had in him was being especially good at kicking the shit out of people. He glared at her. “I was trying to get laid. That’s all.”

Calla shook her head as he talked and he could see the stubborn written all over her face. It was a familiar expression. Ben used to look like that when he wanted something. “It was more than that,” she said. “I don’t know much but I know that.”

Mack turned back to the bag. Fact was, he couldn’t look at Calla now without seeing Ben.

Just one more reason to shut this shit down. “Oh yeah?” he sneered. “And why do you think you know anything? You were a goddamned virgin. Fuck, most teenagers have more experience than you. Besides, three months from now, I’m outta here. Right after the competition.” It was the conclusion he’d come to about fifteen minutes into wailing on the bag. He respected Xavier enough to finish what he’d committed to with training the mustang. But after that, he was out. The grim reaper was coming for Bone, and Mack would be the one to introduce them. “I don’t need any complications between now and then.”

Calla put her hands on her hips. “I don’t have to be a complication. I’d like to be your friend.”

“Already got enough friends.” He swung at the bag again. The impact went up his arm and into his chest. He punched again, even harder. He hadn’t wrapped his hands with tape before putting his gloves on, and if he kept it up this way he’d find his knuckles bloody when he pulled them off.

Calla scoffed. “You don’t have any friends.”

“Exactly.” *Punch.* “And that’s how I like it.” *Jab, jab, punch.*

“Everyone needs friends. I’m just starting to realize that. I lived most of my life lonely and thought it would never change. I was wrong.” Her voice went soft. “You’re wrong too.”

“Look, little girl,” Mack spun on her and pointed a glove her direction. “You were an okay fuck, but shit, I never would have touched you if I knew you were gonna get all clingy and shit.”

Calla’s nostrils flared and her hands clenched. “Maybe Liam’s right. Maybe you’re nothing but a bully.”

He wished she’d stop bringing that fucker up. He hadn’t missed the way Liam was always finding some way to touch her whenever the two were in the same room. Like a dog staking his fucking claim.

After several more long moments of him not responding, Calla threw her hands up in the air. “I give up.”

She spun and walked away. Mack forced himself not to watch her go. If

she looked back, he didn't want her to see him looking after her like a lost fucking puppy.

No, better for everyone involved if he took out his frustrations on this goddamned punching bag rather than pulling a sweet girl like that into his fucked up sphere.

He'd been a selfish fuck to ever look for distraction in her soft arms in the first place. But that was over.

Bone was out of prison. His purpose was clear now. He'd train up to peak condition again. Make himself a machine. To do the only thing a savage like him was good for.

"She didn't want to listen when I told her you were a lost cause."

Mack gritted his teeth at hearing Liam's voice behind him. What, suddenly the back barn was Penn fucking Station? Why couldn't they just leave him the fuck alone?

"People want to deny it but breeding matters. Just take the mustangs. Maybe we get them trained to follow a few commands so we can sell them as a work horse at the auction. If we're lucky. But they'll never be anything more than what they were born as." His lips twisted in disgust. "And nothing compared to a purebred."

Mack sneered, turning to look at Liam. "I take it you're the purebred in this little metaphor?"

Liam shrugged, a superior smile on his face. "Just calling it like I see it."

"Yeah, well no one fucking asked you." The mood Mack was in, Liam better shut his goddamned mouth and run away with his tail between his legs if he knew what was good for him. "You should be happy. You're getting the girl. That should satisfy your ego." Mack couldn't help adding. "Even if it's just 'cause I'm letting you have her."

The vein on Liam's neck stood out as he took a step toward Mack. "She feels sorry for you. I'm sure I can convince her to give up on her little charity project without too much trouble. Your mongrel arse doesn't deserve her and you know it. Not that it stopped you from getting your dick wet though, did it?"

Fucker pushed it too far. Mack had been itching for a rematch ever since Liam had gotten in those hits that night in the kitchen. 'Sides, if he was gonna take on Bone, he could use all the practice he could get.

Mack shook his head and feigned like he was gonna walk away. Then he spun on his heel and swung at Liam.

Liam's eyes went wide with surprise and he ducked out of the way of Mack's glove at the very last second.

"Oh, ya want to batter me? Fine." Liam raised his fists. "I'm happy to settle once and for all who's the better man. I was light-weight champion for three years running at Exeter. Woulda been four," he smirked, "but I got thrown out for fighting."

This time it was Mack's turn to smirk. "Think you know how to fight because you could beat up some other pansy assed rich kids?" He shook his head and pulled off his boxing gloves, cracking his fingers as he went. "This is gonna be fun."

He faked a jab and then reared back, letting loose a punch that would have smashed Liam's face in. If the little fucker hadn't danced away at the last second, that was.

"Boxing is all about footwork," Liam said, doing more of that stupid bouncing around bullshit.

Mack was almost too busy laughing at him to dodge when Liam let out a left-cross. He barely managed to knock Liam's hand away mid-air.

But Liam was ready and came back with his right, landing one right on Mack's jaw. Motherfucking piss ant son of a—

Mack roared and ran full speed into Liam. He caught him off guard and took him to the dirt floor. Liam grunted in pain as Mack landed on top of him but Mack didn't waste a second pinning him and then trying to get his arm around the fucker's neck to choke him out. Right before he could, though, Liam grabbed Mack's shoulder, jerked his arm across, and then rolled out from underneath him. Slippery little fuck—

Next second he was jumping on Mack's back and slamming him into the ground. Then he did some fucking ninja move, grabbing Mack's arm, putting a hand around the back of his neck, and then ramming into him from the side until he flipped Mack on his back.

Mack struggled but the bastard still had one hand around Mack's neck and his knee on Mack's other arm.

Liam grinned in Mack's face as Mack wriggled and fought to get free. "Did I mention I also dabbled in wrestling?"

Superior piece of shit. Mack might not know any fancy fucking wrestling techniques, but he knew the basics of getting out of a tight spot. He reached behind his head and grabbed Liam's hand, jerked it down with pure force, then jammed his elbow into Liam's body. He used the momentum to flip

Liam so he was on his back.

Liam hit hard and his chest moved up and down as he breathed heavily underneath Mack's body. His teeth clenched. "So you know how to get out of a half nelson. Good for you."

"I know how to get a mouthy little shit on his back, if that's what you mean." Mack ground Liam into the floor, chest to chest.

The more Liam jerked and tried to get out of his hold, the wider Mack's smile got. "Guess brute strength wins out over breeding."

Liam's face went red and he tried to knee Mack in the kidneys from behind. Mack just shifted so he pinned Liam's entire body and not just his upper half. Which meant his pelvis came into contact with Liam's.

He almost jerked back at what he felt.

Liam had a huge fucking hard-on.

Liam's eyes flashed and he yanked to try to get away from Mack. All that accomplished was rubbing his cock more against Mack's. Liam was wearing jeans but Mack only had on athletic shorts and he felt every inch.

When his own cock stiffened in response, again Mack almost pulled back and let Liam go. But then he saw the way Liam's face had gone cherry with embarrassment.

"So I'm white trash not worth the shit on your shoes," Mack sneered, "but you still want to fuck me."

Liam's nostrils flared as he glared back at Mack, jerking again to try to dislodge him. With the same results—he wasn't going anywhere.

Mack lifted up slightly but only to get enough momentum to slam his body back down on Liam's. The move had their cocks grinding together even more.

"Sure, I'd fuck you," Liam shrugged, pretending nonchalance. "Or have you chauffeur me around. Or wipe down the table after I eat." Liam's eyes went flinty even as one side of his mouth lifted. "There's all kind of uses for the help."

Mack laughed. "You got one thing wrong there, little boy." Keeping Liam's arms pinned at his sides, he rolled him until Liam's chest was smashed into the ground. "I don't get fucked," he hissed in Liam's ear from behind. "I do the fucking."

Then, moving to hold both of Liam's wrists behind his back with one hand, Mack reached underneath Liam, jerked the button of Liam's jeans free, and shoved them down to expose his toned ass.

For a second neither of them said anything. Until Liam bit out, “Condom. Back pocket.”

Holy shit. Mack was bluffing. He’d just meant to put Liam in his place. He didn’t expect him to...

Mack shoved his hand into the back pocket of Liam’s jeans. He yanked out the condom. Stared at it for a moment. Then he ripped the packaging open with his teeth.

He’d show this Irish motherfucker once and for all who was in fucking charge. They’d get it out of their system. Then Mack would be done with him.

Mack shoved his own shorts down and rolled the lubed condom down his cock.

“Grab your ass cheeks,” Mack bit out, finally letting go of Liam’s wrists. “Open for me.” Again there was a moment of hesitation. But it wasn’t even two seconds before Liam reached back and separated his ass cheeks. Exposing his little puckered hole.

Mack’s cock lunged almost of its own fucking accord. His hips did the rest.

The head of his cock pressed at Liam’s entrance.

Mack swore. This part always made him fucking crazy. Would he be able to get in there? How much struggle would his partner put up before submitting? Because he suddenly very much wanted Liam to submit. More than anything else he’d wanted in a long time, apart from Calla.

“Relax,” Mack ordered, putting his hand on the bottom of Liam’s spine. “Open up more.”

Liam pulled his cheeks even further apart and Mack thrust in at the same time. And fuck, yes. The crown of his cock breached the tight ring of muscles. Liam’s body spasmed underneath him.

“On your knees.”

Mack kept pressing forward with his cock as Liam pushed back against him, struggling up to his knees.

“That’s right,” Mack said, grabbing Liam’s ass hard. “Look who can’t wait to take it up the ass. How long you had a hard-on for me? How many nights you slept in the wet spot after coming to the thought of me? Come on,” he lunged deeper. “Tell me.

Liam turned and glared over his shoulder. “Fuck you.”

Mack laughed. Shit but this felt good. So goddamned good. “No, fuck

you.” He shoved his cock all the way in to the hilt to emphasize his point. Liam’s mouth dropped open and his face contorted. Pleasure or pain, Mack couldn’t tell. He suspected both.

“Show me how fuckin’ hard you are for me.” Mack reached around Liam’s waist and grabbed for his cock. It was a good size. Fucking *thick* too.

“You stuck this cock in Calla? You two fuck after I left?”

Liam’s eyes opened again and he smirked. How he had the nerve to smirk at Mack while he had his cock up his ass, Mack didn’t know.

“I fucked her so good she couldn’t even remember your name by the time I was through.”

Mack jerked his hips back and then he rammed back in. Liam grunted as his body jolted forward. Mack grinned.

“You ride her as hard as I’m riding you?”

Liam’s eyes narrowed in challenge, his head still swung back to look at Mack over his shoulder. “You call this hard? I barely even feel your mickey. That a pencil back there?”

Oh he was fucking in for it now. Mack growled in determination as he pulled out and shoved back in. All the way. No fucking mercy. And Christ, the way Liam’s body clenched on him.

Then Liam shifted, shoving back against Mack’s thighs as Mack thrust forward. Mack grabbed one of his shoulders and then started pounding the fuck out of him.

And for the first time since Mack had read that fucking email earlier, his mind cleared. Christ, he’d forgotten how a good lay could do that. Make all the other bad shit go away.

Ben had known. And he’d known Mack needed it just as much as he had. But Mack had always had to be careful with Ben. He couldn’t take him hard. Not after what Ben went through. No matter the dominance games they played, Ben was only comfortable with certain positions. Certain role play. Slow and easy, that’s how it had been between them. Every inch Mack gained he had to coax from Ben, even though it was Ben who’d pushed them being together in the first place.

But Liam apparently wasn’t in the market for slow. And pile driving his ass like a mad motherfucker seemed to turn the guy on even more. His hips bucked as he rode Mack’s cock, faster and faster until the slap of their flesh echoed around the barn.

That was when he heard a high-pitched yip of surprise. And it didn’t

come from Liam. Both Liam's and Mack's head swung to the barn door and Mack froze.

Fuck.

It was Calla.

Chapter Nineteen

LIAM

Shite. Liam stared at Calla. This was bad. What the hell had he been thinking?

“Calla, I—” Liam started but then broke off. Because what could he really say while Mack’s cock was buried up his arse?

Her eyes were wide as saucers and she had a tall glass of lemonade in her hand. “I thought you might be thirsty, working up such a sweat,” she whispered, eyes flicking to Mack.

A heavy silence fell around them.

“After all the shit I said to you, you came back with fucking lemonade?” Mack’s voice was half-strangled.

Calla gulped and looked down.

“I’ll just go—” Calla started but Mack cut her off.

“You aren’t going anywhere. You’re gonna sit your ass down right here,” Mack pointed to a bench beside them, “and take off your overalls.”

Liam swung his head to glare at Mack over his shoulder. “Don’t you fecking talk to her like that.”

Mack’s nostrils flared. “So you’re the only one I can order around like my little bitch?”

Goddamned bastard. Liam didn’t know what to say to that. He didn’t know why he’d spread himself when Mack asked. Not thinking had been the

whole damn problem. When Mack had him pinned, so easily taking him down...

Jaysus. Liam's cock just got harder and harder with every ounce of force Mack used to hold him to the floor. When Mack had pulled his jeans down, Liam's cock went fucking stone.

He'd had the condom in his pocket in case things got hot and heavy with Calla again. How screwed up was it that it was now on another man's cock—one that just happened to be buried in his arse?

And yeah, he'd been with men before, but was always the top. Every single time. Sometimes he used toys in his arse, sure—prostate stimulators were fucking magic if you knew how to use them.

But he'd never let anyone else in there. Ever.

He took power.

He didn't give it.

So why today, of all fucking days? And why Mack, of all fucking people?

"Sit." Mack looked back at Calla, jerking his head again at the bench.

Calla came forward and sat.

"Take off your overalls and finger yourself while you watch us fuck."

Jaysus Christ, did he have to be such a crude bastard? Then again, maybe that was part of what was making Liam so hard. Liam had often been just as much of an arsehole with the people he screwed, back in the day. He didn't know why it was so different with Calla. Maybe because he actually respected her?

Calla's breath hitched, but the next second she undid the straps of her overalls.

"Take your shirt off."

Liam could see her hands trembling as she reached down for the bottom of her shirt and pulled it off over her head. She was wearing a sports bra that all but flattened her breasts. She covered herself awkwardly with her arms.

"You're beautiful," Liam encouraged but Mack just snapped, "Bra too."

Mack pushed back into Liam's arse as Calla's bra came off. Liam let out a low hiss and his hand dropped to his own cock.

"See how bad he wants it?" Mack asked Calla. "He loves getting his ass fucked." Mack gave Liam's arse cheek a smack.

Liam glared over his shoulder at Mack, his hand still moving up and down his own shaft. "You're fecking pushin' it."

Mack lazily sawed his cock in and out and oh Jaysus— He was hitting

that spot just right and— Jaysus, Mary and *Joseph* that felt good.

Liam's head tipped back, mouth slack. He jerked himself harder.

Calla's quick gasps filled the barn and Liam glanced over at her. Her hand disappeared into the pool of denim at her waist and her back arched, thrusting her pale breasts out.

"Pinch those pink little nipples," Mack ordered.

The hand not massaging herself pinched one nipple than the other. She obeyed each of Mack's commands so eagerly. So it wasn't only Liam that responded to Mack being a jackass.

And watching her at the same time Mack thrust in again. Liam worked his cock quicker than ever. "I'm gonna c—"

"Don't you dare." Mack's hand came down hard on his arse. The stinging bite of it mixed with everything else he was feeling. Liam's hand fisted around his cock, squeezing the tip roughly. Shite. He didn't know how much longer he could hold off.

Mack grunted with effort as he drove mercilessly into Liam. Liam watched Calla as Calla watched them.

She'd leaned over like she was trying to see the exact spot where Mack entered Liam. Shite. It was all good, so, so good.

"Hands and knees," Mack said to Calla. "Crawl over to us."

Liam clenched on Mack, angered and even more turned on by his every word. Calla blinked and then she dropped down to the ground. At least she still had the pants of the overalls on so her knees wouldn't get dirty.

And then, shite. She actually crawled toward them, her breasts full and swinging as she came.

Mack reached for her when she got close, taking her arm and urging her up. Liam looked over his shoulder and watched as Mack kissed her hard. Never once did he lose his rhythm pounding away at Liam's arse.

It was only when Liam said, "I want her too," that Mack pulled back and pressed his forehead to Calla's for the briefest moment. Then they stared at one another. Liam couldn't read the emotion on their faces. Whatever it was, it was intense. Jealousy growled through his stomach. He wasn't sure if it was for Calla or for Mack.

"Kiss him," Mack said, eyes breaking from Calla's only long enough to nod to Liam.

Calla leaned in and gave Mack another quick kiss before she dipped down to Liam. Liam twisted his head toward her and met her lips. They were

warm and wet from where Mack had just kissed her. Liam's tongue thrust inside. He wanted to claim her. To take her. To own her.

"Sit," Liam said. "Here." He gestured for her to sit close to him, right beside where he was on his hands and knees. "Touch me."

He took the hand she'd been pleasuring herself with and dragged it underneath him to his cock. Her hand squeezed around him and he almost choked. He reached for her center.

"Jaysus, she's wet," he hissed before leaning over to kiss her again even as his forefinger slipped inside her.

She let out a quick moan before kissing him back. Her tongue danced inside his mouth, out to tease at his lips, then back in to tangle with his tongue again. It was like she wanted everything at once, she was so fucking eager.

There were no games with her. No façades. She was just beauty. Just sweetness. Innocent in spite of all the ways they wanted to debauch her. His thumb circled her clit and she gasped, eyes dropping closed as Liam worked her.

But suddenly that wasn't enough. He hadn't put his mouth on her since the first night. He didn't just want to touch her. He wanted to taste her.

Mack leaned over his back and Liam's eyes shot open. Jaysus, that angle. Mack's cock brushed Liam's prostate with every thrust.

Shite, he wanted to taste Calla before it was too late. He wanted to be buried in the scent of her when he lost it.

"Lay back," Liam managed between gulping breaths. He moved his hand from Calla's pussy to her hips to help urge her down in the direction he wanted. She crab-walked backwards a little bit and Liam tugged her overalls down, exposing her slick cunt.

Behind him, Mack put his hand on the back of Liam's head and shoved him down into Calla. Liam didn't have any qualms about taking this unspoken order. And just knowing Mack wanted the same thing, shite, it made it even hotter.

Liam licked up Calla's center and then latched on her clit. He wasn't wasting any time. He wanted her right on the edge with him. Liam leaned down to steady himself on one elbow, clutching her hip with one hand while he dropped the other back to his cock.

He glanced up Calla's body and saw her eyes flicking up and down between Mack and Liam like she couldn't decide who she wanted to look at.

What was on Mack's face? Some superior smirk? Or was he as lost in pleasure as Liam and Calla?

And why did Liam want the second to be true so desperately?

Calla's legs started shaking underneath Liam's mouth. She was about to come. Liam could feel it. Taste it. He focused in on her clit, moving the tip of his tongue back and forth across her swollen bud.

Right as her legs stiffened and she started coming, Mack suddenly pulled out of Liam and with his hands on his hips, rolled Liam onto his back.

Calla let out a little whine at her denied orgasm.

"What the—" Liam started, but then Mack came forward, chest to chest, and shoved up his arse again.

Liam's eyes shot open.

Holy *fuck*.

Mack's cock had only been grazing his prostate before. But in this position, the head of Mack's cock hit the nail square on the head.

"Up," Mack growled and Liam blinked, trying to see through the haze of pleasure. Did he mean—

Calla got to her knees, then to her feet. Mack grabbed her hand and tugged her over to where he crouched on his knees, cock up Liam's arse. Then he jerked her overalls all the way down.

"Step out."

Calla stepped free of the pile of denim and then Mack's hands were on her hips, positioning her so she straddled Liam's body, her pussy right in Mack's face. Her hands landed on Mack's head as he dived in.

Son of a bitch wanted her pleasure for himself. Mack had stopped thrusting while he'd arranged Calla, but then he started up again.

And all the breath left Liam in a great whoosh because Jaysus fucking Christ— His spine lit and he grabbed his cock, jacking himself furiously while Mack thrust so that his cock hit the jackpot every single time.

"Oh God," Calla cried and Liam felt like shouting along with her. It. Was. Hitting. So. Fucking. Hard.

Cum spurted all over Liam's hand and he tugged himself even harder. Prostate orgasms were usually intense but this went beyond the—

He groaned in pleasure as he milked the last of his cum from his cock. He looked up at Calla's soft round arse as she grabbed Mack's shoulders and trembled against him, her whole body taut a long moment before relaxing.

Only then did Mack shove himself in and out of Liam's ass more brutally

than ever until finally he thrust in and stopped, then pulled out and pushed in again one last time. Liam clenched around him, imagining Mack's cum filling the condom.

When Liam looked back again, he saw Mack had collapsed into Calla, his arms going around the back of her thighs in an embrace.

And in that moment, as Mack's cock slipped from Liam's backside, Liam felt horribly disconnected to both of them. Like he was just a prop in the Calla and Mack show. Useful to be, well, *used*, but not for anything else.

It was a position Liam had found himself in far too many times before. People had used him for his money all his life. Occasionally for his body *and* his money—or rather, they used his body as a means to get at his money.

He didn't even know why he was being such a pussy about it. He'd just gotten laid. What the hell was there to complain about? Well, other than the hard-packed dirt of the floor underneath him and shite, his back was getting scratched to all hell by the hay scattered on the ground. So it was just another hard and dirty fuck. So what? He'd had plenty of those in his life. What was one more?

He crawled out from between Calla's legs.

But before he got very far, she turned and dropped to his side. She wrapped her arms around Liam's waist, her forehead to his chest. She clutched him hard.

She was warm. For a second, that was all he could think. Her skin was soft and so, so warm.

She wanted him. He was more than a prop to her.

And Mack?

Liam's eyes flicked over to him.

Mack was jerking up his athletic shorts and stumbling away from them. Calla's head turned until both of them were watching Mack. Waiting to see what he would do next.

Chapter Twenty

CALLA

“Oh no you don’t.” Calla sprung up to her feet. “You aren’t pulling a runner again.” She marched over to Mack and got in his face. A voice in the back of her head was screaming, *oh my God, you’re naked!* But the rest of her was too pissed to care.

“You wanted what happened here just as much as we did.” Calla crossed her arms. “Don’t even try denying it.”

Mack’s eyes followed the action of her arms and then paused there. Was he seriously checking out her boobs right now? *Men.*

“Just proving my point here, pal.” She snapped her fingers in front of her breasts to get his attention.

Mack’s eyes jerked guiltily up to hers and then his jaw went hard.

“Let me guess,” Liam stood up, pulling his jeans on as he went. Yeah, that was probably the dignified way to go in this situation. Clothes. Still, she wasn’t about to give up her ground now.

“This is the part where you tell us we’re just good for a fuck but that’s it?” Liam continued. “Or some other equally arseholish remark?”

Mack’s eyes cut to Liam. “And if it is?”

“Bullshit.” Liam took a step toward them. “Why can’t you just admit it? There’s something here but you’re terrified of it.”

“I’m not afraid of anything.” Mack glared at Liam.

Liam smirked. “He says as he runs away with his tail between his legs.”

Mack took a step forward like he wanted to punch Liam again. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

Calla stepped between them. “So tell us.” She placed a hand on Mack’s chest, which glistened with sweat and little bits of dust and dirt from their vigorous activities. She didn’t want to think what a mess she must be. She focused in on Mack’s eyes.

“Liam’s right. There’s something here between us. All of us.” She glanced Liam’s way before moving her eyes back to Mack. “Something special. Something good.” It was an echo of Mack’s words that first day and she hoped she was getting through to him. “Life’s too short not to grab ahold of something good before it’s gone.”

By the way the hard lines of Mack’s face went soft, she could tell he remembered. His eyes were full of pain, though. “Not sure I got any special to give.” He stepped forward and ran his thumb down her cheek. “This ain’t where my road is headed, sweetheart. I meant it when I said I’m leaving in three months.”

He was wrong about the special, Calla was sure of that. Calla had known a lot of folks in her life and never come across special the likes of Mackenzie Knight or Liam O’Neill. Still, Calla nodded. “So give us three months.”

It just popped out of her mouth. She hadn’t thought it through. But Mack was right about grabbing hold of good before it was gone. God knew it was the way she ought to be living her life. She never knew when life as she knew it could be over. And it would be cruel to ever get in a real relationship without telling the person there was every chance she was a ticking time bomb just waiting to explode their lives. No, even the damn fortune cookie knew it was smarter to live life the way Mack was suggesting.

No future. No tomorrow.

“We take it a day at a time,” she said, reaching out for Mack’s hand. “But we live the hell out of every moment while we’ve got it.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” Mack bit out, his hands balled into fists. Calla grabbed hold of it anyway. Liam’s head was swinging back and forth, looking to her, then Mack. Calla grabbed Liam’s hand in her other one, connecting the three of them.

Mack just stared down at their hands for a moment. And then, with a full body sigh like he was giving in against his will, Mack interweaved his fingers with hers.

Calla pulled both of their hands to her chest over her heart so Mack and Liam's knuckles touched.

"So we're all in?" She looked back and forth from Liam to Mack.

Liam's eyebrows wagged up and down. "Ménage with benefits till we get sick of each other? Count me the fuck in."

Mack rolled his eyes but nodded.

Calla grinned brilliantly, pulling both of them close and hugging them at the same time. Her heart raced with a happiness so full she felt high with it. She was elated. Ecstatic. Euphoric.

And when it ended?

And if the test results came back positive?

And if she slowly lost her mind? With no family? No money? Nothing to live for?

She shook her head and let all the negative thoughts go with it. She kissed first Liam and then Mack.

Live each day like it's your last, motherfuckers.

Chapter Twenty-One

MACK

Mack didn't know why he hadn't immediately said hell no to Calla's ridiculous proposal that day in the barn two weeks ago. He ought to be focused only on his training. Every minute spent hardening his mind and body so he'd be ready when he came face to face with that evil fuck.

But then he'd think about what Calla was offering and, well, if there were no strings... He could still leave in three months. No harm, no foul. Friends with benefits, that's what Liam called it, right?

Except Mack didn't have friends. So what the fuck was he doing?

Well, for one, he was standing in Liam's room just like he did almost every night, watching Calla slip through the door.

Liam had the biggest bed so his room had become the unofficial fuck pad. It wasn't every night—sometimes after a day of hard work, one or the other of them fell asleep while waiting for the rest of the household to go to bed. But more nights than not, they'd meet up in Liam's room by the light of Liam's dim nightstand lamp.

"Shirt off, gorgeous," Mack said to Calla, his throat dry. This was the moment every day that Mack lived for. Watching Calla's jeans or overalls fall to the floor. Or on a day like today when she'd showered before she came, watching her strip her oversized sleep shirt off over her head. Mack's

cock stiffened at the sight of her full, pert breasts.

This was what it always came down to, wasn't it? Strings or no strings, he didn't fucking care. He was a selfish piece of shit. He wanted this. Wanted it bad. Some part of him whispered, *you deserve to be happy in the time you have left.*

Which just proved what a son of a bitch he was. It was attitudes like that driving all the entitled fucks he hated. Using other people for their own pleasure or gain. Stomping all over anyone in their path to take what they wanted.

Liam got up from the bed where he'd been lounging and took a step toward Calla. He was in sweats and a shirt.

Mack glared his way. Speaking of rich entitled assholes. "You too," he said. "Strip."

Liam smirked at him. Then he stepped out of his sweatpants and boxers and tossed them to the ground, revealing his fully hard cock. When Liam moved to Calla and wrapped one arm around her, his shaft bobbed against her hip and she shivered, her gaze lifting to his.

Rebellious, stubborn little fuck. Liam hadn't taken his shirt off and Mack knew it was on purpose. He was always finding little ways to avoid doing what he was told. Mack stretched his neck and cracked his knuckles.

Liam drew Calla toward the bed. They slipped underneath the covers and he began kissing and caressing her. Mack pushed down his boxer-briefs and then got in on Calla's other side. He rubbed his hands down Calla's back, grabbing her ass and flexing his hips forward to grind his hard cock between the cheeks.

Calla gasped into Liam's mouth and pressed her ass back against Mack. Mack reached around to tease her with his fingers and found Liam's hand already there. He growled as he nipped at Calla's shoulder.

Then he rolled her so that she was facing him, her breasts against his chest. Liam immediately tugged so she was on her back, though, and he moved on top of her. Mack's jaw set when he glanced down and saw the other man already had a condom on.

So he thought he'd be the first to have Calla tonight, did he?

This was the routine they'd fallen into. Calla in the middle with them on either side, seducing her until they took turns fucking her sweet little cunt. Occasionally one of them would take her mouth while the other fucked her. Either way, she usually came three or four times each session. Sometimes

they could tease her into one of her mega-orgasms that seemed to last for minutes with multiple peaks. She was fucking magnificent.

But Mack knew there was so much more to explore. Like they'd begun doing in the barn that day. A hundred combinations and ways of seeking pleasure. If only Liam weren't such a proud little shit. He was depriving Calla of all the experiences she deserved.

It was time to put it to an end.

"Sit up for me, honey," Mack said, grabbing Calla's waist and tugging her up the bed even though he could tell Liam had been about to thrust inside her.

Calla scooted up the bed. She was always so eager to listen and explore. Fucking beautiful.

Liam glared Mack's way and he smirked.

"I want to teach you something tonight," Mack said, then leaned in to drop a quick kiss on her lips. He got distracted for a moment by her little tongue darting out and he couldn't help deepening the kiss.

Then she moaned into his mouth, her lips going slack in the way they did when she was nearing the brink. Damn, Mack knew he was a good kisser, but he'd never made a woman come before by just kiss—

Wait a second. Mack looked down Calla's body and sure enough, there was Liam, eating her out like she was his last fucking meal.

Goddammit. Mack kept on kissing her. He wouldn't deny her the quick orgasm Liam was bringing her to. But it could be so much better. This constant grab for power between himself and Liam made for sloppy scenes that didn't have the careful build-up and release that would be so much more satisfying for all of them.

And he wasn't going to sit around allowing this bullshit to continue.

After Calla clenched and cried out, one hand grasping Mack and the other reached down to Liam's head, Mack pulled her up and into his arms where he sat.

"Like I said," Mack glared Liam's way, "I want to teach Calla something tonight."

"What?" Calla asked, eyes bright, only a little breathless from her orgasm. Her first orgasms of the night were usually short, quick little affairs like that one that got her primed. It was the second and third that really had explosive power.

Liam rolled to his side to look at them. Mack didn't miss the resentment

in his eyes at having Calla pulled away from him.

“Usually you’re at the center, gorgeous. But tonight I want to try a little something different. I want you to feel what we feel. Taking you there. Making you ride that edge.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “How?”

Mack’s eyes went to Liam. “By Liam being the center tonight. I want to teach you how to worship him.”

Calla’s eyes dilated as she looked to Liam and she bit the bottom corner of her lip like she did when she was aroused.

Liam obviously recognized it too because he didn’t automatically reject the idea outright. His eyes flicked between Calla and Mack. “How? What do you mean?”

“You’ll see,” Mack said. “Lay down in the center of the bed.”

Liam looked uncertain. “Why don’t we just—”

“Lay down.”

Liam’s nostrils flared. “Fine.” His movements were jerky as he threw back the covers and laid down in the middle of the bed.

“Take his shirt off,” Mack instructed Calla.

Calla licked her lips as her hands dropped to Liam’s waist. She started to just pull it up but Mack dropped his hand to her wrists to slow her down. “Slowly. Tease him.”

He demonstrated, inching Liam’s shirt up and dragging the tips of his fingers across Liam’s abs as he went. Calla’s eyes flashed with heat when Liam let out a low hiss. She mirrored Mack’s actions, caressing up and then down Liam’s stomach. She teasingly ran her fingers down his happy trail to where his cock stood at rigid attention.

“You won’t be needing this right now.” Mack gripped Liam’s shaft and tugged the condom off in one swift pull. Liam’s whole body jolted at the touch.

Calla leaned over and gave the crown of Liam’s cock a kiss, licking around the head. Her eyes went to Mack, seeking assurance. His whole body vibrated with the rightness of it. Yes. This is how it should have been between them all along.

Mack nodded and ran his hand down Calla’s spine as she continued teasing Liam’s cock with her tongue.

“Not too much now,” he said, pulling her back after a few minutes. Calla stopped sucking and let Liam free from her mouth with a little *pop*.

Mack reached inside the nightstand and pulled out a tube of lubricant.

“What’s that for?” Liam asked, rising up on his elbows and staring at what Mack had in hand.

“Lay back.”

“Fuck you. What’s that for?”

Mack handed Calla the lube. “Coat your first two fingers with that, honey.”

Then he bent with his forearm across Liam’s chest, forcing him back down to the bed. “You’re gonna take what we fuckin’ give you, you got that?”

“Says who?” Liam struggled against Mack’s hold.

Mack grinned evilly. “Says me.”

Then he said to Calla, his face softening. “Stick your finger in his ass, honey. Just one at first.”

Calla’s eyes flicked to Liam. His jaw was clenched but he nodded to her. Again Mack felt that roar of satisfaction in his chest.

“I can’t— It won’t go in,” Calla said.

“Relax,” Mack whispered to Liam.

Liam glared murderously back and Mack grinned again. Then he moved down the bed to where Calla was crouched.

Liam was on his back with his legs up, his long, thick cock laying against his stomach.

“Stroke him,” Mack said. He squirted lube on his own fingers.

Calla obeyed, reaching up to pull on Liam’s cock. Fucker was built like a horse. Mack’s cock was just as long but not as thick. Even Mack had to admit—impressive.

“Now keep massaging all around his anus,” Mack said softly. Watching Calla’s small fingers pressing at Liam’s ass was fucking hot, that was for sure. “Don’t be afraid of hurting him. He can take it.”

Mack pinched Liam’s ass. Liam let out a gasp of angered surprise, but the next second, Calla’s finger had slipped inside him. His head fell back against the pillow and he breathed rapidly in and out.

Calla’s finger couldn’t feel like that much of an intrusion. More likely it was the thought of what they were doing to him that had him on edge. Which just thrilled Mack to no fucking end for some reason.

“Now stretch him. Really ream him out,” Mack instructed. Christ, Calla was beautiful, naked and bent over Liam, finger up his ass and jacking him

off with her other hand.

Mack couldn't help but reaching down to give his own cock several long pulls. Fuck yeah.

Then he moved his own finger he'd coated in lube to join Calla's. He wasn't shy about wiggling his thick forefinger right in beside hers.

"Shite," Liam cursed, looking down at them.

"That's right," Mack said, stretching Liam's ass as he tugged on his own cock. "Loosen him up. You want to get two, maybe three fingers in here. I'm gonna show you where to massage a man to make him feel so fucking good, he'll fall at your feet."

Calla tongue flicked out to wet her lips as her eyes rose to Mack's. "I don't know about the falling to my feet part." She looked up to Liam. "But I do want to make you feel good."

She rubbed her thumb over the tip of Liam's cock, collecting precum and then massaging it in as she tugged up and down on his shaft.

"That's right," Mack whispered. "We want his pleasure to override every other single thing in the universe. You can do that. You have that power, gorgeous. We're getting him good and stretched now." Mack swirled his finger around inside the hot glove of Liam's ass one more time before pulling out. "Add two more fingers and then I'll tell you what to do, honey."

Calla nodded. She slipped a second finger in beside the first.

Mack's chest pumped up and down as he watched. "Now a third."

Christ, his mouth was dry watching her.

She edged a third finger up Liam's ass. Liam groaned but it wasn't in pain. His cock was rock hard in Calla's hand.

"About three or four inches in, feel along the front wall." Mack tapped right above Liam's cock to indicate which wall he meant. He dropped his hand down to play with Liam's balls while Calla bit her bottom lip in concentration.

Liam cried out, his whole body going tense. He threw his forearm over his mouth and groaned into it, hips thrusting his cock rapidly up and into Calla's hand.

"I'd say you found the spot."

Mack reached and took over masturbating Liam. But instead of jerking him off, he squeezed the head. Liam's face was pained when he looked down at them.

"Don't come yet," Mack warned. "Not until I say so."

He could tell Liam wanted to balk—most likely to tell him to fuck off. Mack squeezed his dick harder. “We’re trying to teach Calla how to give and receive the most pleasure. And that means showing her how discipline can lead to even higher climax.”

Liam’s mouth went into a hard line but he finally dropped his head back to the pillow, eyes squeezing shut.

“Good boy,” Mack murmured with a smile.

“He’s gripping me so tight,” Calla whispered, eyes wide and excited.

“You like that?” Mack asked.

She nodded.

“Is it making you hot?”

She nodded again.

“Show me. Open those legs wide. I want to see you dripping you’re so wet.”

A little shudder went through her as she went up on her knees, one hand on Liam’s upraised knee to brace herself, her other hand buried up his ass.

“You can touch yourself, Liam, but stop if you’re getting too close.”

Liam didn’t open his eyes, but he nodded and his hand dropped to his cock.

Fuck, that was a hot picture. Finally they were both under his control. Exactly where they were meant to fucking be.

Mack moved behind Calla, so close to the edge of the bed that he put one foot on the floor. He slid a finger to her pussy to see if she was ready for him and Christ, she was fucking sopping.

“I want to feel you, honey. You know I’m clean. You trust me to pull out?”

“Yes.” She nodded, leaning over to lick the tip of Liam’s cock as he jacked himself. The move only had her exposing her pussy to him further.

He didn’t hesitate lining up his cock and pushing inside her. Fuck. Fuck. She felt so good. Squeezing on him like that. So hot. And tight. Fucking *tight*.

He looked on as she moved her finger in and out of Liam’s ass and his face was just absolutely fucking destroyed with pleasure.

And Mack almost forgot to follow his own goddamned advice and spilled right that second. But he got hold of himself and forced it back. No. Not yet. He wanted this feeling to go on forever. To fucking live in Calla’s cunt.

He’d never get tired of watching her finger fuck Liam’s ass. Never lose the high of knowing they were both at his fucking mercy.

Shit. The idea had him so fucking hard. He grabbed Calla's hips and started jackhammering away.

"Oh," she cried in the breathy way she did right before she was about to come. Angle he was taking her at, he knew he was hitting her G-spot and it would be a big one. "Mackenzie. Oh. *Oh!*"

She was getting so loud he had to wrap a hand around her mouth to stifle her cries as he fucked her through her orgasm.

"Can I come?" Liam asked, voice hoarse as he watched them, hand working his cock hard and furious.

"No."

Liam groaned and writhed on the bed at being denied.

Calla's screams reached the highest pitch. Even muffled by Mack's hand, it was still clear enough she was hitting her peak.

His spine lit on fire and everything in him wanted to fucking explode.

No. Not fucking yet.

Calla finally went limp after long seconds of climax.

Mack didn't waste any time. Right as she came down, he pulled out of her and moved around the bed.

"Open," he demanded, fisting his cock and positioning it right in front of Liam's face. "Suck her juices off me."

There was only the briefest flash of opposition in Liam's eyes. Mack smacked Liam's cheek with his cock at the hesitation.

"Suck her off me or you don't get to come."

Liam's nostril's flared but he opened right up.

"Massage him good, honey," Mack called to Calla. "We're gonna make him feel better than he ever has in his whole fucking life."

"Yes," Calla said, sitting back on her haunches but narrowing her eyes in focus on Liam's hole. So fuckin' hot.

Mack fed his cock into Liam's waiting mouth. As soon as the tip of his cock hit Liam's tongue, he almost fucking lost it again.

Fucking Liam in the barn that day had been good, but this felt like it would finally put Liam in his place once and for all.

"Eyes on me," he snapped.

Liam's eyes lifted. Mack had expected more rebellious defiance. Instead, he saw... vulnerability. Liam's blue eyes were so wide and clear. Mack had called him boy before just to put him in his place. But suddenly he seemed like he was. Much younger than his twenty-seven years. And Mack felt the

oddest protective sensation.

Which was just...

Mack shook his head at the sensation. He focused instead on his desire to simply dominate the fuck out of him. He wasn't gentle when he grabbed the back of Liam's head and shoved his cock to the back of his mouth, into his throat.

Liam's blue eyes went wide.

But he didn't choke. Or yank away. Instead he relaxed and took everything Mack had to give him.

And suddenly Mack was the one fucking breaking.

"Come," he growled, and like the order had been issued at himself, he immediately climaxed. It hit like a fucking freight train.

His cum shot down Liam's throat. Liam swallowed convulsively and his eyes stayed on Mack's even as his whole body arched.

They were coming at the same time. At the same goddamned time.

And then Mack heard Calla's muffled cry. When he glanced her way, he saw that she had her hand buried in her sex. She was coming with them, even as ropes of cum spurted from Liam's cock all over his stomach.

Fuuuuuuuuuuuck. Mack clenched his teeth to hold back his roar as he mastered the whole fucking universe. Because there was nothing else in the world except his girl and his boy. And they were fucking *his*.

It was perfect.

Everything was fucking beautiful...

...

...

...

And then all his cum was spent and Bone's face flashed through his mind. Then Ben, lying lifeless in the yard under the bright noonday sun. He hadn't been there to witness it but he'd imagined it enough times for him to know just what the scene must have looked like.

He jerked back from where Liam and Calla had collapsed on the bed. Calla had crawled up so that she was cradled in Liam's arms. She looked toward him, a contented satiated smile on her flushed face. Little beads of sweat dotted her forehead and she'd never looked more beautiful.

She held out her arms for Mack.

So innocent. So pure.

"Stay tonight." This from Liam who usually couldn't boot him from the

room fast enough. “Please.” Liam swallowed and Mack could see how much it cost him to ask it. Whatever had happened between them tonight, Mack wasn’t the only one who’d felt it. “Stay,” Liam repeated.

And that was when Mack knew he had to shut this shit down.

One night didn’t change reality.

He was the shit from the wrong side of the tracks that people like Liam barely even glanced at or acknowledged as they passed by. He was the dumb fuck who couldn’t even do the job right when he went to punish the fucker who’d been beating on his mom. He was the ex-convict who’d let himself become a victim in prison. And he was the sad sack of shit who got Ben killed. Never able to protect the people he cared about.

So even though he wanted more than anything to go curl up behind both of them and sling his arm across both their waists, he took a step back instead.

He was allowing himself the escape of being with them, but it could only ever be sex. Sex the way he dictated. He was aware it made him an asshole to want it both ways—control in the bedroom but no attachment beyond that.

Maybe if he stepped back, Liam and Calla could really have something. If he weren’t in the middle complicating the hell out of things. They looked good spooned together there on the bed. Like they fit with each other

His back stiffened at the thought. He wasn’t sure if he was more jealous for Calla or Liam.

Fuck it. They were both his for now. But that didn’t stop him from turning his back on them.

“Got an early morning tomorrow,” was all he said before he turned and left the room.

Chapter Twenty-Two

CALLA

“**A**ll right, Paint, let’s show ‘em what we can do.” Calla smiled as she opened the back of the trailer to let Painter out. Today were trail trials, a laid-back competition at a wilderness park just outside of Casper. People came from all over Wyoming to try out their newly trained horses in public for the first time.

Calla could hardly believe two months had passed since she’d gotten Painter.

Then again, they said time flew when you were having fun. And the last two months had been the best of Calla’s entire life. She spent her days doing chores and training Painter. And her nights... she blushed. Well, suffice to say, as much as she’d fallen in love with Painter, she spent the daylight hours counting the minutes until she got to be alone with Liam and Mack.

She shook her head. She couldn’t be thinking about all that right now, though. This was her first chance to try Painter in a competition setting and prove to herself and everyone else that she had a real shot at that hundred thousand dollars next month.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Alright. She didn’t want to get cocky. But there was nothing wrong with being confident.

Today in the trials, riders would be judged on a series of ten to twelve obstacles all along a trail in the woods. The obstacles could be anything from

logs in the path to navigating around a group of noisy campers to having to open a gate while astride your horse. Calla had never been on this particular trail but she'd been training Painter on dealing with unfamiliar situations and the mare caught on quickly to everything Calla threw at her.

Not to brag or anything, but Calla basically had the best, most genius mustang of anyone in the whole dang makeover. Facts were just facts.

Calla grinned, then clicked her tongue while she held onto Painter's lead. Painter stepped calmly down from the trailer.

"Good girl," Calla praised, rubbing down her withers. "What a good girl you are."

In the trailer beside hers, Mack tugged on his lead several times until finally his horse poked his nose out the back end of the trailer. Mack held an apple in his hand to coax Torpedo all the way out.

Several more trailers behind her, all she heard was Liam's loud cussing. "You stubborn donkey, move your arse."

Calla laughed and walked Painter around the trailer. "Good girl," Calla said again, running her hand down Painter's long neck.

And then Calla froze. Her head jerked to look down at her leg.

Her thigh muscle was spasming crazily underneath her jeans.

She blinked, her breath catching. She flexed her leg and the muscle stopped jumping. She breathed out.

Then it started up again.

Calla shook her leg and jumped up and down. She grabbed her foot from behind and pulled it toward her butt to stretch her quads.

After a few seconds stretching, she let go and stared at her thigh.

Painter shifted and snorted beside her, nosing at Calla.

"Hush," Calla muttered, shooing Painter away as she glared at her leg. Would it spasm again? If it did, did that mean—? Was this the first sign that she had Huntin—?

"Well look what we have here. The tomboy slut shows her face in public."

Calla squeezed her eyes shut at the voice coming from behind her. "Not now, Bethany."

"What'd you have to do to earn the gas money to get here? There are five guys who work out there, right? Do they each like, have a night? Or do they just fuck you whenever they want? Or all at once? Jesus, that's be a five-some. Or a six-some if you count that mutant-freak giant who runs the place.

I'm surprised you're still walking upright."

Calla spun around, ready to let Bethany have it when she heard someone beating her to the punch.

"I've met some real bitches in me life," Liam said from behind Bethany, his horse in tow. "But don't think I ever met one as maggoty as you."

"Wait, no," Bethany sputtered, spinning around. "I was just— That was out of context." She laughed and waved a hand. "Calla and I just joke around like that sometimes. Crude, but you know—" She waved her hand again, eyes wide and desperate. "It's just a joke. Calla knows that."

"That true?" Liam asked Calla.

Calla glared at Bethany. "No. She's just a bitch." She clicked her teeth at Painter and led her away from Bethany, who kept sputtering about how it was all a misunderstanding.

But Calla didn't feel any vindication at finally having a witness to Bethany's true character.

Her leg. She kept sneaking glances down at her thigh as she walked. She didn't think it was spasming anymore. It was hard to tell while she was walking.

People get muscle spasms for all kinds of reasons. Dehydration. Not having enough magnesium in their diet.

"You all right, baby? Don't let anythin' that slag said get to ya."

Calla nodded jerkily. "Oh, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Just got us all signed in." Mack came over to them. "We're up in fifteen with the second group. I've just got to get Torpedo from where Xavier's holding h—" He paused, looking between Liam and Calla. "What's wrong. Did something happen?"

"Yeah, some blonde skank came around telling Cal—"

"Nothing," Calla cut Liam off. "Just some trash talking. That's all." She narrowed her eyes at Liam. "Let's just focus on the competition. Clear heads."

Mack's eyes softened. "You got this, babydoll." He reached out and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. "Nothing to worry about."

"Hell yeah, she's got it. Now, second place is a different story. Hopefully there are enough police nearby to hold back the rioting when an Irishman walks away with the trophy."

Calla rolled her eyes while Mack scoffed. "I'm shocked you managed to

get that animal off the trailer. Look at her.” Mack gestured to Liam’s horse. “She looks like she’s gonna bolt any second.”

Calla glanced Mistress’s way and Mack wasn’t wrong. The way her eyes were wild and searching, it was obvious all the noise and fuss of the field where everyone had parked was putting her on edge. Calla kept telling Liam he needed to do more desensitizing training with her.

Liam’s eyes narrowed at Mack. “Sometimes it’s all about the superior rider.”

Calla shook her head. Seeing them today, she’d hardly believe these were the same two men who’d been caressing each other and sharing such intimate experiences as little as three nights ago. Calla had been going to bed early to get ready for the trials but the boys were always like this. Everything a competition. But when they stepped in the bedroom, it was like they became different people. Or maybe that was the *real* them and all this bluster was the façade.

Calla glanced down at her thigh again. It was still.

Okay. It was just a false alarm. Right? Her throat went dry.

Today. Today is all that matters.

And today she was going to show that she was training up a prizewinning mare. Time to get her head in the game. “Where’s the starting area?”

The guys stopped glaring at each other long enough for Mack to gesture behind him toward a cluster of people and horses.

Twenty minutes later, Calla, Liam, Mack and a group of about five others that unfortunately included Bethany grouped together near the start of the trail.

“Ready,” the trail master called out, “Set. Mount up and go!”

Calla put her foot in the left stirrup and smoothly hiked herself up into the saddle. She only spared one glance behind her to see Liam get his foot in the saddle and then his horse started forward before he could get his leg over. He jumped back to the ground and tried again with the same result. He didn’t give up and drop back down this time, though. He held on, standing with one foot in the stirrup as Mistress turned in circles, teeth snapping in Liam’s direction.

Calla turned forward, trying to choke back her laugh. She clenched her thighs around Painter to get her moving, noting both Bethany and Mack and a couple others already had their seats too.

“Stand still, you manky mongrel,” she heard Liam growl as Calla urged

Painter into a trot down the trail head. She was third but the path was wide for a little while and she quickly passed a man and headed for the leader. Bethany's long blonde ponytail bobbed ahead in the distance.

"Let's go, Paint. We got this."

They were almost on Bethany's heels before she looked over her shoulder to glare at Calla. Her mouth dropped open and she looked infuriated before her long ponytail whipped around as she looked forward again.

Just in time, too, because they were coming up on the first obstacle. The trail narrowed slightly and several downed trees had been laid across the trail. Bethany barely stopped in time for her horse not to trip but Calla had plenty of time to transition Painter from a trot to a walk.

Bethany had brought out a crop and was smacking the back of her mustang's rump, finally urging her over the first log.

Ignore her. Painter was all that mattered right now.

Calla clicked her tongue and made sure Painter could see the obstacles. Then, just like they practiced every day at home, she led Painter to lift her legs and feel her way over the objects in her path. Out of the corner of her eye, Calla could see the judges standing off in the trees. Probably the only thing that kept Bethany from cussing her out.

Because by the time she'd led Painter over the last tree trunk, she was in the lead. Calla allowed herself a brief smile before tightening her thighs to send Painter on down the trail. She heard noise behind her—Bethany had probably gotten her horse over the logs and more riders had arrived at the first obstacle—but she tried to block it out.

Next came a willow tree with sweeping branches that she had to guide Painter through blind. It was an exercise in trust and Painter came through brilliantly.

She didn't pause to celebrate though because even though she only looked over her shoulder a couple times and only glimpsed Bethany once, she knew Bethany would be pulling out all the stops to beat her.

She and Painter had to be perfect.

They had to be nearing the end of the trail. They'd been through nine or ten obstacles already. Calla had lost count. She'd just finished with the gate obstacle and her entire focus was on finishing strong.

The next obstacle was a rocky embankment that led down to a stream. Calla led Painter down slowly, letting her get a secure foothold with each step. By the time she was at the bottom, she heard voices behind her and

rocks tumbling as other riders made it there.

Crap. She knew she'd lost time on the gate. On the stupidest thing, too. She'd had to fiddle with the damn latch because it wouldn't catch the first few times she tried it.

Calla urged Painter into the little stream at the bottom of the embankment. Her impulse was to rush but she tamped it down. Painter's safety was always primary. While the first part of the stream was shallow enough that she could clearly see the bottom, white water rushed on the far side.

It probably wasn't deep. They wouldn't make it too risky for a competition like this, but still. There weren't any streams around the Kent ranch and this was one thing she hadn't been able to train Painter for directly.

But when she gave Painter her head, she strode into the water confidently. About five feet in, it went from ankle deep to about a foot and a half, but Painter didn't even falter.

"All right, girl. Now for a little deeper." Calla leaned back in the saddle as Painter took a step into the deeper white water. Her hoof slipped and she scrambled, letting out a short squeal.

"That's all right," Calla said calmly, letting Painter come to a stop so she could feel sure-footed. Calla reached forward and rubbed her neck. "You're all right. You're all right." Then she clicked her teeth and kept her thighs firm around Painter to keep her going forward. "Just a little bit more and we're done."

She knew her staying calm and keeping on would help Painter do the same and they were closer to the far shore than the one behind them.

The clatter of rocks and voices got even louder behind Calla, followed by splashes, but she didn't look back.

Painter took an uncertain step forward. "That's right, girl. You're doing so good. Such a smart, good girl."

Calla kept talking her through it and only moments later, they'd made it to the shore.

Clapping sounded in the distance and when Calla looked ahead, she realized the end of the trail was just ahead. They'd made it. She grinned as she nudged Painter up the muddy embankment, about to urge her into a trot toward the finish line when—

A roaring horse scream from behind her had her whipping around to see what happened.

Torpedo. He was reared up on his hind legs and—

“Mack!” she screamed. Mack struggled for a moment to keep his seat on Torpedo but the horse was too spooked. Both horse and rider fell backwards into the water.

“*Mack!*” Calla dismounted and ran back into the water.

Torpedo rolled to his side and got back to his feet but Mack was still down. Bethany and her horse ran by at the same time.

“Mack!” Calla screamed again, slogging through the knee-high water to get to him. Oh God, if anything had—

She reached him at the same time he sat up, sputtering and spitting water.

“Oh my God. Mack.” She flung her arms around him. She was immediately soaked but she didn’t care. He could be hurt. Oh God. She yanked back and looked at him. “Are you okay? Oh God. Does anything hurt? Can you feel your toes? Follow my finger with your eyes.”

She raised her forefinger and moved it back and forth in front of his face.

He grabbed her hand and pulled it out of his face. “I’m fine.”

Then he winced. Obviously *not* freaking fine.

“Is he okay?” Calla looked up to see Bethany on her horse, standing in the rapids and looking back at them. Since when was Bethany human?

“I’m fine,” Mack muttered, hefting himself to his feet. Water sluiced down from his body but thank God, he didn’t seem to have broken anything.

“What happened?”

“Is he okay?”

More and more riders were arriving and seeing Mack unhorsed. Several of the judges had come to the edge of the stream as well.

Out of her periphery, Calla noticed Bethany take off. In the direction of the finish line. Calla rolled her eyes. So much for human.

“Are you okay to walk?” Calla asked Mack. “I’ll get Torpedo.”

Mack nodded, wincing again as he took a few steps into the deeper water.

“He’s okay!” someone behind them called out and there were cheers and clapping.

Calla got Torpedo’s lead and he walked through the stream, no problem. Mack was standing on the shore, hands on his knees.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Calla asked when she got to him.

He immediately reached for Torpedo and the horse nosed toward him like he too wanted to make sure Mack was all right.

“What even happened?” Calla asked, staring at Torpedo in bewilderment.

“Fuck if I know. He must have got spooked by that blond chick’s horse when she went past. We were doing fine until then.”

Bethany. Calla glared open-mouthed toward the finish line. But no. Surely she wouldn’t try to— Not just to win a piddly little competition like this?

Calla shook her head, dismissing the thought. Not even Bethany was that twisted. More likely it was something in the stream that had spooked Torpedo. He hadn’t been exposed to a stream like that any more than Painter had. Some horses were bound to spook easier than others. It’d be something they’d have to focus on training him with when they got back to the ranch.

Other riders streamed past them toward the finish line. So much for showing what she and Painter could do.

Then she shook her head at her thoughts. God, what if something *had* happened to Mack? It had been a nasty fall. It was only by the grace of God he was all right. It had looked like Torpedo landed right on top of him.

“You want to just walk Torpedo in?” Calla asked. “It’s not too far.”

Mack glowered. “The saying is literally get back up on the horse.”

Calla held up her hands. “Whatever you say boss.”

“That’s the right attitude.” He smacked her ass and she yelped. “Stop slacking. If we’re not careful, Liam’s gonna beat us and neither of us will ever live that down.”

“Speaking of.” Calla nodded over Mack’s shoulder as she grabbed hold of Painter’s saddle to mount up again.

Liam and Mistress had finally gotten to the stream. Where she’d stopped to take a leisurely drink. Liam’s curses could be heard clear across the stream. “Come on, you poxy cow! Move!”

Calla laughed as she readjusted her seat. *Ugh*. Nothing like the feel of wet jeans on a damp leather saddle.

“He’s gonna kick her flank,” Mack observed, not yet up on Torpedo.

“No,” Calla said. “He knows better. She’s ticklish there.”

Liam kept nudging Mistress with his thighs to get her moving forward, but she ignored him as if he were little more than an annoying gnat.

Mack just shook his head. “He’s gonna do it.”

“He wouldn’t—”

Liam kicked at her flank.

Oh, Calla winced. Mistress leapt forward into the stream. Leaving Liam behind. He popped right off the back of her rump. And landed hard on his.

Ow.

“Wild-eyed bitch threw me!” Liam jumped back to his feet, holding his backside.

“Calla and Xavier have both told you a hundred times not to kick her flank,” Mack called out across the stream.

Liam looked around like he was searching for the voice. When he finally located Mack, he flipped him off.

Calla groaned. “Xavier’s gonna be so proud of how we’re representing him today.” She shook her head and turned Painter toward the finish line as more and more riders rode past. Her shoulders shrank.

People from the group that had started ten minutes *after* theirs were passing them now. So much for showing she was a contender. Calla was pretty sure she, Mack and Liam would be coming in last place.

Her future had never been less secure. She thought about her leg tremor. If she had a future at all.

Still, as Liam and Mistress came up and she saw the goofy grin on Liam’s face, her heart clenched with emotion for him.

It was like this every time she felt any moment of happiness or joy. There was always the accompanying terror. It was always there. Whispering this was the best she’d have it and soon it’d all be gone.

Enough.

Calla clicked her teeth to get Painter moving as Mack and Liam started bickering about who did better in each obstacle. She looked back and forth from one man to another.

She was terrified of all the things she wanted with them. Of all the things that might never be. *Enough*. She was done living her life in the shadow of fear.

It was time to know.

It was time to get the test done.

Chapter Twenty-Three

CALLA

“I want to get the test. For Huntington’s.” Calla sat up straighter on the exam table at the doctor’s office. Here she was. Taking the future by the balls. Or, well, at least being willing to own up to it, whatever it might hold. Other than a brief freak-out in the car—Mel let her borrow her little Camry whenever she needed to come into town—she was even managing to keep her shit together.

She fidgeted with her balled fists. Mostly anyway.

“Are you sure?” Dr. Nunez was a middle-aged woman whose hair was only going a little gray at the temple.

Calla nodded. “My employer gives us good insurance so the test would be covered.”

Dr. Nunez’s eyes gentled. “You know it’s not paying for it that concerns me. I’ve referred you to a genetic counselor before. Did you ever go see them?”

Calla shook her head. “Didn’t seem much point if I couldn’t pay for it.” If she was honest, Calla would admit she’d just taken that as an out not to learn if she was positive or negative for HD. If she had the mutated gene that would determine the course of the rest of her life. “Anyway, I’m ready now.” She straightened her back. “I won’t be changing my mind. It’s time to know.”

Dr. Nunez was quiet another moment before finally nodding. “I’ll refer

you to the genetic testing facility in Casper.”

Calla swallowed and nodded. “Good.” Then, eager to change the subject, she asked, “So how’s Savannah doing with her mustang? Savannah’s what, fifteen, sixteen?” There was a junior’s category in the makeover and Calla knew Dr. Nunez’s daughter was competing.

Dr. Nunez smiled. “She’s sixteen. And the summer has been so exciting for her to get hands on experience training a horse. It’s given her something else to do than just watch TV and chase boys.”

Calla smiled and Dr. Nunez put her hand on Calla’s shoulder. “All right, while I work on the referral I’ll have the nurse come in and take some blood. You haven’t been in a few years and I’d like to do a complete physical.”

Calla heard what she wasn’t saying. She wanted to know if she was already exhibiting any symptoms of HD. Calla already told her about her leg spasm. It hadn’t happened since and Dr. Nunez seemed confident it was just a normal spasm due to the physicality of Calla’s job and training schedule. The doctor also suggested she pick up some magnesium supplements. At the same time, when she’d pressed, Dr. Nunez hadn’t been willing to rule out the possibility of it being an indication of early symptom activity completely.

“Okay.” She breathed out.

“And you already gave a urine sample, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Great.” Dr. Nunez patted her shoulder. “We’ll get everything squared away.”

Then she left Calla alone in the small exam room.

She was just flipping through a Horse and Rider magazine when the door opened again. Calla looked up, expecting to see the nurse.

Instead it was Dr. Nunez again. And there was something off about her expression. Calla sat up straighter.

“What? What is it?” Did she see some symptom of HD that Calla hadn’t recognized? Oh God, she knew it. She just knew she had the gene—

Her eyebrows were scrunched together. “Did you know that you’re pregnant?”

“What?” Calla shouted, almost falling off the exam table.

Chapter Twenty-Four

CALLA

Calla felt wobbly on her feet as she walked up the stairs to her dad's nursing home. She'd been living with the reality that she was pregnant for almost an entire week now. She'd been dodging Mack and Liam for most of that time.

And she had no more clue now than when she first heard what the hell she should do about it.

"How is he?" Calla asked one of her dad's nurses once she got inside. *Rita*, by her nametag.

Rita's mouth curved down as her eyebrows lowered in sympathy. "Not so good. Eating's been getting harder for him. Since he was losing so much weight, we had to put him on a feeding tube.

A feeding—? Calla blinked. "Was that really necessary?" She knew he'd been getting skinnier than usual, but still...

Rita put a hand on Calla's arm, eyes full of compassion. "You'll see."

Calla wanted to yank her arm away but managed to stop herself at the last second. She swallowed and tried not to sound like she was gritting her teeth. "Can I go in to see him?"

"Sure, honey. You know the way?"

Calla nodded and then hurried down the hallway not wanting the woman to see her face. A *feeding tube*. The whole reason she was paying this place

so much goddamned money was so that they could assist her dad in things like eating when he wasn't able to do it himself. For God's sake, she knew firsthand how frustrating it could be feeding him spoonful by spoonful, especially when he wasn't in the most cheerful mood about it all. But that's what she was paying them for!

She was still steamed when she reached her dad's room. She knocked and went in. If they couldn't show they could give her father the best care possible, well then she'd take her money somewhere else—

“Daddy?” Her voice cracked when she saw her dad.

He was lying in bed, cheeks sunken and eyes staring listlessly at the television. His head and legs bobbed constantly back and forth with the shakes.

“Hi Daddy.”

He looked her direction, didn't say anything, then moved his head back to face the screen.

“Whatcha watching?”

Calla looked toward the TV. “Wheel of Fortune, huh,” she finally answered for him after a long silence.

“Buy a vowel,” he growled at the screen.

Calla looked at the puzzle on the screen. “Daddy they've already got all the vowels up there.”

He continued ignoring her as one of the contestants solved the puzzle.

“Buy a vowel,” her dad repeated.

Calla's stomach sank. What if the nurse's actions hadn't been extreme. Maybe he was at the point where he needed a feeding tube. He was declining more rapidly. Every time she visited, he was worse, and she came once a week. Was her dad still in there at all?

“New job's working out real good,” she tried as the show went to commercial. “Xavier's a fair boss and I'm training a mustang for the Extreme Horse Makeover. You know I always wanted to do that. I'm getting my shot at it this year. Got a great mare named Painter.”

Her dad didn't say anything, just kept staring at the screen while a commercial for dishwasher soap played.

“But that's not what I really wanted to talk about today.” She took a deep breath. “Daddy, I'm pregnant.”

She waited a beat.

And then another.

Still nothing from her father.

She gave him another moment. Sometimes it took him longer to process things than the average person.

But Wheel of Fortune came back from commercial and still he hadn't said anything to her.

"But I don't know what to do, Daddy," she whispered, swallowing back against the tears that threatened. God, she didn't even know whose baby it was. Her cheeks burned with shame. She'd gone bareback with Liam that time in the shower, but there'd been a couple times when Mack had pulled out early and from what she'd read online, it was rarer but still possible to get pregnant from pre-cum.

Doctors had told her for years she'd have difficulty getting pregnant if she ever tried because of her irregular cycles. For her to have ovulated at the perfect moment on any of those few specific incidents with the guys seemed so unlikely as to be, well... *miraculous*.

If only it wasn't simultaneously the worst news Calla had ever gotten in her life.

"What if the baby has it?" Calla took a step toward her dad, swiping at her eyes as she went. "I got the blood taken for the test earlier today. It'll take three weeks to find out if I test positive or not. But even if I'm negative, there's still a twenty-five percent chance the baby could still have it."

"Buy a vowel," Dad said again, eyes glued to the TV.

"Daddy." Calla swallowed hard against the tears. "Please. I don't know what to do. The father isn't planning to be in the picture." The Horse Makeover Competition was only weeks away. Mack hadn't said anything about his plans changing. He was leaving, and it was only a matter of time before Liam moved on too.

"If it turns out I'm positive, then maybe I should think about..." Calla balled her fists and looked to the floor. God, she hated even thinking it. But what kind of life could she really give a child if she was going to get sick in a few years? At least she and Dad had had the ranch, for as long as it lasted. But her child wouldn't have anything. It would be cruel to bring them into the world knowing what was in store for—

"Did you hear me, Daddy?" she said louder. "I'm pregnant."

Another commercial came on, and still he didn't look her way.

"Dammit, Daddy, can you hear me?"

She moved to his bed and grabbed the remote from his nightstand. She

pushed the power button so the TV snapped off behind her.

That definitely got his attention. He roared and reached for the remote, his movements jerky and uncoordinated. The sudden movement rolled him over in the bed. The only reason he didn't fall off was because of the side rails.

"TV," he screamed. "TV!"

Calla backed up, her thumb fumbling on the remote until she finally hit the button to turn the television back on.

"TV!"

"It's on. I turned it back on!"

Her dad kept shouting, unintelligible words occasionally interspersed with *TV*. A nurse came through the door and Calla looked at her helplessly. "I'm sorry."

"Howard," the nurse said, reaching for her dad's shaking shoulders. "Howard, look over here." She physically directed him so that he faced the television. "That's right. That's right, Howard," she soothed like he was a small child.

That was Calla's breaking point.

Not just because she knew now she'd truly lost her Dad and there might never be time to make it right between them.

But because she saw herself in that bed. Fifteen, twenty years from now. Being held down by a nurse while she spewed demented ramblings. Having lost control of her own body.

She turned around and fled like a coward.

Chapter Twenty-Five

LIAM

Liam pushed his extra-large cart with the pallet of feed toward the front of the supply store, looking for Jeremiah as he went. They'd headed in different directions after coming in. Jer was headed to get some wood for fence repair and Liam wondered if he'd—

“Oh hi!” came a chirpy voice. “I thought that was your truck I saw parked out front.”

Liam looked down to see the fake-tanned blonde who'd insulted Calla at the Trail Trial the other day. He frowned and tried to move his heavy cart around her but she just stepped in his path again.

“It takes a lot of man to handle that much truck.” She smiled flirtatiously. “I thought about getting that model but Daddy talked me into the Ford F450 Crew Cab.” She rolled her eyes and shrugged. “Yes, it was more expensive, but I always say, never scrimp on the important things.” She beamed at Liam.

“You're in me way,” was all he said, gesturing to his cart.

“You're not still upset about what you overheard the other day, are you?” Her eyes went big and she put a hand to her chest. No doubt to emphasize the cleavage spilling out of the tight red top she was wearing. “I've been so embarrassed about that ever since. My Mama would've washed my mouth out with soap if she'd overheard me.” She waved a hand. “It was just a harmless joke but I totally understand if poor Cal took it wrong. I'll apologize

to her again the next time I see her. I just think of her as one of the guys but it was wrong of me not to be more considerate of her feelings.”

“Anyway,” she sidled closer to Liam’s side, ignoring the way he jerked back when her arm brushed his. “Liam, like I said, I’ve felt so bad about the misunderstandings we’ve had the last couple times we’ve talked. I wanted to invite you out to my place where we could spend some alone time and really get to know each other. I’ve got a big stretch of land and a jacuzzi out back that will help relax these muscles.”

She moved and put her hands on his shoulders.

What the— He jerked away from her touch again. Could she not get a fucking clue?

“Oh! See? You’ve got so much tension back there. The jacuzzi will loosen you right up.” She leaned in. “I know there aren’t a lot of places around here to enjoy the finer things in life, but I’ve got a bottle of Chateau Margaux that I have just been *dying* to split with someone who would appreciate it.”

“I guess I didn’t make meself clear enough last time. This is biscuits to a bear.” At her confused expression, he clarified. “A waste of *time*. I will never, not ever, want to spend any time with you.”

“But you wanted me,” she sputtered. “That night at Bubba’s. We had a connection. I know if you would just give me a—”

“Are you feckin’ delusional?” he asked incredulously. Jaysus. “You were a cow to me girl, Calla. To be honest, breathing the same air as you is makin’ me a bit nauseated.” He scrunched his nose up to give further effect. “I wouldn’t get with you if you were the last woman on earth and sleepin’ with you meant the survival of the human race. I’d still find you too disgustin’ to lay me hands on. Me cock would shrivel up and fall off first.”

The woman’s mouth dropped open and then her face went quickly red with rage. Liam waited for the slap. Perhaps he’d taken it a tad too far there, but he wanted to get it through the poxy bitch’s head once and for all.

“Did I miss something?”

The woman’s head swung over to Jeremiah as he pushed his cart closer and looked between her and Liam with raised eyebrows.

“I— He—” The woman sputtered several more times before making an infuriated high-pitched noise, turning on her high-heeled boots and stalking off toward the front of the store.

Liam just shrugged his shoulders when Jeremiah leveled his gaze on him.

“What?” he said. “The ladies love me. Sometimes I’ve got to beat them off with the proverbial stick.”

“Remind me never to make you my wing man.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Liam rolled his eyes. “Come on, let’s get going.” Calla spent the day in Casper visiting her dad and Liam wanted to be there when she got back.

* * *

Getting the rest of their supplies took longer than Liam would’ve liked and they didn’t get home for another hour and a half. It was nine o’clock but Calla still wasn’t home yet.

Liam jogged up the stairs and headed for Mack’s room. Calla hadn’t texted him anything, but maybe Mack had heard from her.

Liam had just pushed Mack’s door open the slightest bit when he heard Mack’s voice. Liam frowned, pausing. Mack never had anyone in his room. Liam leaned his ear to the door and realized it was just a one-sided conversation.

“—don’t have any more info about what he’s been up to since he got out?”

Silence.

“Laying low? What the fuck does that mean?”

It must be a phone conversation, because there was another brief pause before Mack’s voice sounded again.

“Do you have a location or not?”

Pause.

“Okay.” There was scuffling like Mack was reaching for a pen and paper. “But you don’t know if he’s still at Franco’s or if he— Well Jesus, Sammy, what the fuck am I sending you three g’s a month for?”

A sigh from Mack. “Yeah, yeah. I know. I’m sorry. This shit’s just got me on edge. You know I appreciate you, Sam. Look after Brenda and Sammy Jr. I’ll be in touch.”

Footsteps sounded and Liam pulled back from the door. But it didn’t open. Just more footsteps. Mack was pacing. He did that when he got antsy. Liam could just see the way he was probably stretching his jaw and shoulders.

He'd definitely be coming to Liam's room tonight. He always did on days he got tense like that—well, as long as Calla came first. Mack never came without Calla.

Just another one of the many mysteries that was Mack.

Along with—who was Mack on the phone with? Someone he was sending three grand a month for information. About who? Why? And where the hell did he get that kind of cash?

Liam's eyes cut back to the door and he knocked on it.

“What?” came Mack's growling reply.

Liam smirked and pushed the door open.

Mack glared his direction. “What do you want?”

Liam *tsked*. “How was your day, Liam? Oh, really? How interesting. Tell me more.”

“Cut the shit.” Mack narrowed his eyes.

Liam laughed out loud. “And to think,” he said, closing the door behind him as he stepped into Mack's room, “it's taken me this long to learn to appreciate your bracing honesty. It's okay, big guy.” He smacked Mack on the shoulder. “This is an open sharing space. Tell me how you really feel. I won't judge.”

He walked past Mack further into the room when he didn't say anything. He lifted the lid of Mack's laptop. “Any good porn on here?”

Mack slammed it shut. “What. Do. You. Want?”

“Jaysus, it must be exhaustin' being so damn serious all the time.”

“It's called being a grown up. You should try it sometime.”

Liam gasped. “Touché.” Then he dropped the act. “Have you heard from Calla? She's not back yet.”

Mack's eyebrows went up, finally exhibiting another emotion than annoyance at Liam's presence.

“I've tried calling her but she's not picking up.”

Mack shrugged. “You know how spotty service is around here. Even if she did have a signal, she's smart enough not to pick up while she drives. Unlike *some* people, she doesn't treat traffic laws like suggestions.”

“Ha. Ha. I'm serious. She's never this late.”

“What time is it?” Mack asked.

“Nine.”

“I don't like it.” Liam felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle at finally admitting it out loud. He walked over to the window and put his hands

around his eyes to peer out into the darkness. “Anything could happen out there on the road. The deer are fecking suicidal around here. I had two jump in front of me car just last week.”

“Yeah, well,” Mack said, grabbing his laptop and sitting down with it on his bed, “she’s driven these roads all her life. Pretty sure she knows what she’s doing.”

Liam glared at Mack. “Do you have an emotional bone in your feckin’ body? Our girl is out there, God knows where, and you’re just gonna sit there and what?” Liam reached for the laptop again. “Check your Instagram feed?”

Mack jerked the laptop away at the last second and closed the lid again. “Why are you here again? I don’t buy any of this concerned Prince Charming bullshit.” He gestured Liam up and down.

“Why do ya always have to be such a poxy bastard about everything? Jaysus. Did your mother drop you on your head as a small child or somethin’?”

“That’s it,” Mack growled. He tossed his laptop to the side and got to his feet.

“Ooo,” Liam said, putting a hand over his mouth. “The big scary man is comin’ for me. Run for me life!”

Liam grinned when Mack’s glare went a shade darker. At least pissin’ with him would help distract Liam from worrying about Calla.

Besides, he only had a few more weeks of this. Fuckin’ with Mackenzie Knight whenever he pleased. After that, Mack would move on, and it would just be him and Calla.

Which was good. It was what he’d wanted in the first place. To get the girl.

So why did the thought of never seeing the big angry bastard in front of him feel like a kick to his gut?

The thought had the smile falling from Liam’s face. Did he actually *care* about—

Jaysus. *No.*

He wasn’t that much of a fecking idiot. Or a masochist.

Right as Mack grabbed for Liam’s shirt, Liam jumped back and heard the sound of the front door slamming below.

“Calla,” he and Mack said at the same time, their gazes locking. Good. Time to put this back on familiar fecking territory. With Calla firmly between them.

They both went for the door at the same time. Mack got there first, the wanker. He met Calla halfway down the stairs.

“You okay, honey? You’re late. We were worried.”

Liam rolled his eyes. What a crock of shite.

He ignored Mack and joined them.

“Did you have any trouble on the road? Are you hungry? We kept a plate of food for you in the fridge.”

“For Christ’s sake, she just walked in the door.” Mack shoved Liam to the side so he could pass by with Calla on his arm. “Let her breathe before firing twenty fucking questions.”

Liam would have tried to batter the bastard, but Calla was leaning on him like she was glad for the support.

Shite. Something *was* wrong. Liam knew it. She hadn’t been acting herself all week. Something was off.

“I ate on the road.” Calla’s voice was little more than a whisper and it sounded scratchy. Like she’d been crying. Liam’s head jerked up to Mack and he nodded. He heard it too. “I’m just tired.”

Why wasn’t she confiding in them?

Mack didn’t lead Calla to her room. Instead, he took her straight to Liam’s. The rest of the guys were downstairs watching a game and at this point, Liam didn’t care if anyone saw them. Calla needed them and it wasn’t like the twins or Nicholas were gossips.

Liam suspected Xavier knew something of what was going on, but if he did, he wasn’t saying anything about it either.

Mack led her to Liam’s bed and sat her down while Liam shut the door behind them. He hurried over to Calla and sat beside her on the bed, grabbing her hand in his. It was ice cold. He rubbed it between his palms.

“Baby, what’s going on? Talk to us.”

“Nothing,” she answered, too quickly.

“You’re a bad liar,” Mack said gently, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear. She wore it down more and more often.

Calla’s hazel eyes flashed up to them before dropping back down to her lap. She bit her bottom lip and her throat moved as she swallowed hard. “It’s my dad... he’s... really sick.” She covered her face with her hands and her back started shaking. “I don’t think he even recognized me.”

“Shh, come here.” Mack pulled her into his chest. Liam moved up close against her back. Jaysus, she felt so fragile between them. Her body shook

like a leaf as she sobbed.

Liam shared another worried glance with Mack and then wrapped his arms around her so that she was enclosed all the way around by them.

Finally she pulled back from Mack's chest, tear tracks fresh on her cheeks. She looked first at Mack, then at Liam.

"I just want to forget. Please. Can you help me forget for tonight?"

"Baby," Liam said, rubbing a comforting hand down her spine. "are you sure you don't want to—"

Calla turned in their arms and cut Liam off with a kiss. She wasn't shy about it either. The more nights they all spent together, the bolder she'd grown. More and more she told them exactly where and how she wanted to be touched. What made her feel good. Watching her come to life sexually had been one of the most fucking amazing things Liam had ever witnessed.

So Liam trusted her to know what she needed right now and he kissed her back. Her hands immediately started scrabbling at the bottom of his shirt. He obliged by pulling it off over his head. Her hands roamed up his chest. And then down, her deft little fingers tugging at his button.

"Jaysus, woman," Liam groaned into her hot little mouth.

Mack nestled his nose into her neck from behind. "Christ you smell good," he murmured. "Like some kind of flower."

Calla laughed a little, hiccupping as tears still fell and she turned around to kiss Mack. Liam followed and kissed the salty tears from her cheeks.

"Beautiful Calla," he whispered. "Goddess Calla."

"Come here," Mack murmured, taking her hand and tugging her in the direction of the bed. She followed, arms around his neck. She kept kissing him while they moved. Liam stayed with her too, nuzzling his nose into the back of her neck.

Mack tugged her t-shirt off over her head and Liam undid the bra clasp at her back, sliding it down her shoulders. Next Mack worked on the button of her jeans before tugging them down, too. Between them, they had her undressed in under a minute.

Mack was gentle as he pushed her back on the bed. She arched up so she could keep kissing him. It was like she couldn't bear to lose contact for even a second. She reached out for Liam the next moment, moving from Mack's lips to his.

He frowned but kissed her deep. She seemed frantic. Was it just her dad she was upset over? How long had she been crying? She'd been gone all day.

He hated to think of her crying while she'd been driving the dark roads between here and Casper.

"Baby," he started but she just shook her head like she was anticipating any of the many questions he had.

"I want you tonight." She looked from Liam to Mack. "I'm ready. I want you both at the same time."

Mack's eyes shot to Liam. Did she mean—

"I've been stretching myself," she continued, eyes cast down like she was embarrassed. "Every night. I wanted it to be a surprise." Her gaze flicked between Liam and Mack. "But I can't wait anymore. I want to feel you both at once. I need it."

Shite. She *did* mean—

Mack's eyebrows furrowed. "I don't want to hurt you—"

"You won't," Calla hurried to say. "I told you. I've been stretching."

"With what?" Liam asked. Did she really know what she was asking? Did she think just stretching herself with a finger was anywhere near—

She licked her lips and looked down again. "Just a small toy. I've had it for a while."

Liam could only stare at her.

"Holy shit, that's the hottest fucking thing I've ever heard," Mack growled, grabbing Calla and kissing her roughly. Liam had to agree. Even the idea of her playing with her arse like that each night to get herself ready for them—Jaysus, his cock throbbed at the image.

Mack pulled her until they were both laying down. But then he rolled Calla so that she was facing Liam.

"Eat her out," Mack ordered Liam. "I want her cunt sopping, you hear me?"

Liam bristled at being ordered around. He mock saluted. "Yes, sir."

Mack leveled him with a glare but Liam ignored him, kissing down Calla's body. "Open up, baby," he said when he came to the apex of her thighs. He coaxed her to lift one leg and Jaysus—her scent hit him along with a wave of lust.

He licked down her cleft and buried his tongue inside her cunt.

Her body shuddered and she reached down to bury a hand in his hair. Christ, he loved how responsive she was. It wasn't just a show she was putting on for him, either. Every reaction he and Mack wrung from Calla's body was the genuine article.

He moved up to lick around her clit when her fingernails dug into his scalp. He pulled back the slightest bit and saw Mack behind her. He was doing something to her that was driving her crazy.

Shite, was that how she reacted when someone played with her arse?

Liam moved his hand around to her back entrance, wanting to feel what Mack was doing. His hand collided with Mack's. Mack didn't push him away. Liam felt down Mack's arm covered in wiry hair all the way to his hand. Then to his fingers.

Jaysus, he had two buried in Calla's arse. He'd lubed them up because they were slick. He had them shoved in past the second knuckle. He worked them in and out, in and out.

Liam sucked more furiously at her clit.

"Come for us honey," Mack growled. "Give us your first one just like this."

Calla threw her own hand over her mouth to stifle her cries as she climaxed, thrusting her cunt into Liam's face over and over.

He lapped up every drop of her, loving how crazy they could drive her. He kept sucking on her clit until her body had gone lax with only little aftershocks occasionally making her legs jerk.

He pulled back and looked to Mack.

"All right, honey," Mack said. "I'm gonna lower you on me. You need to slow down or stop, you just say so. You got me?"

Calla looked over her shoulder at Mack and nodded, biting her bottom lip.

"You nervous, baby?" Liam asked, cupping her face and drawing her back around to look at him while Mack stacked up all the pillows at the head of the bed and sat back against them.

She shook her head. "I know you'll take care of me."

Her hazel eyes were full of such trust, it about knocked Liam on his arse. Who was this girl to put so much trust in him? He was a poncy little shite who'd never appreciated all the privileges he'd been given his whole life.

Mack lifted her by her waist so she was straddling him in reverse cowgirl position. Calla crouched and Liam held her hands to help her balance. His breath quickened as he looked around her and saw Mack smear lube up and down his long cock. Then he took it and positioned himself at Calla's arse.

"Here we go, baby." Liam kissed Calla as Mack fed his cock into her arse. Liam felt the second Mack penetrated—Calla gasped and her hands

squeezed Liam's.

"That's right. You're doing so good, honey," Mack said from below them. His hands were on Calla's waist, lowering her down onto himself.

"I'm going in another inch. Fuck you feel good. So fuckin' tight." Mack's voice was strained in a way Liam had never heard before.

Liam pulled back from kissing Calla to look over her shoulder at Mack. His face was red, veins standing at attention on both his neck and his forehead, it was taking so much for him to hold back.

"Look what you're doing to him," Liam whispered to Calla, kissing down her neck to her breast. "You're driving both of us insane." He rubbed his cock into her stomach. He wanted her hands on him but he didn't want to take her attention off the feel of Mack taking her virgin arse.

"Christ," Mack bit out through clenched teeth. "Calla. *Fuck.*" He took a huge heaving breath as he settled Calla even deeper. Her eyes popped open wide and she gasped again, swallowing hard.

"You alright?" Liam asked.

She nodded frantically. "It's just— I've never felt anything—" She huffed out a short laugh. "It's like nothing I've ever felt before." A concentrated look came over her face.

"Christ honey, you clench on me like that again and I'm gonna fucking lose it."

Calla looked entirely pleased with herself. She was so feckin' adorable. Liam went back up on his knees so he could kiss her deep.

She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him up and into her. His cock bobbed against where she was slick and he groaned low.

"Now you," Mack said. "Take her pussy. Let her feel both of us at once."

Liam pulled away from Calla to reach over to open the nightstand drawer. He was surprised when Calla put her hand on his arm. Her eyes were hesitant, then shadowed. "You don't have to. Wear one. I'm— It won't—"

Liam put his hand under her chin. "Never be shy with me, baby. You telling me it's safe because your monthly's off?"

She nodded, eyes still down.

"Baby that's the best news I've heard all week." The thought of having her bare made his cock stiffen so much it was almost painful.

"Get inside her," Mack growled. "I need to move."

Liam smiled lazily at Mack. "Can't rush seduction." He took his cock in hand and brushed it up and down against Calla's pussy lips.

“Jaysus, she’s so wet,” he whispered.

“Then get the fuck inside her. I want her stuffed full. She’s ours and she needs to know what that feels like.”

Calla made a little needy whine at that and her hazel eyes were full of need when Liam looked at her.

Feckin’ hell, he couldn’t stand it another second. He lifted her left leg up and shoved home.

“*Oh*,” she gasped, her eyes going wide again.

This must be what heaven felt like. Right here, hiding in plain sight—*heaven*. This feeling. These two people. His cock buried to the hilt in Calla with Mack up her arse, all their limbs tangled up together.

Liam pushed Calla’s body down until she was laying back against Mack’s chest. He lifted her leg up over his shoulder, pulled back and then thrust back in. He hissed through his teeth at how good it felt.

Calla turned her head to the side and Mack met her lips greedily. They were both so hot. When Mack moved his hips, Liam could feel both Calla *and* Mack— Jaysus, it was—

Calla turned back to Liam and then her lips were on his. He’d swear he could taste Mack on her.

And it was like she read his mind. Because she pulled back from him and cupped his cheeks. Her eyes closed and her mouth dropped open, head tipping back as he and Mack continued fucking her. She sucked in a quick breath and then her eyes opened. And, still holding his cheeks, she pulled him forward.

But not to her own lips.

She put her hand on the back of his neck and pulled him until he was bent over her shoulder. Face to face with Mackenzie.

“Kiss him,” Calla whispered, her chest heaving between them. “This is all of us. Feel it. *Oh God*. I want you to feel it *all*.”

Liam looked to Mack, alarmed. No. He and Mack weren’t like that. Sure he’d let Mack fuck him that time, and *maybe* he’d sucked Mack’s dick a few *more* times—but that was just animal. Bodies fucking. That was all they were to each other.

But when Mack took over for Calla gripping the back of Liam’s neck and his lips crashed against Liam’s, everything he thought he knew flew out the window.

Mack’s jaw was rough with five-o-clock shadow and his lips were hard

and thin. Nothing like Calla's giving softness. But Mack kissed him like... Like he wanted to fucking own him.

Liam's eyes had dropped closed but they flew open again and he pulled back from Mack.

Wrong move.

Because that meant he was looking Mack straight in the eye. And what he saw there— Jaysus. Did Mack really— Want *him*? Want him like *that*? Liam blinked, confused even as he thrust even more forcefully into Calla, matching Mack's hips.

Christ. So good. Like nothing he'd ever—

"You're both mine," Mack snarled, reaching around Calla to grasp Liam's waist.

"Yours," Calla gasped, rolling and grinding her hips against Liam. "Oh, it's coming." Her body was slick with sweat between them.

"Give it to us," Mack said, withdrawing and then jerking his hips back up beneath her. She jolted every time and all the lines of her face went taut as she chased her pleasure.

"Not yet," Liam said, thrusting even more furiously. He looked back and forth from Calla's face to Mack's. He couldn't decide who he wanted to watch as climax came closer and closer. What he really wanted was to hold it off forever. To stay right here in this moment of before, all of them connected, right on that edge of fucking bliss with both of them.

He stilled inside Calla for a moment, focusing only on the slight friction provided when Mack's cock thrust up her arse and knocked against the wall where Liam's cock was buried. It was too much for him. He had to start thrusting after that.

"Baby." Liam had said it to Calla, but Mack's eyes met his again.

"I know," she said, lifting one hand behind her and hooking it around Mack's neck. She drew Liam close with the other.

Their heads all came together, sweat and breaths mingling. Liam's chest went tight. He didn't know what he— This all felt too—

"Now," Mack said.

Calla was the first to lose it. The way her pussy squeezed around Liam's cock, he couldn't help but to lunge forward as deep as he could in response. He dropped his head over Calla's shoulder. Mack met him there, kissing him, and when the very tips of their tongues touched—

Liam roared into Mack's mouth with the rush of his climax. Mack

swallowed it all and drew even more out of him.

Liam pulled out and pushed in again, and then again. No. He wasn't ready to let it go. Just a little longer. A little bit more—

Calla clenched around him and he broke away from Mack so he could kiss her. After the roughness of Mack's mouth, her soft lips felt even more sensuous. He could spend a lifetime comparing and contrasting the different ways their mouths felt and tasted.

He brushed his thumb over Calla's breasts and her body gave another shudder. Liam moved his hand beneath her and traced down from Mack's collar bone to his nipple. So much smaller and tighter. He plucked at it and got a slap to the arse for it.

Liam yelped and glared at Mack. Calla laughed at them and rolled with Liam to the side. Mack was spooned behind her and she snuggled her head on his bicep. She wrapped her arm around Liam's waist and pulled him close.

Liam felt the moment Mack went to pull away. To leave like he always did. Liam's stomach swooped with disappointment.

But then, instead of pulling away from Calla, he shifted to wrap his arm more firmly around her waist.

"Roll over," he ordered gruffly.

Liam was confused for a second. Then he realized Mack was talking to him. He blinked a couple times and rolled over.

Calla scooted up against his back, notching her knees behind his. And then Liam felt the weight of Mack's arm settling over both their waists.

Liam's breath caught.

What did all this mean? And why had tonight felt less like fucking and more like making lo—

He shut down the thought before he could finish it and squeezed his eyes shut. Why the hell was he suddenly looking for meaning in shite? A shag was a shag. That was all there was to it.

But when he finally fell asleep, it was to a restless dream of charging into a burning castle to rescue a princess. Only to get trapped by the flames himself.

Until a certain brawny, tattooed fireman came in and rescued them both.

Chapter Twenty-Six

CALLA

“**A** toast to our three soon-to-be champions!” Mel stood up from the table and clanged the side of her glass with her spoon. It was the night before the Extreme Horse Makeover competition and they’d all come out to a nearby bar and grill on the outskirts of Denver for dinner and drinks. It was no Bubba’s, but it would do in a pinch.

Almost everyone from the ranch sat around the two tables that had been pushed together. They’d all done their normal chores before coming down today and Nicholas was holding down the fort until they got home tomorrow. Mel and Xavier had even brought the kids. Reece was occupying them at the furthest end of the table, the baby in his lap.

Calla leaned into Liam’s side, smiling at Mel.

“Tomorrow Mackenzie, Liam, and Calla will take their mustangs to the Extreme Horse Makeover competition.”

Mel grinned at each one of them in turn. “No matter how much each one sells for at auction, you’re already winners. By training these horses, you’ve made it so they can find forever homes instead of spending another winter starving out there or locked up in the BLM holding facilities. A round of applause to our trainers!”

The table erupted with clapping.

“And a round for the bar, on Mel’s Horse Ranch!” she yelled even louder.

A roar of approval came from the crowd around them, along with clapping and a few wolf whistles.

“Alright now,” Xavier said, pulling Mel down into his lap. “Don’t anybody be getting any ideas. This here’s my woman.”

“Oh I am, am I?” Mel arched an eyebrow at Xavier.

“You bet your ass, babe.”

She grinned and kissed him. Long enough that the table started making a racket and Mel pulled away with an embarrassed blush.

Xavier just laughed and smacked her ass before letting her go.

Calla watched it all with a smile on her face but an ache in her chest. The last few weeks had been nothing short of perfect. Things with Liam and Mackenzie couldn’t be better. Painter was a dream. She’d never been happier in her whole life.

Which was the problem, wasn’t it?

Because for every second of happiness, she heard a ticking clock in the background. Ticking down to the competition. Mack hadn’t said anything about changing his mind about leaving afterwards. There were things he kept from her and Liam, she was sure of it. Important things.

Ha. She was one to talk. Every week that passed, she felt her body changing more and more. The nausea had been mild, thank God for that. But there was a little being growing inside her. One that was part her and part Liam or Mack. Twelve weeks. It was the size of a lime. That was what the website said.

Calla cursed herself for ever looking it up. Now she had to imagine the little lime in there opening and closing their fingers and curling their toes. That was what happened at this stage in development.

How the hell was she supposed to do what she might need to do, knowing that?

The appointment to get the results of her Huntington’s test was next week. Four days and she’d know. Four days and she might have to make the hardest decision of her life.

Under the table, her hand went to her lower stomach. It had just started stretching and protruding slightly. She’d been begging off going to Liam’s room the past week, saying she needed to rest up for the competition. Mel had let her pick through her closet for tonight’s shindig and she’d chosen a dark plum colored *peasant top*. At least that was what Mel had called it. It had a plunging neckline but was loose everywhere else.

From the way Liam kept not so subtly checking out her cleavage, she'd say it was a good choice all around.

The smile died on her lips, though.

She was lying to him. To both of them. They'd never forgive her if they found out. And if she had to—

“You okay?”

“Huh?” Calla looked up to find Mack scrutinizing her.

“Is everything okay?” His eyebrows were furrowed.

“Fine,” she said, aiming for breezy. She wasn't sure she succeeded from the way Mack glanced over her head. No doubt sharing a look with Liam. She both loved and sometimes hated it when they did that. Watching the barriers come down between them in the bedroom was beautiful to watch. But she couldn't say she relished having two times the observational power turned her way, especially lately.

“If we're talking about things to celebrate,” Hunter said, standing up, “Isobel and I have some news.”

Calla looked up, glad to be distracted from her own thoughts. Hunter volunteered each year at the Makeover as an extra on-site veterinarian. Calla had known him forever since they'd both grown up around here, though he was a few years ahead of her in school. She only gotten to know him on a more personal level when he took over for Dr. Roberts at the only large animal veterinarian clinic in two counties. She'd gotten to know his wife Isobel a little over the past year too. She was good for him, had brought the life back into him after everything that happened with his first wife.

“We're pregnant,” Isobel said, beaming as she stood up and hugged Hunter's side.

Calla's smile went brittle.

Pregnant. And they were obviously so happy about it. Of course they were. Everyone around the table congratulated them. Because pregnancies were usually something to celebrate.

“How far along are you?” Mel asked, hand going to her own extended stomach.

“Six months now,” Isobel said. “We find out if it's a boy or girl at our next appointment in a few weeks.”

Mel clapped. “Our babies are going to be twinsies. Ours is due in five and a half.”

Calla took a drink of her sparkling soda to swallow down her jealousy.

Mel's face went sour. "We tried to find out if they were a boy or a girl but they wouldn't give the nurse a clear shot during the ultrasound. I swear," she glared at Xavier, "if you give me another boy—"

Xavier just grinned and held a forkful of potato salad toward his wife's lips.

Mel shoved the fork out of her face. "Which do you want?"

"I want a daughter but Hunter wants a boy."

"Just think about when they're a teenager," Hunter broke in. "If you have a boy you only have to worry about one dick. With a girl you have to worry about *all* the dicks."

Calla almost spit out her soda at that. Isobel smacked Hunter on the arm as everybody laughed.

Calla smiled. Good. She could be happy for Isobel and Hunter. It would be okay. She could keep her emotions in check.

"You're a smart man." Liam fist-bumped Hunter. Then he shook his head, "Jaysus, you're both braver than me. I never want kids."

Calla's chest clenched and she clutched her glass of soda. He *never* wanted kids?

"Never?" Mel echoed her thoughts, one eyebrow arched.

"It would cut into his time staring at himself in the mirror," Mack muttered.

Liam smirked at Mack. "Oh let me guess, you think you'll be father of the year whenever you have kids? All your tattoos on display when you pick them up from preschool?"

Mack held up his hands. "No kids for me either."

Oh don't hold back now. Anyone else want to shove a knife in her guts while they were at it?

Calla's lips pursed and she took another long sip of soda.

"Well I'm having a passel of them," Reece said from the end of the table, leaning in so they could hear him over the noisy restaurant.

"Oh yeah?" Jeremiah looked at his twin. "And how exactly are you going to support them?"

Reece rolled his eyes. "Don't go getting all high and mighty on me just because you're Mr. College now. The rest of us get by just fine. I've got a fool-proof plan, if you must know."

"And that is?" Jeremiah asked.

Reece bounced the baby on his knee and grinned. "I'm gonna marry a

rich woman, obviously. Well,” he bobbed his head, “that’s Plan B anyway. Just in case I don’t win the lottery.”

Jeremiah’s eyebrows lifted. “What concerns me is I can’t tell if you’re serious or not.”

“What?” Reece sounded offended. “I’m a catch.”

Jeremiah snorted but Reece ignored him and went on, “I’ll be the perfect stay-at-home dad while wifey goes off and earns the bacon. And twins run in the family. So we’ll have a few pairs of them. And Liam,” Reece turned toward him, “Don’t think I buy it for one second.”

“What?” Liam popped a handful of beer nuts in his mouth.

“You say you don’t want kids now,” Reece shook his head. “But you’ll feel it one day. Just look at this adorable little guy.” He grinned down at the baby while he spooned some sort of mushy orange goop in his mouth. The baby shook his head back and forth and the spoonful went all down his front.

Then he started wailing while Reece dipped the spoon back into the small jar on the table and made *choo choo* noises as he lifted it back to the baby’s mouth. “Train’s coming. Yummy train is coming!”

Liam just stared on, shaking his head. “Sorry, don’t see meself suddenly deciding I need me eardrums shattered on a regular basis. Or that I really *hate* getting a good night’s sleep every night.”

Isobel smacked Liam on the back of his head.

“Thank you,” Mel smiled at her. “I couldn’t have reached him from all the way over here.”

But Liam just held up his hands. “Hey, I just know me own limitations, that’s all.”

Calla tipped her glass up and drank more. About now she was really wishing there was some actual vodka in her vodka soda, instead of just soda. Soon the cup was empty but she kept it tipped up, not ready to deal with the conversation or anyone at the table yet.

She stood up abruptly. “I’m gonna go get a refill.”

She didn’t wait to hear anyone’s response. She made a beeline for the restroom. She had to get her shit together before she could face anyone or she was gonna freakin’ lose it.

She went straight for the sinks, turned on the tap, and splashed cold water on her cheeks. Then she looked at herself in the mirror.

She barely recognized herself. Mel had helped her put on some mascara and lipstick before they came out, and to style her hair in loose waves. She

backed up from the mirror and ran her hands down her body, breasts to hips. In the purple top and sleek black skirt she'd borrowed from Mel, the illusion was almost complete.

She looked nothing like the Calla who'd walked into Liam leaving Bethany from a bathroom very much like this one.

In a few more months, no one would be mistaking her for a man, that was for sure. She let out a humorless laugh and then leaned her hands on the sink and dropped her head. What the hell was she *doing*? Better yet, what was she *going* to do?

She turned away from the mirror in disgust and slammed out of the bathroom door.

And right into Liam's arms.

"Hey beautiful," he laughed, catching her when she stumbled in surprise.

"Way to scare the shit out of her, asshole," Mack said from where he stood behind Liam.

"No, I'm fine," Calla said. She slipped her arms around Liam and pressed her head against his chest. God, he felt so good. Forget about burying her head in the sand. She wanted to bury herself in him and Mack.

"Hey, what's all this about?" Liam asked, putting his arms around her and hugging her back. "Are you okay, love?"

Love. If only he meant that the way she wanted him to. No, that was stupid. What was she thinking? She squeezed her eyes shut and then pulled away from him, forcing a smile. "I'm fine."

"You sure?" Mack asked, eyebrows furrowed like he could smell her bullshit from a mile away.

"God," Calla rolled her eyes, putting on a façade of bravado. "I just had to use the bathroom. No crisis here. Chill out."

Liam smirked. "What? Chicks aren't angelic creatures who never piss or shit? Your blowin' me mind here, baby."

"Ha," Calla said. She made to leave the back hallway but Liam put a hand on her elbow to stop her.

"Wait, there's something I been wanting to give you."

Calla stopped, surprised. "Give me?"

Liam just grinned and pulled a small oblong box out of his jacket pocket. What—?

He lifted off the lid and there was a silver necklace inside with a small oval pendant on it. Calla reached and ran the tip of her index finger down the

thin chain to the delicate filigree tree engraved on the outside of the pendant.

“It’s beautiful,” Calla said, her voice high and tight. God, she felt like she was about to start crying. Fucking *hormones*.

“Let me put it on you.” Liam smiled, obviously pleased with her reaction.

Mack watched on from beside them, arms crossed over his chest, a slight frown on his face. Was he feeling left out?

“Would you mind if Mack put it on?” Calla searched Liam’s eyes.

Liam looked over at Mack in surprise. “Not at all. Go ahead.” He waved Mack close.

Mack looked uncertain for a second. “It’s his gift. I don’t want to—”

“We share everything, don’t we?” Calla asked.

At least for now.

Chills ran down her body when Mack’s calloused hands brushed her neck as he draped the necklace around her. She lifted her hair off her neck as he fumbled with the clasp.

“This is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever worn,” she whispered to Liam. No need for him to know it was the only jewelry she’d worn in a long time—since her mother had left anyway. She used to play at trying on her mother’s things but had thrown away the few pieces her mom left behind and never looked back.

Mack finally managed the clasp and stepped back. Calla lowered her hair and Liam came forward, centering the pendant right over the dip of her cleavage.

“You’re so beautiful,” Liam said.

“Perfect,” Mack whispered.

Calla’s cheeks burned and she was glad that she’d nixed the blush when Mel offered it earlier. She was pretty sure her cheeks were plenty pink all on their own.

“Wanna dance?” Liam held out his arm to her. There was a small dance floor off to the left of the main seating area and it was filled with people.

Calla smiled and it was genuine this time. God, it was always like this when she was with them. All her worries and fears disappeared. Even when it was *them* and the future she was worried about.

She grabbed Mack’s hand with the arm Liam wasn’t holding and dragged him along behind them.

The atmosphere and energy of the small crowd on the dance floor was hard not to get caught up in. Mack pulled Calla into his arms as that Florida-

Georgia line song, *HOLY*, came on over the speakers. Liam stepped up right behind her.

Just like the first night they'd all danced together.

Liam moved her hair behind her ear and whisper sung the lyrics in her ear, "You're holy, holy, holy, holy, I'm high on loving you."

Loving? Did he just—

She swung her head around to look at Liam but he'd dipped his face into her hair. She blinked in the dim light of the dance floor, heart and mind racing a mile a minute as she swayed back and forth in their arms.

It was just a song lyric. It didn't mean anything.

Did it? What if it did?

No. *God*. If he loved her, why would he say it for the first time off-handed in a song like that. She was a neurotic mess. *Fucking hormones!!*

She squeezed her eyes shut. *Turn off brain. Please, just for tonight*. She clutched Mack with one arm and then lifted the other behind her to hold the back of Liam's neck.

Which reminded her of that night she'd held them close as they'd both taken her. Her panties went damp.

And for the first time all night, all her worries quieted. It was just them. Mack and Liam's bodies warm on either side of her. The music surrounding them. Perfection.

The next song was a little faster but neither Mack or Liam moved. Calla moved her hips back and forth, grinning when she felt Liam's hard on against her ass. When she slid forward and ground against the front of Mack's jeans, she smiled even wider feeling he was hard too. It was such a rush to be able to drive both of them so crazy.

She went up on tiptoe so she could whisper in Mack's ear. "I'm so wet."

He growled and pulled her even more roughly against him.

Toby Keith's *I Love This Bar* came on and a roar of approval came up from the crowd. People shouted along to the familiar lyrics.

"I'll go close out our bar tab," Liam said. Mack nodded at him as he continued holding Calla close even though what they were doing could only loosely be called dancing. She loved every second of it.

By the time Liam came back, they were on to a slow dance and Mack had pulled her so close her body was absolutely cemented against his. Liam pulled her back from Mack and enfolded her in his arms, his hips swaying as he two-stepped with her in a small circle.

“That was my dance you just stole,” Mack growled from behind Liam.

Liam looked over his shoulder and smirked Mack’s direction. “Guess you’ll have to put me in me place once we get back to the hotel.”

Mack’s eyes went dark and Liam licked his lips.

“Oh, I’ll make it a night you won’t forget,” Mack promised.

Calla grinned at both of them, grabbed their arms, and dragged them toward the door.

They could barely keep their hands off each other but Calla forced Mack to sit up front and Liam in back just to torture them. Calla drove since she hadn’t had anything to drink.

What she didn’t foresee was Mack torturing her right back. His hand inched up her leg the entire fifteen-minute ride back to the hotel, along with him whispering the dirty, dirty things he wanted to do to her and Liam.

She was so turned on by the time she pulled into a parking spot that opened up right in front of the hotel, she was about to jump one or the other of them. Or both. Yes, both sounded like a good idea.

But your stomach.

Screw it. She’d just keep her shirt on. She dragged Liam’s face down and kissed him hard as they walked through the front door, Mack’s hands on her waist from behind.

But then Liam jerked away from her. “What the *fuck*?”

Calla blinked, taken aback by Liam’s loud voice.

“What’s up his ass?” Mack asked.

Calla frowned and shook her head as Liam strode right up to a middle-aged man in a suit who was sitting in one of the lobby chairs.

“What the fuck are you doing here.”

“Well there ya are. Finally. I was beginning to think that blonde slag who kept callin’ saying you’d be here was lying and wasting me time.”

Liam just stared at the man, frozen.

“Well come on now.” The man glared at Liam. “Give your da a hello at least.”

His da—? Calla had barely taken Liam’s father in before a gorgeous, statuesque redhead came running over from the reception desk.

“Baby! I’ve missed you so much!” She threw her arms around Liam and planted a kiss right on his lips.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

LIAM

Liam was stunned frozen for a moment. And then his brain started processing again.

Brigid was kissing him. While Calla and Mack watched.

He wrenched back from Brigid to glare at her and his da. Only to find Calla skirting them and running toward the elevators while Mack looked at him murderously.

“*Shite*. Calla!” Liam went to chase after her but Mack stopped him with an iron grip on his elbow. Calla opened the door to the stairs and disappeared. Dammit. He had to go make it right.

“Let go of me,” Liam spoke to Mack through gritted teeth. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

Mack’s jaw worked. “It better not be. If you hurt her, I swear I’ll—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Liam muttered, jerking out of Mack’s grasp and running up the stairs after Calla. Mack was right on his heels. Jaysus, talk about déjà vu.

“Liam!” Brigid called after him right before the door to the stairs shut. “Wait. I just want to talk. Please!”

What a clusterfuck. Liam ignored Brigid and caught up to Calla right before she shut the door to her room on the second floor.

“Calla,” he breathed out, stopping her door from closing. She stepped

back and allowed him to push his way in.

“That down there, it’s not what you think. She doesn’t mean anything to me anymore.”

Calla’s head came up, hazel eyes vulnerable and full of uncertainty. “But she did? Once?” Then she shook her head. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m acting like this.” She turned away from him. “It’s not like we have— We’re just—” She waved a hand. “I know we agreed it’s not a relationship or anything—”

Liam went to her and spun her around to look at him. “That’s shite and you know it. This summer’s been—” Now it was him who didn’t know the right words to say or how to put it. One thing he did know. “It’s sure as fuck a relationship.”

He took her shoulders and dropped his mouth to hers but she pulled away at the last second. Her eyes were still full of hurt. “She kissed you.”

Liam squeezed his eyes shut and breathed out. “I’m sorry, baby. She’s me past. We were together for about six months a couple years ago. That’s all.”

Calla nodded but her mouth was tight like she was barely holding back her emotions.

“She’s nothing to me. What you, Mack and me have, it’s everything. Do you understand? Now, I have to go down there to talk to me Da and Brigid. It might take a bit, but I need you to trust me. Can you do that?”

Calla nodded rapidly, swallowing hard as she met his eyes. His brave girl. “I promise I’ll explain as soon as I can.”

She nodded again and he pressed a quick, hard kiss to her forehead.

When he turned to go back downstairs, he found Mack standing in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest. He watched Liam like he was sure Liam was about to fuck them over.

“Take care of her until I get back,” Liam said to Mack, meeting him glare for glare.

“I’m okay, don’t worry about me,” Calla said, joining them at the door and running a hand down Liam’s back comfortingly. “You talk to your dad. We’ll be here when you get back.”

Liam swallowed, then ran back downstairs where Da and Brigid were waiting for him.

“What was that?” Brigid asked, eyes narrowed as she looked past him up the stairs.

Liam could only stare at her incredulously. “As if you have any right to

ask me that. Tell me, how's Sean these days? What, did he lose all his money in another get-rich-quick scheme? That why you're here? Your personal ATM run out again?"

Brigid winced and pursed her lips. "That's not fair. Liam, please, we just need to talk. Your da and I have things we need to—"

Liam scoffed cynically. "I think we all said everything there was to say two years ago when I left. Right, *Da*? Oh wait," he paused dramatically, "I might not have the right to call you that. So, Ciarán, you disinherit me yet? That why you're here? So I can sign the papers freeing you of me legally?"

Learning Ciarán O'Neill might not actually be his father had been one of the great blows of his life. At the same time, it explained so many things.

It was two years ago. His mom had been sick. Dying of liver failure. They hadn't spoken in years but he remembered the ma she'd once been. How they used to spend summers together in the country. Riding horses and painting. How loving and happy she'd once been before the drinking and drugs.

He was in the first stable relationship of his life with Brigid and he thought, maybe, just maybe, he could reconcile with his ma and find some real sort of happiness. Wasn't that what you were supposed to do when you were an adult?

Ma had looked terrible when he visited her in the hospital. Her skin was yellowish and papery, with her veins standing out in her thin, emaciated body. She was short of breath and seemed easily confused. It was right near the end.

"Ma," he'd leaned over her hospital bed, taking her hand. "It's me. It's Liam."

Her eyes had slowly drifted up to his face.

"You," she rasped.

"Yes, Ma, it's me." He'd swiped at the stupid tears in his eyes. She'd been so beautiful once, so kind and loving. His earliest memories were of her holding him close and singing to him before bedtime. She was still in there somewhere, beneath the husk of woman destroyed by drugs and drinking, he had to believe that.

Her eyes slowly tracked up to his face and she met his gaze. "You ruined me life."

Liam yanked away from her like she'd struck him. Maybe he'd heard her wrong. "Ma, I don't know what you—"

She fell into a coughing fit that shook her entire body. He sat there

helplessly, not knowing what to do.

He reached out for her arm but she batted him away. “You and your da ruined me.” Then she laughed and it was a dry, brittle sound. “Course he might not be your da at all. I hope you are the stablemaster’s bastard.”

“What are you talking about?” Liam asked, so loud she winced away from him. Shite. He ran a hand through his hair. But what she’d just— No, she was just confused. The nurses warned him this might happen. This wasn’t his ma at all. She didn’t m—

“Not that your da ever had the balls—” another long coughing fit “—to find out for sure if you were his or not. Didn’t trust himself not to disinherit ya and kick ya to the streets. And what a scandal that woulda been. His pride couldn’t have borne it.”

But when he’d run out of there and gone to his da’s office to get him to contradict Ma and tell him she didn’t know what she was talking about, his dad didn’t deny it.

They got in a huge row that ended with his da yelling, “As useless as ya are with your life and considering your whore of a mother, of course I wondered every day if you were even me son.”

Liam had always felt deep down his da didn’t love him. At least now he knew why.

“Congratulations,” Liam had said, yanking open the door to his da’s office, “You got your wish. I’m not your son anymore.” Then he’d slammed the door behind him.

They hadn’t spoken or had any contact since. His ma died a week and a half later, and Liam pulled up a map of the United States on his laptop, closed his eyes, and blindly put his finger on the screen. Couldn’t say he’d ever heard of *Wyoming* before, but he looked up jobs that would let him have a low profile and was on a plane the next day. Working on a horse ranch had a certain irony. After all, there was apparently just as much chance his real da was a nobody stablemaster as a billionaire media mogul.

“If you’d let me get a word in edgewise,” Ciarán said, red faced. “I could tell ya why I’m here.” He looked around the lobby where people were staring at them. They were making a scene. Something he knew Ciarán hated.

Liam smiled. “No, you know what? I think I prefer how we’ve communicated the past two years. Not at all.”

Liam knew he was being immature. But everything had been going so good. Calla and Mack, it was all—

“It’s time to end this charade and come back home where you belong.” Ciarán stood up straighter, speaking with that superior tone that always put Liam’s teeth on edge.

But he wasn’t a child anymore. Ciarán might have held him at an arm’s length his whole life, but it was Liam’s choice to do the leaving for once. He left Ciarán. Ireland. Everything.

And if Ciarán thought he had the right to just march right back in, he had another thing coming.

“You should go now.” Liam walked back toward the front sliding doors of the hotel. “You aren’t welcome here.” He looked past Ciarán to Brigid. “Either of you.”

Ciarán stared at him a long moment. Then he waved a hand. “It’s late and you’re pissed.” He strode not toward the door, but over to the elevator. “We’ll talk tomorrow, somewhere *private*, when you haven’t spent the evening swimming in Guinness. We’re staying in the penthouse.”

Liam bit his tongue. He wasn’t drunk. He’d only had a beer and a half earlier, over several hours. Unlike back in Dublin, he didn’t have to drink himself into a stupor each night so he could be numb to just how miserable his existence was.

“I’ll be just a minute,” Brigid called after Ciarán. Then she turned to Liam. He could still feel eyes on them from all sides. If he was *really* lucky, this little throw down would show up on TMZ tomorrow. As much as he hated that shite, he refused to go anywhere with either Ciarán or Brigid.

“Well, for a getaway, you certainly chose a place that’s,” she looked around, eyes lingering on a chandelier made out of antlers, “*eclectic*.”

“You can follow Ciarán back to your rooms and then out the damn door tomorrow. I don’t have a thing to say to you.”

Her eyes flashed hurt and she took a step toward him before stopping again, folding her arms across her stomach and looking down. “You don’t know how sorry I am for the things I said that day.” She looked up, eyebrows furrowed like she was stricken. “I wished I could take it back a hundred times. But I couldn’t find you to apologize and beg you—” Her voice broke and she took another step toward him.

Liam’s jaw clenched as she came even closer and ran her hand down his chest. “—Beg you to give me another chance. We were good together.” She bit her lip, eyelashes batting. “Best I ever had.”

Liam jerked back from her and glared, head shaking. “You must think

I'm an awful fuckin' eejit to fall for your shite again. You tossed Sean over for me because he was bust and I was bank. Then when it looked like I might go bust too, you were just as ready to drop me and go looking for another lad."

"That's not true," Brigid said, coming up to him again. He grabbed her wrists before she could land them on him. "I just got scared. Haven't you ever been scared? Liam, I loved you." Her voice was impassioned as she searched his eyes. "I still do."

He shook his head in disgust. When he'd gone to her after the fight with his da, all she could focus on was the money. Saying he needed to get DNA tested to prove who his da was since only Ciarán's 'natural born son' would be given a ten percent share in the company he'd built. That was the language Ciarán had the lawyers put in the legal paperwork—just one of the little details that had come out in the row earlier. Just in case Liam wasn't his son. He'd been hedging his bets where Liam was concerned his whole life. Never willing to *quite* invest all his money, or his time, or his love—

And then there Brigid had been doing the same.

Liam grabbed her hands and begged her to come.

To run away with him.

No money, no prospects.

Just him.

And she'd backed away from him like he'd been diagnosed with leprosy.

"You lost your chance with me," Liam said, affecting a hard grin. "But seems like you've been spending some quality time with Ciarán. You're the type he usually goes for these days. Young. Pretty. Willing to play the slut for —"

She slapped him.

The sound of her hand against his cheek echoed around the empty room. Gasps came from the small crowd that was gathering in the lobby to watch the show.

"Shite," Brigid swore. "Liam, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—" She reached for him again but he pulled back.

"No, don't take it back." He stretched his jaw. She packed quite a wallop. "I think that's the fitting end to us." He shook his head. "If you knew me at all, you woulda known all I ever wanted was someone who wanted me for *me*. Starting the way we did, I don't know why I ever thought that person would be you."

“Liam, I *can* be that pers— Wait, where are you going?” She followed him as she went out the front door and headed for his truck. He needed to take a drive. Clear his head.

“Wait. Liam. Please!” she pleaded.

He slammed his truck door in her face, then peeled out. Then he sped out of there, leaving his da and the woman he once thought he loved in his dust.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

MACK

Calla fell asleep in Mack's arms about an hour after Liam left them. He'd texted Liam several times to ask what was going on but got nothing back.

Calla said he was probably just catching up with his dad. Mack didn't tell her he saw Liam storming out of the hotel when he'd followed him back downstairs earlier. Or that that woman, Brigid, had gone right after him.

Calla always believed the best in people. So Mack had just nodded along, not believing it for a minute. People like Liam always stuck to their own kind in the end. The fact that he himself had started allowing Liam just the little bit *in* made Mack furious with himself.

But if he was honest, Liam *had* wormed his way under Mack's skin. Calla too.

Mack would find his thoughts straying to the softness of Calla's hair at the most random moments. Whenever he made a breakthrough with Torpedo, she was the first one he wanted to tell. And whenever he had a setback, he immediately wanted to take out his frustrations on Liam's ass.

Though really, there'd even been more tender moments between him and the bloody Irishman lately. Who would have thought? Just this morning, early as fuck, he'd woken up hard as a rock and gone in to grab Liam so they could go give Calla a wake-up call she wouldn't forget.

And he'd stood there for a good five minutes just watching Liam sleep.
What the fuck was *that* about?

Thank Christ for the rude awakening of Liam's past coming back to remind both of them exactly who Liam Delaney O'Neill was.

Because the clock had wound down. Time was up. Mack was supposed to split town as soon as Torpedo was auctioned tomorrow. But he hadn't yet made any plans. Or packed any of his things.

He sifted his hands through Calla's soft hair as she slept against his chest. His gut clenched and he felt fucking nauseated at the thought of leaving them.

What if he didn—

Shit. No. He couldn't think like that...

Could he?

He jerked forward. Calla stirred in his arms and he froze. When she settled, he moved her gently so that she was laying on the bed.

Then he got up and paced back toward the window.

The thought returned—*what if?*

What if he didn't go back for Bone? What if he forgot that part of his life had ever happened? What if the happiness he'd found here *could* actually last?

He sat for hours watching Calla sleep. Waiting for Liam to come home. The others got back from the bar a little after Liam left but they were quiet and didn't wake Calla.

By three a.m. he'd memorized every contour of Calla's face but he wasn't any closer to deciding what he should do. He climbed into bed beside Calla. Her body was so warm and when he slept with her and Liam, the nightmares didn't come.

He was so tired. So, so tired.

Ever since Ben had died, Mack spent every spare moment thinking about taking his revenge on Bone. Fuck the consequences.

He was born shit and he'd die shit, right?

There was nothing but darkness for him. No future. No joy. Just doing what needed doing and then either spending the rest of his days rotting in a cell for it, or, more likely, getting cut down by another of the Devil's Spawn.

But... maybe, just maybe, choosing his future was as simple as that—a choice. Shit could be fertilizer, right? If there was the right person nurturing whatever was growing.

His eyes fell on Calla again. Someone bright and full of life like her.

Christ, he was tired. Fucking delirious if he was having such flowery fuckin' thoughts.

He let his head drop back against the pillows. Calla was so warm in his arms. She even smelled like sunshine.

He fell asleep, that old song playing in his head, *you are my sunshine, my only sunshine.*

* * *

“Do you think he’s okay?” Calla asked for what felt like the hundredth time as she and Mack parked the trailer in the designated area. They were towing Calla’s horse and Xavier and Mel were bringing Tornado over from the stables where they’d boarded them for the night.

One look at Calla’s anxious face made Mack want to punch Liam in the fucking face. Especially on a day that was this important to her. She’d only brought it up once, but Mack knew she had hopes of winning one of the cash prizes today. She had a real shot at it. What she’d accomplished with Painter in three months was fucking phenomenal.

But she needed every ounce of focus she had. Which Liam fucking knew.

“You saw the text,” Mack said, trying to make his voice reassuring even though he felt anything but. “He’s fine. He’ll be here soon.” The text had been three lines long. *See you this morning at arena. Went for drive last night. Didn’t want to wake you when I got back.*

Calla put a hand on his arm, stopping him from getting out of the car. “It’s okay if last night upset you. I know you two can be...” she looked to the roof of the car before meeting his gaze again, “volatile. But I know how much you care about him.”

Mack paused, frowning. Shit, was she right? Was he so mad at the bastard because he was worried about him?

He pushed the car door open. “Wouldn’t have killed him to have fucking called,” he mumbled under his breath.

Calla came around the front of the truck cab and threw her arms around his waist. “Everything’s going to be okay.” She looked up at him, eyes searching. “Right?”

His chest went tight at seeing her uncertainty. “You bet your ass.

Everything's gonna be great." He gave her a squeeze, and then a quick smack on the ass. "Now let's go get your prizewinner ready."

She smiled and nodded. He was about to follow her to the back of the trailer rig when his phone buzzed in his pocket.

He pulled it out and glanced at the screen.

Sammy was Facetiming him.

Mack frowned. Sammy knew the competition was today. He wouldn't be calling if he didn't have something important.

"I'm gonna go check on Torpedo, okay, hon?" Mack called out to Calla.

"See you in there."

Mack was already striding away. The phone stopped ringing but started right back up again. Mack finally answered when he got to an empty part of the huge parking lot where no one would overhear him.

"What's up, Sammy?"

But it wasn't Sammy's face he saw on the other end. It was some fucking meathead.

"Who the fuck are y—"

"Bone's got a message for you," the meathead said.

Mack's blood went cold. The screen shifted like the guy was moving the phone around. It settled on a computer screen that was obviously some kind of camera feed.

And what Mack saw almost made him lose his breakfast.

There was just enough light to see Sammy, naked, bloody, and strung up on a hook like he was a slab of meat at the butchers. He was screaming in agony.

"Please! Please, don't—"

Mack almost dropped the phone. "Sam!" he shouted.

And then came that evil fucking laugh that haunted Mack's dreams.

Bone's face filled the computer screen a second later. He grinned, showing off his stained, yellow teeth. "Baby boy, I heard you been asking around about me. You wanted to arrange a reunion all you had to do was ask me direct."

Bile rose up Mack's throat

"Instead, I learn you got one of our own playing snitch for you."

Bone moved out of the way and Sammy's body took up the frame again. Some of the blood and grime on his chest was dark, but some was bright red like Bone had slashed him right before placing the call. Mack's stomach

bottomed out at seeing his friend like this.

“Gotta say I didn’t mind having the excuse to get me a little plaything,” Bone’s voice came over the video of Sammy. “It’s so goddamned boring on the outside. I miss having my pick of the fresh meat.”

Bone circled one of Sammy’s nipples with a sharp hunting knife. “Remember the first day you walked the block, baby boy?”

“*Fuck!*” Mack yelled when Bone sliced Sammy’s nipple off. Sammy screamed and writhed on the hook. Mack dropped to his knees, staring at the phone.

“Foreplay just gets me so excited,” came Bone’s voice again. “Maybe you *have* missed me all these years and that’s why you sent this fucking idiot to try to learn about me. So I’d know just where to come and find you. Because Sammy here? He sang like a songbird as soon as I pulled off the first fingernail. Wyoming, huh? I didn’t make you out for a city boy.”

Mack sat paralyzed, eyes glued to the screen.

“Feel free to stay and watch the show. I’ll be seeing you soon, baby boy.”

Sammy whimpered something Mack couldn’t make out. There was another five minutes to the video and Mack wanted to throw the goddamned thing across the fucking parking lot. But maybe there was some deal he could make with Bone. Maybe he could offer to exchange himself for—

Sammy’s scream filled the phone speakers and Mack could only sit helplessly by for the rest of the video while Bone raped his friend and then slit his throat.

Bone’s demonic laugh was the last thing Mack heard before the phone call was ended.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

LIAM

Liam felt like shite as he pulled in to the arena parking lot. “Fuck,” he swore as he swerved to miss an oncoming car in the lot. The loud honk only had him swearing more as he grabbed his head and stomped on the break.

Driving around last night hadn’t done shite for his head and neither had coming back to the hotel and emptying the minibar.

He should have gone to Calla or Mack. But seeing Da and then all that bullshit with Brigid—it had him feeling exactly like nothing had changed in the last two years. That he was the exact same spoiled little cunt that had run away from his daddy issues with his tail between his legs—

Wait, was that Mack?

Out in the far parking lot. A man stood out in the middle of nowhere with his hands on his head. He looked a hell of a lot like Mack.

Liam squinted and leaned over the steering wheel. Liam knew the way Mack carried himself. The way he walked. Knew everything about the lad if he were honest with himself.

Which is why you shoulda gone to talk things over with him and Calla last night instead of drinking yourself stupid.

Because dammit, he *wasn’t* the same. He had changed. And Calla and Mack had helped him change.

He looked around and checked his mirrors before putting the truck in drive again and heading out to where Mack was standing. He slowed down and brought the truck and trailer to a stop. Mack didn't even look up. He was just standing there in the middle of nowhere with hunched shoulders, staring at the ground.

Liam honked his horn but Mack only looked his way briefly. Then he just kept walking.

Shite. Liam shoulda known the lanky bastard wouldn't let last night go so easy. He slammed the truck in park and then jumped down from the cab.

"Mack," he called. "Mackenzie!"

He jogged up beside Mack but when he tried to put a hand on his arm, Mack jerked away so roughly it made Liam stumble.

"What the fuck?" Liam said. Then he breathed out. Mack just kept walking and Liam gritted his teeth and then jogged after him again.

"Look, I'm sorry for how shite went down last night. I should have come right back to you and Calla like I said I would. But things are bad with me da. He might not even be me real da. I might be the son of the fecking stableman. And then Brigid, the woman, she was there to complicate shite and— Jaysus, would you just stop for a second and listen to me? I'm trying to apologize here."

Mack stopped and whirled on him. Liam took a step back at the look of mottled rage on his face. What the—

"You think I care about your bullshit rich boy daddy issues? Wake the fuck up!" Mack yelled, throwing out his arms. "Some people have real fucking problems."

"Why do you always have to be such a shite about everything?" Liam fired back. "I'm sorry if me problems are too white-collar for ya."

Mack got right up in his face. "Admit it. You're gonna make up with your dad and then drop Calla because that's what rich, self-entitled users like you do. The help is good for a fuck but that's it, right? Isn't that what you told me?"

Liam pulled back, sneering in disgust and shaking his head. "I can't believe I felt bad for walking out on you last night. You're a piece of shite who can't see something good when it's right in your face. You're so busy being sure everyone in the world is out to get you. Calla deserves so much."

A shadow crossed Mack's face but then he threw his hands up again. "I don't have time for this bullshit." He turned and resumed walking away.

“Excuse me, are you Liam O’Neill?” Liam’s attention was jerked away from Mackenzie’s disappearing form by a woman sticking a microphone in his face. “Son of media mogul Sean O’Neill and Irish Film and Television Award winning actress Ailis O’Neill?”

Shite. How had the fucking paparazzi found out he was here?

“Is it true you’ve been having an affair with Isobel Snow? Last year’s Missing Heiress?”

“What?” Liam asked, then shook his head, trying to edge around the woman. She just moved in front of him again.

“There are reports of you and Isobel in a cozy cuddle last night at the Mile High Bar and Grill. Can you confirm or deny these rumors?”

Isobel? What the fuck were they on about? Jaysus, these fucking vultures would make up anything for a story.

Which was nothing to what would happen if they sniffed out the actual truth.

Shite. He headed toward a side entrance to the arena.

He had to find Calla. *Now.*

Chapter Thirty

CALLA

“**M**ack! I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” Calla said, hurrying up to him as he yanked the safety chains off the trailer and then disconnected the wiring cable.

He jerked upright and for a second, Calla had the strangest feeling Mack was about to get in the truck and slam the door right in her face. But then he paused and leaned back over, lifting the coupler off the ball hitch. He kept his face averted. Why couldn’t he look at her?

“What?” Calla asked in alarm. “What’s happened? Is Liam okay?”

“That snob will always be just fine.” Mack’s voice was full of acrimony as he dropped the trailer hitch.

“Did you two have another fight?” She followed on his heels as he walked around to the driver’s side and got up in the cab. She wedged herself in the open door. He would *not* be going anywhere until she got some answers.

Mack just shook his head. “Look, it doesn’t matter.” He looked forward through the windshield, jaw working. “It’s time for me to move on, that’s all.”

Move on? Like...

“You’re leaving?” She could barely get the words past her suddenly dry throat.

Mack looked down and then away. "I always said I would." He tossed the wrench he'd been using on the hitch into the passenger side floorboards. "It was time I was hitting the road."

Calla could only stare on in confusion. "But Torpedo. You have to show him today. This doesn't make any sense. Where are you even—"

"Back East. Got some things I got to take care of. They can't wait." He still didn't look toward her.

"And then what?" she asked incredulously. "Will you come back?"

He shook his head. "Told you. I'm movin' on."

This time Calla took several steps back. How could he...? She felt like she'd just been slammed in the chest by a semi.

"I don't understand."

"What don't you understand?" Mack turned her way angrily. "This was always my plan. I gave it to you straight from the beginning. You said you were okay with it."

Calla's jaw set. "Things changed. You know they did. What we've shared," she glared at him. "I didn't imagine that."

Mack just shook his head stubbornly. "It doesn't matter. None of it matters. I got a path I'm meant to walk. And it ain't with you."

"I'm pregnant." The words fell out of her mouth without her thinking them through. Mack's head jerked in her direction.

And it just kept spewing out. "I don't know if you or Liam is the father. With the timeframe the doctor gave me, it could be either of yours. I didn't think I could— I've always been irregular and—" She stopped and looked down. "Anyway, I'm not sure if I should keep it. What my dad has, it's genetic. I could have it too, and so could the baby. I don't know what to do."

Finally letting it go felt like having a hundred pounds lifted off her shoulders. But God, what now? Would he be furious at her for keeping it a secret all this time?

But when Mack climbed down out of the cab, he took her face gently in her hands. "You'll be a wonderful mother." His voice was so soft it was barely a whisper. His eyebrows drew together. "But believe me, you don't want me. You and Liam will raise that baby and be able to give them everything. The life they deserve."

He was breaking her heart. Couldn't he see that? "But—"

His eyebrows suddenly furrowed. "Should you still be doing the mustang competition?"

Oh so he cared about the baby in the abstract, as long as he didn't have to ever see it?

She pulled away from him. "I changed my routine. I'm only doing one galloping pass and the rest is low impact stuff. A lot of experienced, professional women riders keep riding when they're pregnant."

She didn't know why she was bothering to defend her choices to him. He didn't want her. She wasn't worth staying for.

"I'm sorry, Calla," he repeated. "This just isn't my path."

She turned around and ran back toward the arena before his words could pierce her any deeper.

She heard a roar go up from the crowd beyond.

The opening ceremony was starting.

Somehow she had to put her heartbreak aside because she had a competition to win.

Chapter Thirty-One

CALLA

“All right girl,” Calla patted Painter as she munched on hay from the hay net Calla had set up in the temporary stall. “It’s almost time.”

If she kept talking to Painter and focused on the competition, there wasn’t enough space left over to think about Mack. Right?

So why did her chest feel like a melon carver had been used to scoop out her insides?

“Calla! Thank Jaysus.”

“Liam!” Calla felt tears welling up in her eyes as Liam hurried toward her in the narrow path between makeshift stalls.

She climbed over the fence gate that made up Painter’s stall and flung herself into Liam’s arms.

“I need to talk to you,” he said urgently, grabbing her hands and looking nervously behind him again.

“What’s going on? Did Mack talk to you?”

She knew she should have told them both about the baby sooner. Her heart galloped as she waited for his answer, but he didn’t say a word. Instead he pulled her behind him down the path between the stalls. Other contestants watched them as they went.

“Liam, what are you—”

“Just a second. I want to get us somewhere private.”

“Okay, but Painter and I are on soon. The junior competition will be over in half an hour, so I can’t be gone too long—”

Liam just kept pulling her along until they were underneath the stands of the arena.

“Liam,” Calla said, tugging on the hand he was firmly gripping. “Talk to me.”

It was dim underneath the stands, but she could still see the tension on his face.

“I have something to tell you.” Liam finally said. “I want you to hear it from me first.” He looked around anxiously.

Um. Wasn’t that supposed to be her line?

“You’re scaring me.” She grabbed both of Liam’s hands. “What’s wrong? Are you sick?” Her eyes widened in fear. Oh God, what if he’d been diagnosed with something—

“No, no,” Liam shook his head rapidly and Calla felt almost lightheaded with relief. “Nothing like that.” He took a deep breath. “The thing is, I have a lot of money. Like, a *lot*.”

Calla blinked. What was he going on about? “So?”

Liam stared at her like he was waiting for some big reaction. “I’m a billionaire. Back in Ireland, me da owns Prism Media group. They’re the conglomerate that bought out half the European and Australian news companies and even one of the bigger American news corporations.”

Calla gave a tiny shake of her head. Where was he going with all this? “I know,” she said. “So?”

Liam frowned and pulled back a little. “What do you mean, you *know*?”

“Uh,” she shook her head, “yeah. You’re Liam O’Neill. Son of actress Ailis Duncan. Well, she became Ailis O’Neill, after she married your dad. But yeah. I know who you are.”

Liam jerked to his feet, staring down at Calla like she’d suddenly sprouted horns.

“What?” she asked, standing up and reaching for him, but he jerked his hand back.

“*How* do you know?”

She threw her hands in the air and shrugged. “I don’t know. They showed that movie, *Irish Spring*, the one that won all those awards, in the world cinema class I took in college. It was my favorite elective.”

Liam took another step back from her and raked a hand through his hair.

Calla didn't know why he was so freaked out, but she kept going. "When I saw you at the bar last year, I thought you looked familiar. The more I thought about it, I finally realized who you reminded me of. Your mom. You look so much like her. When I googled her, I saw a picture of you two. You must have been a teenager when it was taken." She smiled and lifted a hand toward him. "You had the most adorable floppy hair—"

"Stop!" he yelled. Calla flinched and her eyes flew open as he wrenched away. "What? I—"

"You fucking knew who I was? This whole time?" He looked at her and it was like his eyes were pleading for her to say no. But she wasn't going to lie about something so silly.

"Yeah. I've known the whole time." She shook her head. "I didn't realize —" She felt completely bewildered. "Is it some big secret?"

"Yes," he shouted, throwing his hands up in the air. "You've known," he whispered, more like he was talking to himself than to her. "You've known all along."

"That first time we had sex in the shower, you *knew*." His eyes flashed and he shoved an accusatory finger in her face. "You lied," he said. "You couldn't believe what had just happened because, and I quote, *you're you*. I asked you what you meant and you made up some bullshit about liking me laugh."

Calla's mouth dropped open. "It wasn't your laugh. I said I like how you made other people laugh."

"Bullshit," he accused. "You saw me and thought, here's my chance to cash in. Or at least get your fifteen minutes. Did you call the paparazzi in today?"

"I— Wha—" Each word cut off sharply and she finally threw her hands out in frustration. "I saw you and looked you up and thought: *Huh, a celebrity. In Hawthorne. How cool*. That was it. My entire thought process at the time."

Liam shook his head. "You're such a fucking liar."

She sputtered but he continued, "You just *happened* to come work for Xavier when you went broke? Remembered how that billionaire you'd been stalking worked there and thought, *huh, here's my meal ticket!*"

"How can you even—" She sputtered. "You were the one who approached *me*. I'd never even—"

"You know," he cut her off, his face cruel, "let's just fast-forward this

little scene to the end. I'm sure as a fan of cinema, you'll appreciate that. Come Sunday, I'm outta here."

"Well good riddance!" Calla yelled back, her cheeks hot. "To you and Mack both." It took everything she had not to put her hands to her stomach. God, she couldn't imagine the things he'd accuse her of if she told him about the baby. She backed up out from underneath the stands.

"Anyone who doesn't know me after sleeping with me for three months isn't someone I could ever really care for."

Liam scoffed. "As if you care for anything other than me bank balance."

"You..." Calla reached down and grabbed a clod of dirt from the ground and hurled it his direction. He barely dodged it, but then he started clapping.

"Bravo. This really is the performance of the decade. Ma would be so proud. Too bad you'll never get to rifle through her things. Or get anywhere near me billions."

Calla's entire body shook with rage. But then her shoulders slumped. She turned to walk away, not wanting Liam to see the power he had to hurt her. But no. Screw that. He thought he could just go around and carelessly shit on the people who lo—

She cut the thought off even as it formed. God, was it true? Did she love this selfish bastard?

The pain was almost enough to crack her in two.

"I let you in." She hit her chest with her palm. "You and Mack. I let you both in. Like I never had anyone before. And then you both broke my h—" She stopped when she realized Liam wasn't looking at her but had his face stubbornly set to the side.

"Goddamn you, Liam O'Neill."

With that, she spun on her heel and strode back toward Painter. More determined than ever to win the prize money and be able to have control over her own future without ever depending on anyone else ever again.

Chapter Thirty-Two

BETHANY

Bethany thought the little bitch would never leave her damn horse alone for a single minute. But then Liam came by and of course Cal chased off after him like a dog in heat.

Bethany shook her head.

It was time to show that little whore where she belonged once and for all. The Carters were trash and always would be.

Bethany had always hated Cal. There was just something *about* her. She was nothing but poor white trash but she acted like a *snob*, never hanging around with anyone else or making friends. Like she thought she was so much better than all of them.

But it wasn't until Bethany had walked in on her Daddy with Calla's whore of a mother in his study one day that she knew what hatred really was. Bethany had only been twelve at the time but she knew what it meant when a woman was sitting on a man's lap with her arms around him.

Daddy had sworn he'd get rid of her. And he did. He even got her to leave town.

But there was still her spawn left.

Calla. The uppity little bitch who wouldn't disappear no matter how Bethany tried to ignore her. Always trying to pretend she was equal to her betters.

Every time Bethany came in second place to Cal and her ugly mongrel horse, it was a thorn that dug deeper and deeper under her skin.

But then, finally, *finally*, natural order was restoring itself to the world.

Daddy bought out the Carter ranch, leaving Cal with almost nothing. She had to work as a ranch hand for God's sake.

And Bethany's plans to capture Liam O'Neill's attention and secure her place as billionaire royalty had been *this* close to falling into place.

Until Cal fucking Carter had put her whore fucking nose where it didn't belong and fucked everything up.

Bethany wasn't runner up to Miss Natrona County Jr. two years in a row so she could lose the biggest prize of her life to the town fucking *tomboy*.

And Bethany *knew* if Cal hadn't been distracting Liam with her little I'm-poor-and-helpless-and-oh-yeah-also-a-whore-who'll-let-you-stick-it-anywhere act, he would have been able to see Bethany for the treasure she was.

Daddy always said no man would ever be good enough for his little princess and it was true. None of the grimy Wyoming farmers were. But Liam was a prince if she'd ever met one and they were *meant* to be together. She'd known it ever since she took a picture of him in the bar, googled his face, and found out he was worth approximately three-point-seven billion.

But then to be so roundly *humiliated* in front of him and all because of that tomboy he-she *freak!* Ugh! Bethany's whole body went hot when she remembered Liam's words to her at the feed store. No one talked to her like that. Ever.

And all because, like, Cal had poisoned him against her.

Well Bethany was putting things right. There was an order to the world. And she was restoring it.

No Carter would ever get in her way again.

Bethany approached Cal's horse. It neighed and shifted back and forth on its hooves, tail lifting.

"It's all right," Bethany said, voice gentle. She needed this stupid horse to stand still for what she was planning. When she stepped forward and grabbed the bridle, the mare's eyes went wide. Bethany clicked her teeth and ordered her to stay, and the horse went still.

Which was, in itself, a little annoying, because *fine*, it was well trained. So what? Bethany's mustang would have been superior, hands down. But she couldn't compete, could she? Because they'd given her a lame horse.

The stupid thing had weak joints and went lame right after the trail trials. She'd only been training it in basic reining and cutting skills. And sure, she was pushing a little—but none of her purebred horses would have batted an eye at the exercises.

She gave it two whole weeks off training to rest its strained joints. But after just an hour of getting back out in the training paddock, it was limping again.

So now here she was at a horse competition with no horse. Daddy had even called the BLM and tried to make a generous donation if only they'd give her another horse but they said it was too far into the competition for that.

That was the final straw. Like, you could only push a woman so far.

So she'd called and called for weeks until she finally got through all the stupid secretaries and whatever until she could finally talk to Liam's dad and tell him where his son was. There wasn't a reward or anything, but she figured there was the smallest chance Liam would be so grateful for reuniting him with his father, he'd give her another chance. And if not, well, at least that bitch Cal wouldn't get him.

She wasn't about to let her win this competition either.

She ran her hand down the flank of Cal's horse's.

"Just stand still, stupid horse," she whispered in a soothing voice. She glanced around, didn't see anyone, and pulled the small buzzer out of her pocket. It was about the size of a cigarette lighter and it easily slipped underneath the back of the saddle against the horse's flank. The horse turned and looked toward her, ears flicking back and forth.

"Oh you'll be fine," Bethany muttered, taping the small device in place. "People use these things on race horses all the time." Sure it was illegal but God, if those stupid animal rights activists had their way, everyone would be, like, eating tofu and kale for every meal.

Bethany pulled the remote out of her pocket to test the buzzer. Before she could, though, she heard voices coming her way.

"Shit." She slipped through the bars of the stall and down the hall before anyone could see her.

She smiled as she took the long way around to the arena seating. She couldn't wait to watch the show.

Chapter Thirty-Three

CALLA

Calla was jogging back toward where she'd left Painter stalled and almost ran into the back end of a horse.

"Oh!" she said, pulling up short as the horse and two people leading it turned to look at her.

"Dr. Nunez?"

A young woman stood beside her. The doctor's daughter, Calla bet.

"Calla." Dr. Nunez's eyes lit up at seeing her but then she averted her gaze like she'd just remembered something.

Like that Calla was her patient and they had an appointment next week to reveal Calla's test results.

"Did the results come back already?"

Dr. Nunez head jerked up to Calla and then she quickly looked away again. "It's good to see you, Calla. Good luck today. Come on, Savannah." She pulled on the horse's reins like that's how she meant to leave it.

Holy shit. Calla grabbed her elbow. "If you know, you have to tell me. Please," she begged. "Think about if it was your daughter. I have to know." Maybe a low blow, but God, the knowledge about Calla's entire future could be standing right in front of her.

Dr. Nunez's eyes flicked toward her daughter. "'Vannah, why don't you take Mariposa back down to her stall. I'll be right there."

Savannah nodded and led the horse further down the tunnel back toward the temporary stalls.

Calla squeezed Dr. Nunez's arm. "Please."

Dr. Nunez sighed, then looked around them. Behind them, cheers and applause came from the arena.

"This is completely unprofessional. And you're about to compete. The last thing I should be—"

"So I have it?" Calla pressed. "I tested positive? Is that what you're saying?" She knew it. She'd been stupid to think for even a second that—

"No," Dr. Nunez exclaimed. Then she pressed her eyes shut a moment before opening them again and pulling Calla off to the side of the tunnel hallway. Her eyes gentled. "Your test came back negative for Huntingtons."

Negative?

Calla collapsed back against the wall, blinking in shock.

"Not only that," Dr. Nunez smiled gently, "but your CAG repeats were so low, there's no chance any of your offspring will have it either."

Calla choked and then bent over, hands on her stomach.

She couldn't believe her ears. Did she—

She shot up straight. "You're sure? There's *no* chance—?"

"None," Dr. Nunez assured her.

"Thank you," Calla said. "I don't know how I can ever— Just, *thank you.*"

Calla felt like crying. And dancing. And whooping in elation at the top of her lungs. She hugged Dr. Nunez and thanked her again.

Then she ran the rest of the way back to Painter's stall.

"What's up with you?" she asked when Painter neighed anxiously after she stepped in the stall. She laughed and rubbed down her nose. "Today is our lucky day."

She frowned as she said it. Because it wasn't half an hour ago that both Mack and Liam had broken her heart.

But her son or daughter wouldn't get Huntingtons. And she'd be able to raise them without ever having to worry about abandoning them by getting sick herself.

It meant everything.

"Come on, girl," she said to Painter, opening the gate and leading her out. "Don't want to be late to the party."

As Calla led her around to where competitors had lined up by the chute

that led into the arena, her mind raced. For the first time, she could really start planning her future. And even if it didn't have either of the men of her dreams in it, she would make it a damn good one.

“You and me, little lime,” she whispered, patting her stomach. “You and me.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

MACK

Mack was *this* close to leaving them all behind without another look back. He shifted from park into first gear. But then he froze.

Pregnant. She was pregnant.

It could be yours.

No. Christ. How could he even feel a stab of hope or joy at the thought? He was so fucked up. He was born shit and any baby he made would be—

His mind rejected the thought before he could finish it.

The baby was half Calla. And something that came from her couldn't be anything less than perfect.

He squeezed his eyes shut and as soon as he did, he saw Sammy's bloody, broken body.

Christ. That had happened because of Mack. He needed to get as far away from Calla and Liam before Bone ever knew a thing about them.

Mack slammed the steering wheel. He heard the roar of the cheering crowd. There were speakers on the outside of the arena that broadcast everything happening inside.

And then Mack heard, "Next up, Cal Carter, representing Mel's Horse Rescue with her mustang, Painter!"

He'd leave. He would. But after one last glimpse of her.

He slammed the door to his truck and ran into the arena. He had to push

his way through a group of reporters bottlenecked at the entrance of the arena where a harried looking security guard was holding them back.

“Mackenzie. Mackenzie Knight?”

“It’s Mackenzie!”

Mack looked up sharply at all the eyes quickly turning his way. How the fuck did any of these people know his name?

“This picture of you and billionaire playboy Liam O’Neill was snapped last night.” One of the reporters held up a tablet showing some internet site with a clear picture of him, Calla, and Liam dancing. Close. Closer than close.

Shit.

“Tell us, is Liam cheating on Isobel Snow, last year’s Missing Heiress?”

“What’s your relationship to Liam O’Neill?”

“Can you comment on rumors that Liam suffers from amnesia and hasn’t known where he’s been the past year and a half?”

“Get the fuck outta my way,” Mack growled, finally managing to push through the reporters and to a curtained off area. There were two entrances to the arena and Mack made his way around to the one furthest from the reporters.

He slid through the competitors and horses lined up there until he was right up against the gate so he could see into the arena without going up into the stands. Calla was already taking Painter through her paces.

“Looks like you had the right idea about getting out of town.”

Mack jerked his head around and there was Liam, back propped up against the opposite wall.

“I met your adoring public,” Mack muttered, eyes going back to Calla.

Liam went on like Mack hadn’t said anything. “I’m out of here as soon as I can pack me things up at the ranch.” Liam pulled his wide-brimmed hat low.

Mack glanced his way. “Oh yeah? What’s Calla got to say about that?”

“She doesn’t get a say.” Liam’s jaw tensed. “She was playing me this whole time.”

Mack turned his head at that. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“She knew exactly who I was. And how much I’m worth.”

“Huh,” Mack said. “So?”

Liam scoffed. “What do you mean, so? The rest is self-explanatory.”

Goddammit no one got on his nerves like this fucker. He wanted to order

him to grab his knees so he could tan his ass.

But shit. He was done with all that. Still, Liam needed to get his head out of his ass. Mack wouldn't be here to watch out for Calla so Liam better step the fuck up. "And what she'd have to say about it?" With effort he kept his voice mostly level. "Did she try to ask for money for the baby or something?"

Liam's face went red. "*Baby? What fucking baby?*"

"She didn't even tell you she was pregnant? Jesus," Mack shook his head, "you really fucked things up, didn't you?"

"Me? You're telling me she's fucking pregnant! It's even more proof she's trying to trap me and get at me mon—"

Mack grabbed Liam by the front of his shirt and slammed him up against the side of the chute. The horse who was first in line at the gate snorted and stamped its feet, while the owner started bitching at Mack.

Mack ignored him. "You better not finish that fucking sentence." He shoved Liam against the wall again, then let him go. He shook his head at Liam. "Christ, you're what I'm leaving her to?"

"I'm going to have to ask you two to move away from the—"

"Shut the fuck up," Mack growled at the arena volunteer and turned his back on Liam so he could watch Calla.

Liam was a fucking idiot thinking she was after him for his money. Woman like Calla, she didn't want anything she hadn't earned. She was as proud as she was stubborn. And too good for either of them.

She rode Painter out into the middle of the arena like she was born to sit on a horse. They moved together as one, like they'd been working together for years instead of just months. And the way Painter responded to Calla's tiniest nudge or click, there was no way you could tell the mare had been a wild mustang not three months ago. Fuck Liam and all his digs about mustangs being inferior to other horses. Fuck Liam in general.

Calla had already made it through several obstacles no problem. She next directed Painter to do several turnaround spins in place, first clockwise, then, after a slight pause, in the other direction.

Then she had the horse back up several steps before taking off at a trot, then a canter, then an all-out gallop across the arena. She brought the horse to a sliding stop, pulled out a pop gun and let out several loud *pop pop pops* as she backed the horse up again. Painter continued through the steps without flinching at the noise.

Mack let out a low whistle. Damn, Calla was impressive. Mack had been

proud when he'd been able to get his gelding to stand still for a whole five seconds. Meanwhile Calla's horse was running circles around them all. She really had a chance at the prize money.

He found himself holding his breath as she approached the last set of obstacles. They were set up on his side of the arena and he could make out the concentration and calm determination on Calla's face. First she led Painter through a veil of hanging streamers. Then she urged Painter up, hoof by hoof, onto a wobbly wooden platform that pivoted on a fulcrum.

Painter set her first two hooves on it, no problem. But when she moved her back hooves up, something went wrong. Painter's neck suddenly jerked and her eyes went wild.

And then she bolted.

She leapt off the wooden platform, jarring Calla to the side and almost off the saddle.

"Calla!" Mack jumped up on the gate.

Calla righted herself on her saddle and was clearly pulling on the reins to try to get Painter to stop. But her eyes were wide with some kind of hellfire and she just kept going. Calla had enough control to get her to turn slightly left around the curve of the arena oval, but she was still galloping hell for leather. They flew past Mack and on down the arena.

Mack was about to jump the fence but one of the chute workers held him back.

"Please sir, get down! You're not allowed in the arena during another contestant's ride."

"She's in trouble," Mack snarled, yanking away from the man as he tried to see what was going on with Calla and Painter.

They were reaching the opposite end of the arena. It looked like Calla was trying to get Painter to turn again since she wasn't slowing down.

It didn't work this time.

Calla's body flew off the back end of the horse as Painter kept galloping off without her. Calla flipped once in the air before landing on the arena floor in a puff of dirt.

"Calla!" Mack shouted.

"Let go of me, you bastard! She's hurt!" It was Liam's voice from behind him. All Mack knew was that no one was holding him back anymore.

He jumped the gate and started running for Calla. Goddammit, why was the arena so fucking big? He was only halfway there when paramedics came

out with a stretcher. They slipped a neck brace around her neck.

Fuck. Was she unconscious? Had she broken her arm? A leg? A fucking spinal injury?

What about the baby?

He pumped his legs even harder.

The paramedics lifted Calla and were moving her out of the far exit of the arena. Shit. He was glad they were so efficient but he just needed to know if she was okay.

They disappeared into a wall of people who had gathered at the arena tunnel. Mack was there fifteen seconds later.

“Out of my way,” he growled, trying to push through the crowd and see where they’d taken Calla.

“Liam! Liam O’Neill!” called a man in a suit holding a microphone, eyes focused behind Mack. “What is your relationship to Calla Carter? How are you feeling right now as she’s being taken away with unspecified injuries?”

“Are you in a relationship with Isobel Snow?” asked someone else.

“Are you cheating on Isobel with Calla?”

“Liam, why did you run away to America? Is it because the rumors about your father being your family’s long-time gardener are true and Ciarán disinherited you?”

“Get out of my fucking way!” Mack roared as the vultures came at them from all fucking sides. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Liam having an even worse time of it. Camera flashes popped off every other second.

Mack growled and grabbed Liam’s upper arm, hauling him forward with him.

“No fucking comment,” Mack shouted, putting his shoulder forward and using it like a battering ram to shove through the wall of people.

“Hey!”

“You can’t just—”

One bastard with a camera was knocked to the floor. He immediately started sputtering about suing but Mack kept plowing on. These fuckers had the gall to be thinking about their goddamned story when he didn’t even know if Calla was okay.

When he and Liam made it past the first ring of reporters, Mack shouted to anyone who would listen, “Where’d they take the injured woman?”

A pimply-faced teenager with a Horse Makeover lanyard around his neck looked at him with wide eyes. “Uh, the ambulance is parked around back.

This way,” he jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

Mack let go of Liam and grabbed the boy’s upper arm. “Show us.”

The teenager swallowed.

“Faster,” Mack growled. That got the kid moving, even if he did look terrified. Mack didn’t care. He just needed to know what the fuck was going on with Calla.

The kid led them out of the arena and to the left. “The ambulance was parked right here—” the kid started but then he jumped back. “Holy shit!”

He bent over and threw up.

“What the hell?” Liam asked.

But as Mack looked down on the two bloody bodies in EMT uniforms with *D*’s carved into their foreheads—the calling card of the Devil’s Spawn—a horrible fucking certainty settled on him.

“Bone’s got her.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

LIAM

“**W**hat the fuck does that mean?” Liam spun on him, shoving his shoulders. “Who’s Bone?”

Mack grabbed his head with his hands. “Shit. I don’t know.” His eyes came back to Liam and whatever it was, it wasn’t good.

“Well tell me what you do fucking know,” Liam shouted at him.

Mack took one more look at the two men on the ground, each with a pool of blood underneath them from their slashed necks. Jaysus. Liam turned away before he got sick just like the lad.

“First, we get out of here,” Mack said, voice tight. “Call the police,” Mack said to the white-faced teenager. “Tell them Calla Carter’s been kidnapped by Daniel Jones in these EMT’s ambulance.”

Then he grabbed Liam’s upper arm and started dragging him toward the parking lot.

“Let me the go.” Liam jerked his arm out of Mack’s grasp. “You don’t get to order me around. You’re the one who’s dragged Calla into whatever the fuck this is.”

Mack flinched at that. Not that it gave Liam much gratification. For once, he didn’t care about getting in hits with Mack. But he probably did need the big bastard’s help getting Calla back. It looked like he had the same thought as Liam as they both were jogging in the direction of the trucks they’d driven

in.

“So tell me what I need to know about whoever took Calla,” Liam said as he reached his truck. They worked quickly to unhitch the trailer from the back. Then Liam went and yanked open the driver’s side door.

Mack tried to pull him out of the way. “I’m driving.”

“Fuck you are,” Liam said. “She’s me truck. And—” he shoved Mack back with a hand on his chest— “I drive because I know where the fuck she is.”

Mack blinked at that. “How—”

“You’re wasting me time,” Liam said. “Are you going to get in or we gonna waste more time in this pissing contest?”

“Fine,” Mack said. “But let me get something from my truck.” He backed up and ran toward the other truck.

Liam huffed out a frustrated breath and pulled his phone out of his pocket. Mack was back in a couple minutes, up in the cab and slamming the passenger door behind him.

Mack looked at him incredulously. “You really think it’s time to be checking your goddamned messages?”

Liam didn’t even bother with a comeback. “I’m tracking Calla. I got worried because she takes those trips up to Casper each week and is always driving home in the dark. So that necklace I gave her last night? It has a GPS tracker in it.”

Mack just stared at him for a second. “I could fucking kiss you right now.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Liam held out the phone so Mack could see. “Looks like they’re taking her on back roads. Avoiding the highway.”

Mack nodded, taking the phone. “You drive. I’ll tell you what we’re walking into.”

That was when Liam saw what Mack had in his other hand. A gun. A fucking gun.

Chapter Thirty-Six

MACK

Liam stared at the gun, then shook his head as he put the truck in gear. “Talk. Why the fuck did those two dead guys back there have D’s carved in their heads? And what the hell do they want with Calla?”

Liam peeled out of the parking lot as Mack gave Liam the abridged version of what had happened with Bone and Ben.

“It was personal between Bone and me, let’s just say that,” Mack said. A fucking understatement, but Liam didn’t need to know the gritty details.

Bone liked keeping his pets around until they broke. When Mack stopped fighting back, Bone thought he’d done just that. But he saw he’d made a mistake when Mack thrived after getting away from him. Mack stealing Ben away made it all the worse. It didn’t matter that Bone killed Ben. To Bone, they’d never be square. Sending Sammy to spy on Bone had just made everything worse. He was such a fucking idiot.

He gritted his teeth as he continued, “Things were okay between me and Pres when I got out. The Devil’s Spawn are mainly just a prison gang. There were members outside, but usually just to support the inside members and keep the supply chain strong. It didn’t operate like a normal MC.”

“So you don’t think this President sent his thugs after you?”

Mack shook his head, his jaw hardening. “No. Timing of it? No. This is Bone. Plain and simple.” Mack watched the GPS as Liam turned off onto a

side road. Then he looked at the blinking dot on the map on Liam's phone. *Smart*. Bone had taken the long way around but Liam was circumventing the route by taking a diagonal road that would put them right behind the ambulance.

"He knew where I was gonna be and then he was either watching and saw us all together last night or this morning. Or he saw that damn picture online."

And Bone had always liked to hurt him by taking what he held dear.

What the fuck had he done to Calla's horse? That seemed way too elaborate a plan just to snatch her. Didn't seem like Bone's style. He'd been more of a fist to the throat kind of a guy. Not too bright but brutal as all fuck. Maybe Bone hadn't done anything and he'd just taken advantage of the circumstance. Bad luck for the fucking EMTs.

And Calla.

Mack's hands fisted as Liam floored it. Mack's eyes flipped back and forth between the GPS and the blinking dot on Liam's phone.

Please let Calla be okay. Mack wasn't a praying man but he swore he'd go to church every Sunday if only Calla was okay.

If Bone was just going to kill her right off, he would have left her with the paramedics.

No, Bone would want Mack to know she'd suffered Bone's particular brand of violence before killing her.

They slowed down as they came up behind a small Toyota going the speed limit and Mack's knee jiggled impatiently. The red dot passed the juncture of where their road met up with the ambulance's. They were only maybe a minute behind.

"Faster or we won't be able to catch up with them."

"I'm working on it," Liam said. He laid on the horn as he passed the Toyota and slid back into the right lane just as an oncoming car barreled by, honking their own horn.

"Fuck," Mack swore, grabbing onto the handle on the ceiling as Liam's truck swerved, readjusting. "You're gonna get the goddamned cops on our ass."

"Sounds good to me. The more the merrier."

Mack didn't know about that. He'd prefer to dole out his own form of justice before the cops got involved. He kept the Glock in his truck in case he ran into any dangerous wildlife. Mountain lion sightings were rare, but they

still happened. Now, though, he recognized that Bone was the monster he'd really bought the gun for.

They finally reached the T junction where they turned right onto the road the ambulance was on. Mack checked the red dot. He didn't know the scale of the little map, but it didn't look like they were far ahead. Even at top speed, the ambulance couldn't be booking it *that* fast. Especially not compared to Liam's lead foot.

There were fewer and fewer signs of the city the further out they went. The road they turned onto was a narrow, scenic two-lane highway. Trees lined either side. Liam honked and passed a couple cars and then—

"There they are!" Liam shouted as the ambulance came in to view. It didn't have lights or sirens on and it swerved back and forth on the road.

"Jaysus, is the fucker drunk?"

"Get in front of 'em," Mack said, straining against his buckle and rolling down his window to get a better look. He pulled out his Glock and loaded the chamber.

"What the fuck are you going to do?" Liam shouted, glancing back and forth between the gun and the road.

"Pay attention to the goddamned road," Mack said, eyes locked on the ambulance.

"You're mad as a box of feckin' frogs," Liam muttered through gritted teeth. They sped up until they were passing the ambulance.

"Bone's driving," Mack called. At the same moment Bone looked down and saw Mack hanging out the window. And the bastard grinned. *Fucking grinned.*

"Get in front of him," Mack said, still watching Bone. "Force him to stop."

Liam had obviously been of the same mind because even as Mack said it, they passed and were about to pull in front of the ambulance. At least until Bone jerked on his wheel and rammed into them.

"Shite!" Liam yelled, just managing to right the truck before they fishtailed off the road. In the distance, another truck was heading their way in the oncoming lane. To their left was a large lake.

"Pass them," Mack yelled.

"I'm trying!" Liam slammed his foot on the gas and the truck lurched forward. Mack was thrown back against the seat. His fingers went white-knuckled on the grab handle overhead and he sent another prayer up as the

truck heading toward them started honking.

Liam had just about passed the ambulance when it jerked in their direction again, this time clipping them on the back taillight.

Shit!

They almost spun right into the ambulance's way. What the fuck was Bone thinking? Mack barely had a second to think before the truck's wheels burnt rubber Liam yet again managed to steady them. They cut in front of the ambulance right in time to avoid the oncoming truck.

"Holy shite," Liam shouted as it whizzed by, the horn blaring in one constant honk. Mack swung around to look out the back window at the ambulance.

Mack could just barely make out Bone's ugly mug behind the wheel, features mottled with rage. And shit, even after all this time, Mack felt a kick of terror in his guts. Bone still had that power over him.

He swung around. "Let's end this," he said and Liam nodded. He punched the gas even more, furthering the distance between them and the ambulance.

Then, the road clear of on-coming traffic, he spun the truck sideways, blocking both lanes of the road. There were trees on one side of the road and the lake on the other.

Nowhere for Bone to go. He had no choice but to stop.

Liam pushed open his door and jumped down. "Just in case the crazy fecker tries to go through."

Mack nodded. But he could already see that the ambulance was slowing down. They had the bastard cornered and he knew it.

His fingers closed around his Glock as he tucked it in the back of his pants and walked around the truck to stand by Liam.

The ambulance slowed even more.

And then Bone turned it at the last moment and drove through the flimsy metal barrier into the fucking lake.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

MACK

“C alla!” Liam shouted, running to the lake’s edge after the ambulance. Mack followed right on his heels, his heartbeat a pounding drum in his ears. Liam jumped in the water, swimming to where the ambulance was nose down and slowly sinking.

But then Mack caught sight of movement on the road.

It was Bone, crawling and then stumbling to his feet.

Motherfucker must have bailed right before sending the rig over into the lake. Mack yanked the gun out of the back of his pants and walked toward Bone.

“Mack, help! I can’t get the doors open!”

Mack looked back at Liam, in the water and yanking at the back door of the ambulance. It wasn’t giving even though Liam looked like he was yanking with all his might.

Then he looked back at Bone, who was obviously winded but was still grinning at Mack. “Yes Mackenzie, go try to rescue your girlfriend. If it’s not too late, that is.”

“You son of a—”

“Mack!” Liam screamed.

“What a dilemma,” Bone mocked, putting his fist under his chin. “Do you deal with me and let your girlfriend die? Or let me go so you can go try to

save her?" He laughed. "This is why you were always so fun to play with. You cared so damn much." He threw his hands up in the air. "What's it gonna be, baby boy? Me or her?"

"Who says I have to choose?" Mack said coldly.

He whipped his gun around, aimed, and shot Bone's dick off.

Then he turned and ran for Liam and Calla.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

LIAM

Liam only barely registered the gun shot behind him. He looked back, saw Mack still standing, then went back to what he was doing. The back door was locked, so he'd given up on that and swum around to the front of the ambulance. It was totally submerged. Jaysus the whole thing was sinking so damn fast. It had only been thirty or forty seconds and already the front was full of water.

"Calla!" he heard Mack shouting and banging on the back door. At least the bastard had finally got his priorities straight and was in the damn water.

Liam yanked on the front door. It didn't give at first but after bracing his feet and yanking some more, it finally opened.

Liam took a giant breath of air and ducked underneath the water. He swam into the front seat. It was dark inside, a little bit of light filtering through the submerged windshield. Enough to see that it was the kind of ambulance that opened to the back compartment, thank Jaysus.

It was awkward to maneuver his lanky body through the narrow opening to get to the back. He got the top of himself through but his bottom half became tangled, his foot stuck on the steering wheel. Shite!

He was getting short on air and the back of the ambulance was completely dark. He couldn't see a thing. Including where Calla was. Or where the surface was so he knew how close he was to catching a breath.

He finally kicked and kicked until he got his legs untangled so he could slip all the way through the opening to the back of the ambulance. He swam up and broke the surface. He took a huge breath and then immediately started searching.

“Calla?” He moved his hands around in the wet darkness.

That’s when he heard the most beautiful sound in the world. Muffled cries came from his left and, following the noise, his hands closed on Calla’s drenched frame, sitting on a gurney.

Jaysus the water was up to her chest. He felt along her body until he came to her face. Some sort of rag was stuffed in her mouth. He yanked it out and she started crying, “Thank you. Thank God. Oh God. Thank you. Thank you.”

“Gotta say, this is the first time I’ve been called God outside the bedroom.”

“Oh my God, if I could smack you right now, I would,” she laughed and cried at the same time. “Get me out of here. I’m handcuffed to this damn thing.”

Shite. Liam felt down her arms to her wrists. On both sides she was cuffed to the handles of the huge gurney. There was no way they were going out the way he came in. And they were running out of time.

“I’m gonna see if I can get the doors open from the inside. I’m only letting you go for a second, okay.”

“Okay,” she said, but her voice shook so much Liam could tell she was terrified in spite of the fact she’d just been making jokes.

Right then there was an ear-splitting *bang*. And then another one.

Then the ambulance was flooded with light as Mack yanked open the back door. For a second, Liam could only stare. The bastard had shot the lock off the door.

“You could have killed us, you fucking maniac.” Then he shook his head. “Help me get her out of here. She’s handcuffed to this damn thing.”

Mack nodded and waded into the ambulance. He pulled on the handcuffs and obviously saw what Liam had. They weren’t getting her out of there apart from the gurney. Liam was already trying to tug at the gurney and get it free from the sinking ambulance. It wasn’t budging.

“Mack, help me move this damn thing.” He jerked at it some more but while it rattled a bit and sloshed the water, it didn’t move.

“I don’t want to panic anyone,” Calla said, “but *get me the fuck out of*

here!”

Liam looked up and saw the water was at her neck. He would not sit here and watch Calla die.

Mack dove down, probably trying to find whatever held the gurney to the ambulance. Good idea. Liam did the same. He felt all along the floor on the right side of the gurney. But there were just the wheels and the floor and nothing holding the two together. What the fuck was it?!

He ran out of air and surfaced. Only to find Calla’s head tipped back as she strained to keep her nose above water.

“Goddammit!”

Liam looked around... There! He yanked a bit of clear plastic tubing off the wall. It had a mask on one end and some sort of medical something on the other. He ripped both of them off and put the tube in Calla’s mouth just as the water closed over her face.

He held the other end of the tube clear of the water so she could keep breathing through it. But holding it up meant he couldn’t help Mack in the search to free the gurney. And they only had so much time before the whole goddamned ambulance filled and sank. Liam had no idea how deep the water was, but it had been an especially snowy winter and all the reservoirs and lakes were full.

Mack came up gasping for air. He took one look at Liam holding the tube out of the water and Calla submerged. His eyes widened and then he took another huge breath and dived back down.

“Come on, Mack,” Liam whispered. “I’ll take back every time I ever called you a stupid bastard, if you can just figure this out.”

The water continued rising. The tubing Liam had found wasn’t very long and soon, the water had risen almost to the end of it. Shite, shite, *shite*. He couldn’t— They weren’t going to be able to— *FUCK!*

He looked around frantically for anything else that might do. Some other tubing that might be longer? But everything was in disarray, half the shit must have fallen off the walls and out of the cabinets when the ambulance crashed into the lake.

He was useless. Calla was going to die. For all his money and power, he was a useless piece of shit who would watch her die right in front of his goddamned eyes—

The gurney suddenly shifted.

Mack did it.

The bastard actually *did it*.

Liam wanted to whoop with joy but instead he shook himself and made sure to hold the tubing clear of the water.

Mack came up to the surface, wading wildly with one arm and tugging at the gurney with the other. Jaysus, he was a terrible swimmer.

“Take the tube so she can breathe,” Liam said.

And for once in his life, Mack didn’t argue. He reached over the gurney and took the tube carefully while Liam braced his legs against the side of the ambulance and pushed the gurney out the back.

Calla sputtered for breath as her head finally came clear of the surface and Mack tossed the tubing aside, one hand coming to her face. She spit and blinked. Jaysus, Liam couldn’t imagine how traumatizing everything she’d just been through was.

Even now. She was still locked to a heavy hunk of metal and they were in a lake.

“We’ll get you out of here, baby. Everything’s all right now.”

She just shivered, apparently out of quick-witted responses. Liam couldn’t fucking blame her. He pushed the gurney all the way free of the ambulance, using the doors for the last little bit of leverage before swimming on his own.

Calla’s feet immediately began to sink. She yanked her knees up, twisting and floating but being dragged down by her wrists attached to the gurney.

“Mack, can you get her feet?” Liam asked, trying to keep his voice calm. He wasn’t sure how good a job he was doing by the way Calla whimpered. He stayed at her head, pumping his legs furiously under the water to keep her afloat.

“We’ve got you, baby. It’s just a little way to shore.”

Thank God it wasn’t a lie. While the reservoir dropped steeply off from the road, there was enough silt built up by the roadway. When Mack swam around to the foot of the gurney, they were able to wedge the wheels onto solid land.

Behind them, the ambulance kept sinking until only the top corner of the doors was visible. Medical paraphernalia floated all around.

Even wedged on the soil, the water was still deep enough that Calla’s waist and legs were submerged. When Mack moved around closer, she threw herself into his arms. Well, as much as she could with her hands still cuffed to the damn gurney. Liam tread water, lifting Calla’s cuffed wrist to get a

better look at it. There had to be some way to get it off.

Then he heard sirens in the distance. Thank Christ. He'd gotten into his share of scrapes throughout his years where Garda had gotten involved to be wary of the bastards—but he'd never been happier to hear the police were coming. They'd be able to get Calla free.

"Help's coming, baby." Liam pushed some wet hair out of Calla's face and dropped his forehead against hers. Mack kissed her, all three of their heads close together. Just like they should always be.

Which was when he remembered his last words to Calla about her only being with him for his money.

"I'm sorry I was such a fucking idiot and didn't trust you," Liam said, words tumbling out one after the other. "Everyone I ever loved before has let me down. Just wanted me for what I could give them." Even his da. He was only worth something to Ciarán if he could prove himself worthy of the O'Neill name and legacy—a standard which his da always set impossibly high. Maybe because he never really believed Liam was his son.

"But you aren't everyone else. You're Calla." He grabbed her face between his hands. "You're the woman I love." Jaysus. It was so obvious now. "I was a coward not telling you before." He hadn't even been willing to admit it to himself. Not before that horrible moment when the ambulance went over the road into the lake and his heart stopped beating.

Calla was worth taking a chance on. She was worth everything. And Mack. He had Liam's heart too, the big bastard. Calla was the glue, but the three of them were the perfect fit. When he was with them, it felt more right than anything had in his life. Two people who wanted him just for... well, *himself*. Who found him worthy all on his own.

Liam grasped Mack's bicep and pulled him close as they both embraced Calla. For her part she cried and laughed and hugged them back.

Until a loud growling shout came from above.

"You'll never be anything but my *bitch*."

Mack jerked back from Calla and Liam right as the figure above them, blood streaming from his—*crotch?!—*leapt down from the road, knife raised over his head.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

MACK

Mack didn't even have time for a full thought before—
SLAM. Bone's weight hit him full force and knocked him back into the water. *The knife. Block the arm holding the knife.*

Shit! Burning pain lit up Mack's left forearm. Fucker had sliced him. Still. Better his arm than his throat. Mack wrestled to get hold of Bone's wrist, both of them sinking deeper into the water as they struggled for control of the knife.

There. He finally grabbed Bone's wrist. He tried to elbow Bone's throat but upside down in the disorienting dark water, Mack could barely tell his ass from his ankles. He struck out several times, once even making contact with... something.

But then a thick arm came around his throat. Fuck. Bone had gotten behind him somehow. Mack held on tighter than ever to the wrist holding the knife.

He was short on air, though. Seriously short. It wasn't like he'd gotten much advance notice of Bone's attack. If he didn't get a breath soon, he'd pass out. And be easy fucking pickings.

Then Bone would go for Liam and Calla. Liam might be able to hold his own in a fight, but Bone had a knife. And Calla was still handcuffed to that damn gurney.

No. He would not let anything happen to them because of his fucked up past.

With a roar into the water, Mack jerked Bone's hand holding the knife up and stabbed it into Bone's other arm around his throat.

Bone's grip immediately loosened and he ripped the knife out of his own flesh. Mack took the chance to swim to the surface and grab a huge breath. But Bone was only more enraged. He came at Mack, knife swinging.

Mack yanked the gun out of the back of his pants and he pulled the trigger right in Bone's face.

Bone stopped, wincing. But then he laughed when nothing happened. Shit. The waterlogged gun hadn't fired.

Mack felt his eyes widen as he swam frantically backwards.

"Think fast."

Then a soaking medical duffel bag hit Bone in the head from behind, throwing off his attack on Mack. Bone swung around, tossing off the blue duffel but getting tangled in the straps. Mack wasn't about to lose the opportunity.

He grabbed Bone's knife arm from behind, wrenching it back with enough force to— *Crack*. Like the sound of a wooden baseball bat smacking a ball. There went Bone's bone.

He screamed and dropped the knife.

He still struggled when Mack grabbed and shoved his face under water but he was weak. After the blood loss and then his arm being broken, for once, he was weak and Mack was strong.

"Who's my best little bitch whore? Bone's breath on Mack's ear while he raped him. "You love being my little baby boy, don't you?"

"Go fuck yourself in hell," Mack spat.

Bone fucked him even more mercilessly. "You're clenching on my cock like you love it. You're my favorite, you know that? Out of all the bitches I've ever had, you're my favorite. My special little baby boy.

Mack shoved him even further beneath the water's surface.

He'd never hurt Mack again. He'd never hurt *anyone* again.

"Mack. Mack!"

Mack ignored Liam shouting his name. Until Liam rammed into him from the side, forcing him to let Bone up for air.

Bone gasped as soon as his head hit the surface.

"What the fuck are you thinking?" Mack shouted, grabbing Bone and

shoving him underneath again.

But Liam just shook his head, mouth agape. “You can’t just kill him like this. Listen,” he gestured at the road. “The cops are almost here.”

“We’ll say it’s self-defense.”

“You’re going to make Calla lie for you?” Liam demanded. “After everything she’s been through today. All because of you?”

Mack kept shaking his head. “You don’t know what he did.” He spoke through his teeth.

Liam’s face softened. Compassion. It took Mack aback. As did Liam’s next words. “From where you shot him, I can guess.” Liam moved closer. “He’ll never hurt anyone like that again.”

Mack looked over and saw Calla watching them, sitting up, obviously tense as she waited to see what Mack would do. Beautiful, innocent Calla, who deserved so much better than to witness anything as ugly as this.

“Do this and you might go back to jail,” Liam went on, voice pleading. “Don’t do it. Choose Calla. Choose *me*.”

Mack looked at Liam. His handsome, boyish features were strained with earnestness.

“Fuck,” Mack shouted, lifting a gasping and sputtering Bone back out of the water and hauling him over toward the incline where the reservoir met the road, far away from Calla. If Bone tried anything else, Mack would still be happy to bash his head in with some of the smooth stones near the base of the road.

The sirens were louder than ever, right over head. Liam swam back over to Calla and started to climb up the muddy, rocky embankment.

“Down here!” Liam yelled. “We’re down here. We need help. And bolt cutters!”

Chapter Forty

CALLA

Calla's own heartbeat was galloping a million miles an hour as the doctor moved the ultrasound wand over her stomach in order to see if her baby was okay.

Wown, wown, wown, wown, wown.

A smile split the doctor's face. "You hear that?" He held the wand steady and watched the screen. He was a tall man with more white than gray in his hair. "One hundred forty beats per minute is well within the healthy range. We can run a couple more tests to double check, but you haven't had any spotting and I see no reason to think there's anything wrong with your pregnancy."

"But I passed out when I fell off Painter. My horse," Calla clarified.

"You said you felt like you had the wind knocked out of you when you came to in the ambulance, right?"

Calla nodded.

"Did you have much to eat this morning?"

Calla shook her head and looked down at her lap. "No. I mean, I had half a bagel, but that was it." More like a fourth of a bagel if she was being honest. Mack had urged her to eat more but she'd felt nauseous. Morning sickness still hit some days. She claimed it was nerves because of the competition. God, that seemed like it was a million years ago now.

After the police had gotten her free of the cuffs attaching her to that horrible coffin of a gurney, another ambulance brought her to the hospital. She'd about hyperventilated when they put her in the back of it. Liam and Mack hadn't been able to come either because the police were still questioning them.

"Well," the doctor said, running his pen-light over her pupils again, "barring the results of your blood test, I'd venture to say that it was just a combination of low blood sugar and the shock of the fall that had you briefly passing out. And after the stress of everything that happened to you today," he patted her shoulder, "I suggest focusing on rest and nutrition for the next few days. But like I said, I don't see any reason you shouldn't continue with a healthy pregnancy."

Calla blinked but couldn't hold back any more. She put her hands to her face and started crying.

"Oh. There, there, Ms. Carter."

"Calla!"

Calla looked up at Liam's worried voice. "Are you all right? I'm sorry we took so long. The cops kept asking a million questions."

Liam jogged past the doctor to her side. Mack was behind him but he stopped in the doorway.

"Are you okay?" Liam asked again, slipping an arm under her head and pulling her to his chest. She didn't realize how tense she'd been until all her muscles relaxed at his touch. She went limp against him, reaching her other hand out for Mack.

He stared at her for a long moment before coming forward and clasping it. Finally. *Finally* she could breathe out.

"Everything's fine," she said, laughing and crying at the same time. "The baby's fine."

The next moment, though, her head was filling with images of what happened earlier.

God, when she'd come to in the ambulance only to find an attendant strapping her waist to the gurney. And then—she shuddered remembering how that man, that *monster*, ripped the second ambulance attendant backwards and how the blood sprayed when he slit his throat—

She shuddered.

"What is it?" Liam said. "Baby, you're killing us here."

She could tell he meant it, too. He sounded anguished. He didn't deserve

it. She knew both he and Mackenzie had been through the ringer today too.

“Just...” She looked from Liam to Mack. “Thank you. If you hadn’t gotten there when you did...” She shuddered again and pressed the hands they were holding to her stomach.

Mack jerked his hand away and she looked up at him startled.

He ran his hand through his hair. “I need to go.”

He stood up abruptly.

“Wha—” Calla said at the same time Liam said, “You’re not going fecking anywhere.”

Mack swallowed, looking from one to the other. He shook his head and looked down. “I almost got you killed. The bab—” His voice broke and he looked toward the window, jaw flexing with emotion.

“You saved me.” Calla reached for his hand again but again, he pulled it away.

“Stop it,” he bit out, eyes flashing at her. “I know what I am. I’m ugly and fucked up inside. Why do you think I got these tattoos?” He yanked up his shirt sleeve to expose one of the bug-eyed devils inked on his skin. “It’s what he made me. I’m damaged fucking goods and you deserve better than me. You deserve a man like him.” Mack’s eyes went to Liam.

“Mackenzie,” Calla cried. How could he think that of himself? He’d been used and abused so horribly, but didn’t he see? That was over now. “Don’t you see? I felt ugly and alone my whole life until you two. We belong together. We’re each other’s family. And now we’re about to add one more.”

Mack’s face went pained as he glanced at her hand on her stomach.

Don’t pull away. Please. Don’t pull away again, she begged silently.

“For Christ’s sake, there you are,” boomed a voice from the doorway. Calla’s head swung that direction just in time to see Liam’s father striding into the room.

Chapter Forty-One

LIAM

“I had to find out from the fecking paparazzi where me own son was. They’re flocked outside like buzzards over a kill.” Ciarán looked Liam up and down. “Well, you look a bit waterlogged but not too much worse for wear. Now let’s end this nonsense and come home with me on the private jet.”

Liam could only stare at him in disbelief. Did he not see the woman in the hospital bed whose hand he was holding?

He stood up straighter. Enough. “Da, this is me girl, Calla. And that there,” he pointed to the ultrasound picture that had been printed off, “may or not be me biological son or daughter. Either way, I’m going to love them as if they were.”

His father’s back stiffened. “You have to find out. You can do a test before its born. If I would have had that chance, it would have changed everything.” Emotion choked his father’s voice.

Liam could only blink in disbelief at the man he’d spent his whole life either worshiping or hating. “So you coulda kicked me and ma to the curb if you found out I was the stablemaster’s bastard before I was even born? Is that what you’re sayin’ straight to me face?”

Ciarán shook his head. “If you would have let me get two words in the other day, you would’ve heard me when I told you I did a DNA test. With

some hairs from your comb you left behind. You'd only been gone a month at the time, but I realized it was time to know. To put this behind us once and for all." Liam couldn't be sure, but it looked like there might be a sheen to Ciarán's eye. "You're mine after all. You're me son. But then I didn't know where you were. Not until that woman got in touch with us. You have to believe me, lad, if I'd known all along, it would have been different."

He shook his head. "But learning about the affair when you were still a boy and knowing there was a chance you weren't mine—"

"So Ma was right," Liam huffed out a short mirthless laugh. "I didn't believe her at first when she told me the reason you'd never tested me DNA against yours was 'cause you didn't trust yourself not to throw me out like last week's garbage if you found out I wasn't yours."

"But you *are* mine—"

"It shouldn't have mattered!" Liam shouted, hands going to the sides of his head. "Jaysus, I've spent the last two years ever since ma told me the truth trying to prove to meself that I *was* your son. People only ever wanted me for what I could give them. If you disinherited me and I lost it all, where'd that leave me?"

"Son, I—"

"Don't," Liam bit out, running a hand roughly down the back of his neck and staring at the floor. There was silence for a second before Liam looked back up. "It wasn't ever about the money to me." He stared Da down. "All I ever wanted was you. I didn't even realize it, either. Not 'til the last few months."

He looked at Calla and then Mack. "I didn't know what it meant to love someone who loved you back. Not because of what you could do for them. But just for you. Just because you made each other happy."

He focused on Mack. "I'm sorry for how I've been to you. But you gotta know everything you just said was complete shite. Here I was trying to prove I was better than you, like it meant I was his son somehow."

He shook his head, pain tightening his gut as Mack frowned. "But every step of the way, you've proved you're a better man than me. You're the best man I've ever met." Mack took a step back at that, but Liam followed him, getting right up in front of him. "Seems the only place I could admit that was the bedroom. But you took me as I am. It's just one of the reasons I love you."

Then he kissed Mack in front of God, his dad, and anyone who happened

to be passing by.

His father made a disgusted noise and turned around. “When you’re done with these juvenile stunts, call me office.” He headed for the door.

“This is all I’ve got to say to ya.” Liam gave his dad the middle finger, never taking his eyes off Mackenzie. Then he intertwined his fingers with Mack’s and pulled him back toward Calla on the bed.

Calla had tears in her eyes.

Liam’s neck heated but he didn’t let go of Mack’s hand. “So. If you didn’t hear, I’m not interested in ever findin’ out which one of us donated to make the little sprout.”

Calla laughed and this time when she reached for their hands and put them to her belly, Mack didn’t pull away. The look on his face was priceless, Liam wished he had a camera to capture it. It was full of shock and awe while he also looked a little like he was about to pass out.

“Family,” Mack finally whispered, echoing Calla’s earlier sentiment. He squeezed both their hands and bowed his head to Calla’s stomach.

Epilogue

MACK

“Is the blindfold really necessary?” Calla asked, tilting her head toward Mack. He was driving and he frowned her way. Liam reached up from the back seat and waved his hand right in front of her face, but she didn’t react. Mack smiled.

“You bet your arse it’s necessary. What’s the point of a grand gesture if it isn’t grand?”

Mack pulled onto the long gravel driveway and Calla grabbed for the door to steady herself when the truck started bouncing up and down.

“Whoa,” she said. “So we’re officially somewhere off the beaten path.”

Mack glanced in the rearview mirror and saw Liam looking smug as fuck. Shit, he’d never hear the end of how this was Liam’s great idea. Rest of his life, the Irish wanker would brag about how he knew just how to make all Calla’s dreams come true.

But then Mack smiled. After all, it was his name going on the paperwork.

Mack slowed the truck down as they came up to the house.

“Wait’s almost over,” Mack said. He parked in front of the house and then Liam got out of the truck and opened Mel’s door for her.

“Can I take the blindfold off now?”

“Not yet,” Liam said.

Mack came around the front of the truck to their side and took Calla’s

other hand.

“Now,” he and Liam said together.

Calla reached up and pulled the blindfold off. She blinked a few times in the bright noon sunlight. Then her brow scrunched.

She looked from Liam to Mack. “I don’t understand. Why are we at my family’s old ranch?”

Liam’s grin was so wide it was gonna break his damn face. “Gotta have a place to bring our baby home to, yeah?”

Calla blinked some more. “What do you—”

“We bought the place,” Mack said.

Calla’s mouth dropped open and her eyes went wide. “But how—”

“Turns out there was a reason Mack got a full ride to Harvard. He’s a right smart bastard.”

Calla looked to Mack. He put a hand on the back of his neck. “I just happened to see there was a future in cryptocurrencies. So I made a small investment.”

Calla started smiling but Mack could see she was still confused. Apparently, Liam could see it too.

“Fecking Bitcoin,” Liam said, shaking his head. “Mack bought five-hundred dollars of it in 2011, and now it’s worth fifteen million. Can you fecking believe that?”

“Holy shit,” Calla breathed out. She grabbed Mack’s arm. Her eyes ping-ponged back and forth between them before settling on Mack’s. “Is he serious?”

Mack nodded. He’d worked his ass off at the mechanics shop in town all through high school and had a few grand saved up by the time he went to college... and then prison.

Pres occasionally got a cell phone smuggled in and Mack had used the fifteen minutes of internet Pres granted him to try to do something with the little money he had. Otherwise he knew he’d be fucked when he got out. He’d first heard about cryptocurrencies at Harvard and had read up on it, so that’s where he put five hundred bucks. He’d tried a couple other investments but that was the only one that took off so fucking insanely.

“Can you believe it?” Liam asked. “Now I’m broke but this lanky bastard is our sugar daddy.”

Mack looked at Liam. “Never. Call. Me. That. Again.”

Liam laughed and clapped him on the back. Mack did have to say,

though, Liam was taking the whole not-having-a-penny-to-his-name thing surprisingly well. His dad was ‘cutting him off until he came to his senses.’ Liam had responded to that text with a selfie of himself kissing Mack while simultaneously squeezing Calla’s ass. Really, it was quite impressive he’d fit them all in a single camera frame.

“So you bought back my old house?”

“And the ranch,” Liam said. “And an additional five hundred acres on either side of it.”

Calla stumbled a little and Mack grabbed her arm to steady her. “Holy shit,” she whispered again.

“Know you dreamed about setting up a horse training and boarding place, so there’s money in the budget for that.”

Calla just shook her head. “But how? That’s Ned Cunningham’s land and he’d nev—”

Mack felt his blood rise at even hearing the name. “Turns out he’s so ashamed of having a lying, cheating, whore of a daughter, he’s selling out and moving to California.”

“I heard that after the sheriff arrested B— Betty? Bailey? Whatever her name is. Anyway, after she got arrested and everyone learned what she did, some folks who Cunningham was in debt to called in their markers. So he had no choice but to sell.”

“Six months in jail and a four-thousand-dollar fine is a fucking injustice,” Mack muttered. Stunt like that—using a buzzer on a recent broke mustang—Mack’s teeth ground together. The bitch had meant for Calla to get thrown. And plenty of the best horsewomen and men got seriously injured every year. Just last year Mack had seen a guy on a spooked horse get thrown and then dragged a quarter of a mile when his foot got tied up in the stirrup. Even thinking of how easily Calla could have lost the baby made sweat break out on Mack’s forehead.

But apparently, Daddy Cunningham still had enough money for a slick lawyer. He’d gotten his daughter’s charge pled down to *assault causing bodily harm*.

Then again, Mack himself had finally enjoyed the benefit of a good lawyer for once. Of course it had helped that Liam claimed he’d been the one to shoot Bone. Said the gun was his too.

Mack had never in his life had someone go to the mat like that for him. Seemed like the bastard meant it when he said he loved him. Wonders would

never fucking cease.

“I don’t care about Bethany,” Calla waved a hand. “Can we get back to the part where you bought my family’s ranch?” She bounced up and down on her toes, looking around.

A neigh sounded in the distance and Calla froze. Again, her mouth dropped open. “You didn’t,” she whispered.

“We did.” Another grin lit Liam’s face.

Calla took off sprinting around the side of the house toward the barn and horse paddock. Her shrill scream of excitement carried clear across the yard. “Prissy!”

She was over the gate and hugging her horse’s neck by the time Mack and Liam got there. When she looked back at them, tears shone in her eyes. “I can never repay you.”

She ran over, climbed the wooden fence of the paddock, and dragged both Liam and Mack close.

Christ but it was the best feeling in the world. Their two bodies, warm and alive against them. Family. It was Calla who first said it and every day Mack woke up with Calla and Liam in bed beside him, he could still barely believe it.

He ran his hand down her side to her stomach. A month after the Horse Makeover competition and their little one was growing strong.

“No repayment necessary,” Mack said, clearing his throat when the words came out rough. “That’s the point of family, right?”

Calla beamed up at him and she went up on her tiptoes to kiss first him, then Liam.

While she was kissing Liam, Liam gestured behind her back at Mack.

Oh. Right. The other thing.

He dropped on one knee and as soon as Calla broke away from Liam, he did the same.

“What are you—?” If Mack thought Calla’s eyes were wide before, it was nothing to the saucers they became now.

Liam pulled the ring box out of his pocket. “Calla Carter, will you marry us?”

Calla’s hand went to her mouth and more tears glistened in her eyes.

“Mack won the coin toss,” Liam went on, “so it’ll be his name that goes on the official papers, but it’s between all of us.”

Calla just kept standing there, staring down at them.

“Shit,” Mack said, starting to get up. This was too soon. She hadn’t even got used to the—

“Yes!” Calla shouted, dropping down and hugging them both close. “Yes. A million times yes!”

She sounded happy but she was crying. Her back heaved up and down she was crying so hard.

“Darlin,” Mack held her closer, “don’t cry.”

Calla pulled back. “They’re happy tears.”

“How about just the happy, and no tears?” Mack kissed her deep.

She kissed him back and finally her shaking slowed and then stopped. Mack pulled back but only long enough to turn her toward Liam.

Liam put the engagement ring on her finger, then cupped her face and kissed her. It was gentle at first, but it quickly got frantic.

Fuck, it was so hot when they went after each other like that.

“Let’s take this inside,” Mack said, standing up and hauling Calla with him. He smirked at the look of denied lust on Liam’s face.

Mack took Calla’s hand and led her inside. “We haven’t had much time to set up house yet but,” he led her back to the master bedroom that had a single piece of furniture.

The bed.

“We ordered it special,” Liam said, pulling his shirt off over his head and then kissing Calla again. “It’s an ultra king-sized bed.”

“No more having your mattress hogging ass pushing me off in the middle of the night,” Mack said, coming up behind Liam and massaging his shoulders.

Liam shuddered at the touch and Mack’s cock stiffened even more than it already was.

Calla broke off from Liam’s kiss and then moved behind Mack. She tugged at the bottom of his shirt and he paused to pull it off over his head. Then she started massaging him the way he was doing to Liam. Christ he loved having her hands on him.

“Liam and I were talking,” Calla said, her voice husky.

Mack turned his head to look back at her and he raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Calla bit her lip in a way that had Mack’s cock poking into Liam’s ass. Liam ground back against him.

“What about?”

Liam turned in Mack's arms and cupped his face like he had Calla's earlier. He ran his lips back and forth against Mack's, the stubble on their faces scraping one another. Calla's arms snaked around his waist and her hand dropped to grip his cock.

"About how we want you to know what it feels like to be the one in the middle," Calla whispered. "Receiving all the worship."

Liam jerked Mack toward the bed, pulling him off balance. He stumbled a few steps and Liam took the opportunity to drag him down to the huge bed with him.

Liam landed on top but Mack growled and quickly flipped them so that Liam was underneath. Liam's breathing went stuttered and Calla joined them on the bed. She'd been wearing a soft little cotton dress but it was a puddle of fabric on the ground. She slid her bra and panties off before crawling toward them in a way that made Mack want to fuck her senseless.

He went to grab her so he could do just that when Liam said, "Turn over and up on your knees."

Mack shot Liam a look. It was a look that should have communicated—*we've already settled this. I'm the top. Always.*

But Liam just grinned. "We'll take it easy on you. Promise." Then he winked at Mack.

Mack was about to put the bastard in his place but Calla put a hand on Mack's chest. "Please? Do you trust us?"

Mack stared at her face and the want he so clearly saw there. Did he trust them? Well yeah, but—

"Please," Calla said again.

And shit, how was he supposed to say no when she was flashing those soulful hazel eyes his way. Not to mention she'd grabbed his cock again and he thought he might start begging if he didn't have a hot, wet hole to stick it in soon.

"So how do you want me?" He directed it at Calla. He didn't think he could quite handle the smug look that was undoubtedly on Liam's face.

"On your knees." Calla's eyes sparkled with excitement.

Mack's chest went tight at exposing himself like that. How many nights had Bone shoved him face down into the bunk and then—

Bone can't hurt you anymore. Or anyone else. This is Calla and Liam. You trust them. You love them.

Mack swallowed hard and forced himself to roll over. He couldn't help

how tense his entire body went, though.

“Shh,” Calla whispered, rubbing a soothing hand down his spine. She must have sensed his tension.

He hated that. He was supposed to be the strong one. He was supposed to

—
“Fuck,” he shouted as a mouth closed around his cock. He looked down and there was Liam’s head between his legs, mouth circling his cock. He was on his back, hand at Mack’s shaft, feeding the crown in and out of his lips.

His blue eyes sought Mack out. They were wide. Unsure. Looked like he wasn’t the only one who felt vulnerable in this position.

For some reason that made Mack relax. This was Liam and this was Calla.

He even managed to stay mostly still when he felt a probing finger at his anus.

But that was because he was paralyzed.

This is my ass, baby boy. No one will ever fuck it as good as I do. I fucking own you. Stop that goddamned whimpering. You want to walk tomorrow? Because I’ll—

“Mackenzie?” Calla’s voice broke Mack out of the memory that was so fucking vivid, for a second, he’d been back there. Under Bone’s stinking body.

“Honey,” she asked, “are you okay? Because I can st—”

“Keep going,” Mack said through gritted teeth. He refused to let Bone have any more of his life than he’d already stolen. Not that it was that simple. How many times had he told himself not to give that fucker another thought?

He’d hoped the nightmares would end now that Bone was locked up again—and dickless. Mack had the satisfaction of learning that the surgeons hadn’t been able to do anything but sew together the little bit of flesh that was left after Mack shot the damn thing to smithereens. Bone was left like a sexless Ken doll, pissing out of a permanently inserted catheter. Nurses were surprisingly chatty when it came to a serial rapist who’d murdered two EMTs in cold blood.

Even knowing all that, Mack had still woken up a couple times in the dead of night, the old nightmares riding him.

Unlike in the past, though, Liam and Calla’s warm bodies tucked against his had soothed him enough to be able to go back to sleep more quickly than he used to. So maybe he’d never be cured in a single stroke. But he’d be

damned sure to do everything he could to take back what that monster had stolen.

One of Calla's fingers pushed against his asshole. He sucked in a breath. Her finger was slick. She must have lubed it. Christ, how long had she and Liam been planning this?

"Shh," Calla whispered again. "That's right. Let me in. Let us love you."

Liam licked around his crown and then sucked him in again.

"Jesus Christ," he moaned, his head falling down against his forearms. Calla took the opportunity to slip her finger inside. First one, and then another.

Initially Mack squeezed his eyes shut—but it was too easy to imagine Bone was the one behind him. So he opened his eyes and looked down his chest to where Liam was enthusiastically slurping at his cock.

Fuuuuuuuuuuuuck. Having both of them work on him at the same time. That was so fucking h—

"Oh," he grunted, his whole body jerking as Calla's fingers zeroed in on that spot.

Liam let go of Mack's cock long enough to say, "Gently. Make sure to go gently."

But Mack shook his head as he gave into the sensation. "No. Harder. Jesus. Fuck. Harder."

It was so good. Fuck. It was indescribable. To have something that had been only associated with horror, now to be so fucking good...

His cock hit the back of Liam's throat but Liam didn't pull off him. No, he swallowed him even more. He was clearly unused to the sensation. Calla was usually the one sucking him off. Liam hadn't had much practice. But what he didn't have in technique he made up for in eagerness. His long tongue never stopped moving.

It was fucking sensational. And with Calla's fingers working their goddamned magic. Within minutes Mack was grabbing the sheets and roaring as he had one of the hardest, most intense orgasms of his entire life.

He slid to the side and collapsed, feeling like Liam had just sucked the life out of him. Both Liam and Calla were smiling—Liam with a satisfied grin and Calla with that gentle tilt to her lips.

Goddammit but he loved them. The feeling almost tore his fucking heart apart it was so piercing.

"Make love to her," he said, barely getting the words out he was so out of

breath.

Liam crawled up the bed and Calla joined him. She crawled over Mack, kissing him long and lazily.

He closed his eyes and sank into the sensation. The solid bump of her stomach pressed into him. Their child. Growing inside her. It was so fucking insane.

He couldn't believe he was here. Wanted. Loved.

Calla let out a sudden breathy little gasp and Mack lifted his heavy eyes to look over her shoulder. Liam's face was a mask of concentration.

Damn, he was taking her ass.

Mack felt his cock stir back to life. Holy shit. The orgasm he had, he thought he'd be satisfied for a whole week. A goddamned month.

But with Calla's body jerking over his as Liam took her ass, his cock got stiffer and stiffer.

He pulled Calla's head down for a deep kiss even as he reached to line up his cock at her entrance. Jesus she was wet. So wet and wanting. Always wanting.

As Mack slid home inside her, feeling Liam's cock through the thin wall of her body, he thought: *fuck. This is it. This is perfection.*

He'd spent so much of his life filled with hate. Waging his one-man war against evil. Willing to die for it.

Only to discover that there was also a certain kind of beautiful in the world so precious that once you found it, there was nothing to do except *live* for it. Breathe for it. Give every last ounce of your being for it.

It was a lesson he was learning late.

But one he'd happily spend the rest of his life perfecting.

Reece

Reece
Roughneck #3

STASIA BLACK

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Chapter One

My husband sat across from me eating the Denver omelet I'd prepared for him while scrolling through his email on his phone with his thumb. Two slices of bacon crisped to perfection sat on a side plate, along with a piece of wheat bread, toasted to a light brown, one pat of butter right in the center. One glass of orange juice, one glass of water. His cup of coffee was in a to-go insulated mug. I'd warmed the cream in a water bath to make it the correct temperature so it didn't cool down the coffee—*not* microwaved. Jeff hated the taste of coffee with microwaved cream.

It all had to be done *just so*.

I'd taken extra care this morning to get everything perfect. All the while knowing that perfection didn't always mean safety.

If Jeff got an email he didn't like, or read something on the news that annoyed him... Well, there were a thousand variables I couldn't control.

A sick part of me sat in anticipation for his mood to turn. For that twitch in his eyes, the flare of his nostrils that meant the placid silence of the morning would turn on a dime to chaos and violence.

Jeff looked up at me sharply and frowned. "Why aren't you eating?"

Crap. I smiled, careful to keep my expression neutrally pleasant. "Just thinking about the day, darling. I need to take the dry-cleaning in today. I look forward to getting some sunshine. The rain's supposed to clear up later."

He frowned before glancing down at his phone. "No."

I blinked and swallowed, my fingers tightening in their grip on my fork and knife as I sliced into one of my two boiled eggs. All I was allowed for breakfast. "Oh? Would you prefer I went tomorrow?"

"I don't want my wife gallivanting all over town in a rainstorm, is that too

much to ask? It's supposed to rain all week."

I demurely put the bite of tasteless boiled egg in my mouth. It would be pointless to mention that there was going to be a break in the weather this afternoon. Or that a little rain had never hurt anyone.

Jeff shoveled the rest of his breakfast in his mouth, standing up and grabbing his half-finished toast. Then he glared down at me. "You haven't taken your pills."

"Oh. Forgive me."

I grabbed the handful of pills from the little bowl he'd put them in beside my plate setting. Five pills. Three were anti-depressants. One was an anti-psychotic. The last was a tranquilizer.

I tossed them in my mouth, then took a swallow of water.

"Open," Jeff demanded.

I opened my mouth wide.

"Tongue."

I lifted my tongue to show there weren't any pills squirreled away underneath.

"Good girl." He picked up his briefcase from beside the door to the garage, then his coffee. He stood there waiting, and I scurried to do the expected.

I hurried to his side and kissed his cheek. He patted me on the backside, then looked at me meaningfully. "I expect dinner on the table at six sharp. I might be late, but I might not be. Either way, I expect the food to be hot, so keep it warm in case I'm late. But don't let it get rubbery. I hate that."

"Of course." I smiled. Pleasantly. Vacantly.

"Good girl."

"Have a good day at work, darling."

He ignored me, attention back on his phone as he pushed through the door to the garage and let it slam behind him.

I stayed still, my back ramrod straight, until I heard the garage door open and then shut again.

And then I ran to the bathroom and stuck my finger down my throat until I was choking up the pills. I counted, only breathing out in relief when I saw all five of them floating in the toilet.

I sat back on the cool tile as I flushed. Not for long, though. I got up and brushed my teeth. I was sure the enamel on my teeth was getting worn by this morning routine, but I didn't see any other way. Besides, it was a short-term

fix. I'd only been doing it for eight months.

The withdrawal was a bitch, that was for damn sure.

I looked at myself in the mirror. Slim. Long blonde hair. Under thirty. The trophiest of trophy wives.

As long as you didn't look too closely at my wrists and the scars from the deep slashes there. Bruises could be hidden with concealer, but scars were more difficult. I wondered if any of our so-called "friends" ever wondered why I always wore long sleeves or else a watch and heavy bangles on my wrists, no matter the occasion. Then again, they didn't need to wonder. Jeff told anyone who would listen that I'd tried to kill myself. It fit well into the narrative he painted of me as mentally unstable and "fragile."

I'd been on the cocktail of pills ever since I'd made the attempt to exit this shit life six years ago. During the withdrawals last fall, I couldn't say I wasn't tempted to take the shortcut again. Jeff had finally allowed me to be around sharps again after year two out from The Incident. So I had access. I could have done it.

I wasn't sure exactly what I'd been planning the first day I threw up the pills after drinking just enough water to swallow them past my uvula and get them lodged in my throat. Well, the first time had been accident, but the day after it had been on purpose.

Before that, I hadn't felt much of anything at all for... years. I mean I still felt the pain when Jeff hit me. A slap was a slap and a broken bone was a broken bone, and it hurt. He never let me get numb enough not to feel the pain. What fun would that have been?

But the pills let me drift, pull apart from my body. It let the weeks drift into one another, and then become months, and then years were passing.

I was the broken, cowed thing Jeff had wanted from the beginning, and he reigned over me as Lord of the Manor.

And then one day, I stood at the kitchen doing dishes from breakfast and looking out the window, and there was a hummingbird buzzing around the tree that had just flowered outside.

I stopped, hands in the soapy water, and I watched it. It was beautiful, glorious, with wings flapping so fast I couldn't see anything but a blur as it moved from flower to flower. It had this amazing, iridescent breast of feathers. I was absolutely mesmerized.

I don't know how long I watched it... Before, all of the sudden, it zoomed straight into the window I was watching through with a loud *thump*.

I jumped and let out a little screech, horrified. And then I ran outside when I didn't see it fly back off again.

Only to find the back end of the bird sticking out the mouth of a neighborhood cat at the foot of my kitchen window.

"No!" I'd cried uselessly as the cat ran away with its catch.

I'd felt sick, and hurried back into the house, and I'd thrown up my breakfast.

And seen the pills I'd swallowed not fifteen minutes before. Some were half-digested, others were still in their bright capsule casings.

And it all felt so horrifying. What had happened to the bright bird. How quickly it went from flying free and glorious to becoming prey.

Jeff liked to talk about prey. He had a theory he liked to espouse that the world was full of predators and prey. He was a lawyer, a defense attorney, and he liked to think of himself as a predator who conquered the foolish and weak.

That he considered me one of the foolish and weak prey was a fact we both took for granted in this metaphor. He often talked about women as the weaker sex. When he was in a generous mood, he'd tell me patronizingly that it was good I had someone like him on my side, or else the world would eat me alive.

As if he hadn't been that cat waiting to devour me whole the moment I was vulnerable and stumbled across his path all those years ago.

The next morning, I'd shoved my fingers down my throat the moment he'd left for work, and every morning since.

Hurrying from the bathroom into the bedroom, I donned my gardening clothes and then I went into the backyard, grabbing my best hoe from the shed as I went.

It was raining and I was quickly soaked but I didn't care. I was operating on autopilot. If I thought too much about what I was doing, I might not have the nerve. And nerve was the only thing that was going to get me through this.

I'd almost gone twice last week. It had been sunny. There was no reason I shouldn't have done it then.

Except for the fact that I wimped out. Jeff had been in a good mood and I... I don't know what the hell I thought. But then one day, he came home and found me scrubbing the floorboards.

No wife of his should ever be on her knees. Except when he put me there,

apparently, because the next thing he'd done was give me a swift kick in the back of my ribs.

Like I was a dog.

It hadn't escalated.

But I'd decided that was the last time he would ever kick me.

I was done.

So I dug into the wet, loamy soil. I dug and dug, one foot down, then another several inches. Until I came to the hard metal cash box. I pulled it up by its handle.

The rain continued to fall, making a mess of the mud and dirt. The box was waterproof, and everything inside double-bagged in ziplock bags, so I ran over to the hose off the side of the house and washed it clean of the clinging wet dirt.

My clothes and shoes were a mess by the time I ran to the back porch and rather than trying to clean them, I just kicked off my shoes and disrobed down to my underwear before stepping back into the house.

I moved fast now. If Jeff came home... The thought stopped my breath. There was almost a thousand dollars in the box, squirreled away bit by bit in varyingly daring bids to build a war chest. Plus other items that couldn't be easily explained away. Wigs, hair dye...

There was no reason for him to come home, though. I tried to breathe and think rationally.

Still, I got quickly ready, blowing out my hair again. I'd already had makeup on for breakfast—Jeff said he wanted to look at something pretty in the morning, that was how he put it, "something pretty," so I always woke up two hours before he did to get ready and make breakfast.

I pulled on a dress, the only sort of thing I really owned besides the gardening clothes.

Plus, putting on a show was important for this leg of the journey. I slid my feet into high heels. Then I shoved the bags from the cash box into some of Jeff's luggage, called for a taxi, and waited with bated breath in the foyer until the cab pulled up ten minutes later.

Chapter Two

I had the cabbie drop me off at a motel half an hour south. I waited for him to drive off before hurrying down to the nearest bus stop. Two local bus exchanges later, I was finally at the central Greyhound terminal in San Jose. Buses going all over the country departed from here.

My heartbeat thrummed a hundred miles a minute. Was Jeff onto me yet? Was he... *here*?

I swallowed hard as I waited in line and finally got to the front of the ticketing window. I was still wearing my Penelope Chambers disguise and the guy behind the counter perked up.

Penelope Chambers always turned heads. Jeff had crafted me into the perfect wife, after all. At least from afar. But I'd felt less and less connected to the caricature he'd crafted me into. Big blonde hair, tight dresses, high heels. I'm sure he would have had me get implants if I hadn't had C cups to start with.

I hadn't felt connected to this shell in a long time and now less so than ever. But it was useful. This one last time I had to be her. Perform her.

I didn't smile though.

There were cameras and this was a performance. Penelope Chambers was beautiful, but she was not brave. She was scared. Furtive.

Jeff would absolutely, one hundred percent be watching this video from their cameras at some point. This performance was all for him. As much as I hated it, this was who I want him to think he'd made me.

Cowering. Terrified.

Someone acting on fear and impulse who would be sloppy and not make it very far.

“C-could I please get a ticket to Chicago?” I asked. My voice was so quiet and tentative that the clerk had to ask me to repeat myself.

“Chicago. I- I’d like a ticket to Chicago please. Cash.” I flattened a bunch of crumpled bills onto the counter, along with my ID.

Jeff liked to call me *mouse*. It fit well into his predator/prey worldview.

I was the food you fed to snakes, in his mind.

Who would I be after today? I had no freaking clue. Surviving this was all I could think about first.

The attendant handed me the ticket. “You have a nice day, Miss.”

I dropped my head, hiding my face from him and any cameras pointed my way. And only then, curtained by my hair did I allow a small, secretly thrilled smile.

First part down. Holy shit, I was actually doing this. I erased the smile from my face and lifted my head back up. Okay, one last walk for the cameras.

My heartbeat, already ringing in my ears, got even louder and more frantic.

I moved with stately elegance toward the bathrooms. I swung my hips and held my head high. I walked like Penelope fucking Chambers.

Because although he made me weak and meek, he also demanded exacting standards when we were out in public, a wife who wouldn’t ‘embarrass him.’ Mouse in the house but queen on the scene.

He wanted me to be more beautiful, more perfect and elegant and witty than any of his friend’s or business partner’s wives. Oh, he’d undermine me to those self-same wives to ensure I was always isolated, but he wanted their husbands to be envious of him.

And I paid an exacting punishment when I failed.

So I knew how to own a room. And when I walked, heads turned.

It was one last runway for Penelope Chambers.

May she rest in fucking peace.

And then I got to the bathroom and headed for the handicap stall. I was quick about it. Time was of the essence. I felt it counting down, a giant ticking clock hanging over my head like a proverbial sword.

I couldn’t help feeling like I’d wasted too much time as it was. Frustrating, since I’d tried to plan everything to a T. I couldn’t have the cab driver bring me directly here. Or maybe it was foolish, Jeff was going to find out where I was going eventually, but taking every last precaution to throw

him off the scent seemed smart at the time. Even though I knew he'd always end up following every bread crumb. I just prayed time was on my side.

There was no point in second-guessing myself now, I could only march full steam ahead. He should still be at work, without even a clue I'd left the house. Everything had been normal. Yes, he'd had me followed for a couple of years after my last escape attempt, and again after the suicide attempt, but I hadn't noticed anyone tailing me for the last couple of years.

Everything was fine.

It was *fine*.

Still, I hurried as I shimmied out of the bandage dress one final time and pulled on a ratty pair of jeans. I smoothed my hair down as flat as it would go and nimbly braided the length of it, that I then pinned in a crown around my head. I'd watched this in a YouTube video at the library and practiced in the library bathroom, not daring to try at home.

Once it was pinned as flat as I could get it, I tucked a bit of pantyhose over top to keep it all down, then pulled on a brown chin-length hairpiece that helped change the shape of my face in appearance.

I'd practiced enough times to be able to do all this within five minutes, and a quick glance at my mp3 player showed I was keeping up with my best times. I'd left my phone at home and had picked up the mp3 player at a thrift store. I was so paranoid, I never even hooked it up to our wifi at home. I only charged it at coffeeshops or the library and hid it so Jeff never knew I had it.

I pulled on big, chunky glasses with fake lenses and used a wet wipe to scrub all the makeup off my face. Last, I slipped on what looked like a septum piercing in my nose. A big, baggy flannel shirt completed the look.

My old clothing and blonde wig all went back into a plastic bag, and finally, I pulled a wadded-up denim backpack out of the bottom of my purse. Last but not least were the Converse instead of the high heels. Then I shoved the purse, plastic bag, and all the rest into the backpack and slung it over my shoulders, hopefully completely transformed from the woman who'd walked into the bathroom.

I checked my watch. Okay. The eleven forty-five leaving for Seattle departed in fifteen minutes. I needed to move my ass.

I glanced under the stalls to check that no one was there, then hurried out.

As I came out of the bathroom, I made sure to alter my posture. No more Penelope Chambers, arm candy to the rich and powerful.

I kept my head down, hair swinging in my face, as I slouched out of the

bathroom and pretended to be engrossed in a phone that was really just the cheap mp3 player.

Right now I wasn't listening to anything, it was just a prop. I never saw young people these days without their hands on their devices, and it was all about blending in.

I headed to a different ticketing kiosk.

"Where to?"

"Seattle," I say, head still down.

The attendant looked bored, barely paying attention to me as he rattled off the amount and asked for ID.

Right. Here we go. This was where it could all go into the shitter.

I volunteered at a soup kitchen once a month—one of my few Jeff-approved outings. Charity work looked good for the little wife to be up to and all that.

And there was a girl who came in sometimes, especially towards the end of the month when her paycheck was running out.

She had short cropped brown hair with heavy bangs. Chunky glasses. A septum piercing. She was small in stature.

Our faces didn't look anything alike.

I paid her a hundred bucks for her ID anyway.

I pulled it out and laid it on the counter along with the money. Then I held my breath. Milliseconds stretch into eons. The sweat on my brow slipped down my forehead behind the bangs of the wig.

The ticketer took the money and barely even glanced at the ID before pushing it and the ticket back across the counter to me.

Don't show your relief, don't show your relief.

I mumbled something like, "Cool," before grabbing both and turning back into the crowd.

Right at the same time I heard a familiar voice call out, "Have you seen this woman?"

Shit! Shit shit *shit*.

It was Buchanan, Jeff's overly involved lead attorney and best friend. He who famously covered up, shut up, and otherwise took care of all of Jeff's dirty underhanded dealings that never saw the light of day.

Including *me* several times in the past, when Jeff went too far, and I was left bloody and broken enough to need a hospital.

Broken left orbital bone. Shattered ulna from the time Jeff hit my forearm

with a baseball bat. The... *other time* that led to me slashing my wrists. Which he of course also cleaned up, seeing to my in-patient treatment, locking me away, and having them put me on suicide watch so I couldn't escape, even by death. He also made sure I was immediately put on the numbing drug cocktail so no one would believe anything I said, and yes, I did try.

I was diagnosed as being bipolar with schizoid episodes. And suicidal ideation, obviously.

I heaved for a breath that didn't come and turned away from where Buchanan was pushing through the crowd, showing his phone around, no doubt with my picture on it.

He hasn't got you yet. You can still get out of this. I stumbled through the crowd, clutching my ticket in my hand.

Away. I just had to get *away*.

I fought back the tears that threatened and bit the inside of my cheek as hard as I could. Fuck Buchanan, fuck Jeff.

I was here. I'd come this far.

Just get to the bus. Get to the *bus*.

I nodded to myself and then reminded myself to shuffle. I was a woman without a care in the world. I was just a normal millennial, barely out of college. Off to visit my sick aunt.

Even though it killed me, I slowed down instead of hurrying. I took my time and though every instinct in my body screamed for me to look over my shoulder to see how close the hunter that was stalking me was—

No.

That was the logic of a person who got themselves caught.

Not this time. Not this fucking time.

So I kept cruising forwards. It took me a panicked second, but I finally found the bus for Seattle. I didn't look over my shoulder as I climbed on. I didn't freeze up even though my feet felt like lead blocks. I kept myself fluid. Just like any other person. Visiting a sick aunt, visiting a sick aunt.

A couple people glanced up as I moved down the aisle and took a seat at the back, but only a couple. I wasn't Penelope Chambers, turning heads. I didn't sit by the window even though I preferred the window seat. Any barrier from Buchanan was good right now.

And I'd timed it well. It was only five minutes until we left.

Five horrifying, terrifying minutes where every muscle was rigid and me

about sweat out my entire body weight, clutching my backpack like it was a life preserver, but then—

The blessed noise of the door closing.

I collapsed, boneless, back against the seat in thanks as the bus pulled out of the depot, taking me away from Penelope Chambers, Jeff Chambers, and the prison I prayed I'd never, *ever* see again.

Chapter Three

I was exhausted after three days on the road.

From Seattle I'd headed across country to New York. I disappeared into the city for an afternoon, then got a cab down to New Jersey. At a gas station, I pulled out the electric clippers that were the last goody in my bag, slapped on an inch and a half guard, and cut off all my hair. Talk about liberating. I'd colored it a neutral brown and was happy to leave all the scratchy wigs behind forever.

Then I got back on the Greyhound and went down to Georgia.

Then to Missouri where I saw the big arch in St. Louis for the first time. I pressed my hand to the window glass as I passed, feeling like an alien passenger in my own body.

Every hour, every minute I was free felt...*impossible*.

I'd dreamed of this for so long, so single-mindedly. But now that I was finally doing it...well, it was beyond surreal.

I didn't know how to feel.

How to *be*.

I'd defined myself for a decade in terms of that prison, and of nursing whatever pain he'd most recently inflicted on me, and to keeping up the façade and trying so hard not to wake the beast inside him.

But now I was free to be just...*me* again.

Except I didn't remember how to be her. If I'd ever known her.

Who the *hell* was Not-Penelope-Chambers?

Over the endless hours as I watched the rolling scenery, I tried to remember the me I'd been before her. But when I tried to, it was a shock to think... maybe I'd never really known her—I mean, *myself*. I'd never really

had the time to *find myself*, as it were.

But... not to know who you were, at your core... I mean, I *knew* crazy and that just felt plain crazy.

Before my marriage, I'd just gone from my mother's house to college. There had been a brief flare of phoenix-like color when I got to college as I'd begun the process of discovering myself. I *might* have gotten there.

Except that within a month, I'd met Jeff and he swallowed me whole before I ever had the chance to even think of flying.

And now?

It didn't feel like flying. More like I was one of those crippled birds with a sad, broken wing. How was I supposed to fly? I could barely crawl.

But—I sucked in a deep breath—I'd made it this far, right? I was here. And there. And everywhere. All at the same time. Living in the present and the past and still dreaming of a better future.

Except I just felt as unsettled as my roaming body.

The sun was long set as we pulled into a station in Oklahoma.

It was time for me to get off. This bus was headed back to California and that was one place I'd never go back to. No way, no how. Jeff had too much influence and he always would. My most impassioned prayer was that he'd look for me for a while, maybe six months? And then move on.

I bit my lip even as I wished it, gathering my backpack and pulling it on over my shoulders. Because I knew Jeff better than anyone else. I had no illusions that he loved me.

But he hated to lose. More than anything. An insult to his pride galled him like nothing else.

The thought of me of all people besting him, his prey, his *mouse*... that would gall him until the end of his days. And that made me very afraid of what it might make him do. The extremes it might drive him to in order to find me.

I pulled my hoody up over my head to block my face from any cameras as I stepped down off the bus and made my way into the bus station.

It was cold and mostly empty inside. I pulled out the burner phone I'd bought in New York to check the time. It was eight at night.

I hadn't really checked ahead, and when I got inside, was dismayed to see there weren't any buses heading south until six a.m.

Looked like a night of sleeping in the *super* comfortable bus station chairs was ahead for me. Oh goody.

At least I was tired. I hadn't done much sleeping today in spite of the soothing rumble of the bus tires on the highway pavement.

A chatty woman had sat herself beside me, hellbent on telling me her whole life story. She talked for three hours straight without ever asking me a single question. Not that I minded, I didn't plan on answering any questions. Not honestly, anyway, but still. And her perfume was overly strong.

Thankfully, she'd gotten off in St. Louis but I hadn't been able to fall asleep since.

I found a spot by a plug and plugged in my burner phone that doubled as an mp3 player and FM radio, and settled in.

It charged fairly quickly while I people watched, and then I put my earbuds back in and listened to a couple of podcasts, settling my backpack in my lap and tucking my arms through the straps in case anyone tried to mess with it if I fell asleep.

Then I let my eyes finally settle shut.

The podcaster's voice droned soothingly and I drifted, and drifted, and *drifted...*

"Penelope, can you stay after class?"

I blinked and looked up from my paper. There was a bright C- scribbled on the top of it. My nose stung, which was stupid. It was stupid to feel so wounded over a grade. So what if I'd always gotten all A's in high school.

This was college, and of course I wouldn't ace every paper. It was just... I'd worked *really* hard on this one and thought I had done a good job.

The C- glaring at me said otherwise. C- was almost a *D*.

I nodded at the TA, Jeff Chambers, and my heartbeat started racing for entirely different reasons. He was beloved in the English department, and there'd been much ado about how this was the last class he'd be TA'ing for before switching to his law degree full time. He was already taking classes for it and there was hubbub about how everyone in *that* department expected great things from him too.

This was the person who'd graded *my* paper. And now he wanted to see me after class. It couldn't be for anything good, and yet being singled out by him still made me feel special and brought a flush to my cheeks. Which was even more ridiculous. He was going to chew me out for how bad my paper was and here I was blushing because he was so handsome and all the freshman girls had a crush on him, a graduate student.

I hurried down the row of desks to where he sat typing away on his laptop

by the lectern.

“Just a moment,” he said, not looking up from his task as everyone else filed out of the room. I was the only one he’d asked to stay behind. I stood, nervous, trying not to shuffle back and forth from one foot to the other.

Five minutes of waiting, after everyone else was gone, he finally closed the lid of his laptop and looked up at me.

“Have a seat,” he said, gesturing toward the front row of chairs.

I did. “What’s this about?” I asked.

He frowned and brought his hands together, one rubbing the fist of the other. “I’m not sure how to put this delicately,” he said slowly. “Your paper was...”

I found myself leaning forward on the edge of my seat waiting for what he was going to say.

“It was not well-argued. And frankly, doing a feminist reading of Hemingway is far from original.”

His words felt like a blow. I thought I’d put forth a considered and well-supported case for a feminist reading of Hemingway’s short stories. But I didn’t know how to articulate that without sounding stupid in front of this intellectual giant. “So... I take it that it isn’t?”

He smiled at me like I was especially amusing. “No.” He reached forward and took the paper I was still so sweatily grasping and flipped several pages. “While I appreciate your empathy for the girl in Hills Like White Elephants, it’s not grounded in textual evidence.”

“Oh.” I sat there wanting the ground to swallow me up. I’d worked hard on the paper, and it was true, I *had* felt empathy for the girl in that story, faced with the callous American demanding she get an abortion.

“Hey,” said Jeff, reaching out and putting a hand on my knee, just the quickest touch before removing it. It was just friendly, nothing more, I told myself. “But if you want, I am offering tutoring sessions. There’s a group that meets at my house on Tuesdays. You’re welcome to come.”

I smiled, feeling lit up from his attention. “Really? That’d be great. I want to get my Master’s in Literature so it means so much to me to do well in this class.”

He smiled back at me, a really warm smile that made him look even more handsome. “Here, I’ll write down the address for you, then.” He took my paper from me, flipped it over, and scribbled his address on the back. “Tuesday at seven. Don’t be late.”

“I won’t be,” I gushed. “Promise.”

“Good girl.”

I woke with a start, Jeff’s, “*Good girl*” still ringing in my ears, and waves of revulsion shuddering through my body.

Only to sit up with a start because oh shit.

No.

No no no no!

My backpack was gone.

I picked up the straps that were still wound in between my arms and looked in horrified disbelief at the ends that had been shorn clean through.

Someone had cut them while I slept and stolen the backpack right off me.

Son of a bitch!

I jumped to my feet and looked left and right, but whoever had done it was long gone. I’d been dead asleep for who knew how long after the days on the road, even in the uncomfortable bus station plastic chair.

Oh shit.

My hands went uselessly to my head as I looked back and forth from one end of the bus depot to the other.

My backpack had everything in it. My possessions. My *money*. Oh shit, it had my money. I raked my hands through my short hair.

I was so fucked.

I’d thought about getting one of those travel money belts that fit underneath your clothes, but in the end I hadn’t done it. I didn’t think I’d—

I threw the useless straps to the floor and fought angry tears that flooded my eyes.

To get so far and now to lose everything! What the hell was I going to do?! That backpack had everything. Even my tampons because my period was going to start next week. Shit! Shit shit shit shit!

“Do you have a ticket?” asked a voice from behind me. “You can’t be here overnight in the station unless you have a ticket for a morning bus.”

I spun around to see a guard eyeing me suspiciously.

“Yes. I mean, yes, I’m going to get on a bus in the morning.”

“Can I see your ticket?”

Shit. “It was too late when I got in. The ticket booth was closed. But I’ll buy a ticket first thing when it opens again.” Ha. With what money? Was I going to panhandle?

The guard frowned. “I’m gonna need to see some ID then.”

I blanched and the guard wasn't an idiot. Neither was he moved when I tried to explain what had happened, even as I showed him the cut straps of my backpack.

"You need to exit the station or I'll escort you out."

"Well, you see, it's a funny story. See these straps? I was robbed. Just now!"

The guard stood stoically, not seeming moved by my explanations and I couldn't help getting frustrated. "You're a guard on duty. Where were you when the thieves were stealing all my earthly possessions? Don't you have cameras in this place? It should be caught on camera."

But even as I heard myself say it, I got to my feet. "You know what, never mind. I'm out of here."

Because was I really sitting here drawing so much attention to myself and even demanding we look at taped *footage* of me? Jesus, this was a red flag and the exact *opposite* of everything I'd promised myself I would do on this journey. I was meant to fade into the background, be completely inconspicuous so that no one would remember me or be able to describe me in case any of Jeff's minions came looking.

I threw the stupid backpack straps into the trash and then stalked out of the station and into the cold February air of Oklahoma City.

A bold move considering I had nowhere to go and no idea what the hell I was going to do now.

All I had were the jeans, t-shirt, Converse, and oversized hoody I was wearing. Oh, and my socks, I also had my socks. And some chapstick I'd shoved in my pocket.

I wanted to beat myself over the head. What had I been thinking keeping my little clutch wallet in my *backpack*???

Dear God, it was an amateur mistake and now...

Now I was wandering downtown Oklahoma City with no plan, no money, shivering my ass off while I waited for sunrise.

* * *

I did the only thing I could think of.

I couldn't risk staying in Oklahoma City. Not after the run-in with the security guard at the station. Was it paranoid of me? Sure.

But the last time I'd run away, I'd made it to Portland and what had led Jeff to me was a goddamned cab driver whom Jeff's private detective had interviewed—the guy who'd picked me up from the bus station.

I'd only been there a week before Jeff showed up, and dear God had he made me live to regret it.

I hadn't been able to eat solid food for a month. He told all our friends that I was "having some work done."

It fit the narrative he always painted of me as being superfluous, overconcerned with my looks, and dramatic to the point of mentally unstable if I didn't get what I wanted.

Besides, in this case it was true, I did have a nose job. Because he'd broken the damn thing and it would be too conspicuous to leave it that way. He told the plastic surgeon I'd fallen down the stairs. Bastard couldn't even get original. The plastic surgeon just nodded along and told me he could do a procedure to deal with the bags underneath my eyes, too, if I *really* wanted to keep a youthful glow.

I was twenty-four at the time.

I did not kick the man's balls in, but I'd dearly wanted to.

So no, I couldn't stay here, but I didn't have any money to get to a more final landing place. I'd been hoping to make my way to Austin. It might still be in the South, but it was supposed to be liberal there, and it had a great music scene.

I had this dream of myself where I was the modern version of a hippie. I'd get some tattoos. Go to concerts. Maybe I'd work at a coffee shop. I'd finally reclaim my body as *mine*, and just enjoy some easy living, drifting along.

Drifting along sounded *lovely*. Maybe get some friends who were the genuine kind, and read books, and watch bad reality tv—the kind that Jeff hated—and I'd learn how to just *be*.

Not exactly a grandiose dream, but one that was mine.

Except that I was stuck in freaking Oklahoma City with no funds and not even a change of clothes! Not exactly an ideal place to start this theoretical new life from.

So I did the only thing I could think of. I started walking. I popped in a gas station that was open 24 hours and asked where the big highway was—I 35—and I walked towards it. Turned out I was in luck. It was just a thirty-minute walk away since the Greyhound station was so centrally located.

Then I found another gas station that serviced big rigs, and I did what I figured was either really stupid or really smart.

I asked around for anyone headed south.

“Girl, you stupid or somethin’?” asked a Latina woman of indeterminate age. Well, I guess that clarified the stupid question.

The woman was maybe in her fifties...or maybe a decade older or younger, it was hard to tell. She was wide set, wearing a flannel shirt, with long braided hair coming out the hole in the back of a trucker’s hat.

I squared my shoulders and looked her in the eye. “No ma’am. Not stupid, just desperate. All my stuff got stolen but I’ve got to get to Austin.”

She shook her head at me. “Kids these days.”

I didn’t correct her that I was hardly a kid at twenty-nine, especially since it seemed like she was considering giving me a ride.

“Well, come on, then,” she said. “I’m only going as far as Dallas, but you’re welcome along. I could do with some company to keep me awake.”

I grinned. “I’m great company.”

She huffed a noise of disbelief and checked out with her giant cup of coffee and donuts.

I couldn’t believe hitchhiking actually worked! But we had a great morning driving south. Mostly me asking her for stories about her life, and her telling me long spiels.

It was a gift I had. I could usually get people talking. I was a good listener, and was usually interested in what people had to say.

It was also one of my downfalls. Because, say with someone like Jeff who loved to hear the sound of his own voice, a person like me was catnip to him.

At that first Tuesday tutoring session, he’d gone on and on about Hemingway’s genius and I’d soaked it up along with all the other students he’d invited. I never once questioned or considered the fact that he’d only invited the type who didn’t challenge him and were more likely to think him a god.

And that most of us were women. It was five women and only two guys at that first Tuesday study group. As I became more a part of what I would later realize was a cult of personality Jeff fostered around himself, well yes, it was impossible to *not* notice they were mostly women.

But I told myself we all just flocked to him because he was good looking and charismatic. And smart and gregarious and amazing. I waxed just as

poetic as any of them about how wondrous he was.

And it made me feel even more important when, after the first few tutoring nights, it was *me* he chose to talk to long after the sessions had ended. *Me* who he asked on a date. *Me* who he said understood him more deeply than anyone ever had before. *Me*, who, three weeks after meeting, he declared was his soulmate.

I bought it all hook, line, and sinker, because it was everything I'd always wanted to ever hear.

But a man like Jeff knew that. And so he said the words meant to entice me into his trap like a hunter laying out crumbs to entice prey. And like a foolish, foolish little lamb, I walked right into the maw of the wolf.

I thanked Ana and got off at another gas station in Dallas.

“Don't go getting in just anyone's rig now,” she warned me. “You seem like a decent girl. Good luck to you. And don't go telling folks you're desperate.”

I nodded. “Thanks again. You were a lifesaver.”

She waved me off, then I climbed out of the cab and watched as she drove off.

Leaving me once again, all alone. And hungry. Ana had shared her donuts with me, but that was hours ago.

I held my hand over my eyes and squinted up at the sky. It was warmer here in Dallas than in Oklahoma, and I hoped the further I headed south, the warmer it would get still.

As much as I liked the idea of snow—it seemed picturesque to be sipping cocoa or coffee while it drifted down outside, I was a sunshine-worshipper at heart. Texas sounded just right to me if I couldn't have California.

The last few years, I asked Jeff if we could move somewhere where it snowed. I bought snow globes. I took up painting for a few months and painted wintry landscapes. They weren't good, but I was just learning. Jeff made fun of them ruthlessly and threw them out one day after we'd gotten into an 'argument'—his word for when he would hit me. When I woke up the next morning, all the supplies were gone.

Everything I did over the last half decade was so I could escape again, and escape for good, somewhere he'd never find me.

Austin seemed as good a place as any.

So in spite of Ana's advice, I figured I'd continue hitchhiking.

I stood outside the gas station where all the big rigs were gassing up and

asked around if anyone was headed south.

One big-bellied guy leered at me. “Yeah, baby, I’ll take you as far as you wanna go.”

“No thanks,” I said and hurried back inside. I hid for half an hour and when I went back out, he was thankfully gone.

I tried again for a few hours and finally found an older man who was rail thin and had the kind of leathery, age-spotted skin of someone who didn’t take SPF seriously. If worst came to worst, I figured I could take him.

Unbeknownst to Jeff, I’d taken a self-defense class. Instead of going to Pilates like I was supposed to, I’d snuck away and attended the self-defense class down the hall that met at the same time. I hadn’t really thought I’d ever be able to use the moves against Jeff.

If I fought back, he took it as an affront against God and nature and would punish me twice as hard.

Taking the class was just one of my small rebellions. One of the ways I tried to fight back, to begin to feel strong. That if I ever did manage to escape Jeff, maybe one day I could stand on my own two feet again.

Either way, it was enough to climb up into Rick’s rig, who’d nodded when I’d asked a group of truckers smoking outside the travel gas station.

“I’m goin’ south. I’m Rick. I’ll take ya,” he’d said, then thrown his cigarette on the pavement and stomped it out with his boot.

He was old, wiry, and also wearing flannel, though he had the arms cut off at the shoulders, exposing thin, sinewed arms.

I took one look at the rest of the truckers who were looking me up and down, shivered, and scurried after Rick.

The smell of body odor and cigarette smoke competed for dominance in the cab of his rig, but I decided beggars couldn’t be choosers. I put on my seatbelt and was glad when he reached out with a gnarled hand and cranked up the radio station. Country, naturally.

He seemed to have no interest in talking and that was absolutely *fine* by me.

The next few hours passed in silence as we drove south. He’d occasionally open the window, light a cigarette, and smoke several in a row, taking in long, slow draws of smoke as he drove lazily with one hand.

It didn’t seem the safest way to be hauling what was I’m sure several tons of weight, but considering his age, I supposed he knew what he was doing?

He’d only occasionally bang on his horn and cuss other drivers out. Never

once looking my direction or even acknowledging I was in the cab with him.

It was certainly strange, but not altogether the worst thing I'd ever experienced, and I was just happy to see the mile markers passing indicating that we were, indeed, getting closer to Austin.

We hit some traffic and it was slow going for a few hours. The sun passed overhead and started on its way toward the horizon. Rick's cussing at traffic increased in direct proportion the slower traffic crawled. As did his cigarette consumption.

Since we were all but stopped in traffic several times, the smoke built up in the cab and I couldn't help coughing, but other than glancing my way a couple times—the most Rick had acknowledged me since I'd climbed aboard, he didn't say a thing to me.

Then, about sixty miles from Austin, he got off of I35 and took a smaller highway. I frowned and looked behind us at the much larger highway we were leaving behind.

"Where are we going?" I asked, a little twinge of anxiety lighting in my stomach. More than a twinge.

Rich waved a hand, lit cigarette between two fingers. "Short cut with no traffic."

He didn't seem interested in saying more and I didn't ask. If he knew a shortcut around traffic, I wasn't going to complain. Especially since we were so close to my destination. Whenever he next stopped, I'd get the hell out of this cab and rethink this whole idea.

Except the signs no longer mentioned Austin, and I kept my eyes peeled for every one of them.

Instead of getting to Austin an hour later, we'd arrived in a town called Burnet. And it was definitely a *town*, not a city. The road we'd been on had officially been *labeled* a state highway, but at times gone down to a single lane and the scenery, while pretty, was far more secluded than I was comfortable with.

As the small town of Burnett passed by, I spoke up nervously. "Could we stop? I need to use the restroom."

"Shoulda thoughta that back in Dallas," was all Rick said.

We'd turned onto another highway as we cruised through the town and that was when I finally saw another sign for Austin. Which said it was 55 miles away.

We'd taken a huge detour *out* of our way, *not* a shortcut. What the hell?

This was not good. Very not good.

I thought about opening up the door and jumping out but we'd passed the town and Rick was speeding the truck back up to fifty miles an hour again.

Shit.

No, stop it. I was overreacting. Rick was not Jeff. Not every man in the world was out to get me, or wanted to hurt women. Sure Rick was an anti-social dude, but that didn't make him bad.

Still, I swallowed hard. Because the sun was setting now. It made for a lovely sunset. The Texas sky was splashed with color, neon oranges and pinks, with deeper blues and purples at the edges.

But all I could think was that meant it would soon be dark and I was in a truck with a strange man taking me God knew where.

He's just anti-social. Not every man is Jeff. Over and over again, that was what I told myself, for the next fifteen minutes anyway.

Until it was full dark and the big rig started slowing down on an especially lonely stretch of highway.

Rick pulled off on an even smaller road and I managed to get words out through my incredibly dry throat. "Um. Where are we going?"

He didn't answer, just kept on driving.

Okay, screw this. Screw being polite. I was freaked the hell out. I'd had enough.

"Look, I really appreciate you driving me this far. You're a lifesaver. But if you can just stop, I'll get out here. Thanks again, so much."

I started undoing my seatbelt and that's when his hand suddenly came flashing out of nowhere through the dark cab, slamming into my torso and keeping me in place.

"Where do you think you're going? You gotta pay up for the ride. It's cash, gas, or ass, and we both knew it when you climbed in my rig."

Chapter Four

For a second I was just shocked. I couldn't believe this was actually happening.

Then his hand holding me down started groping me and I *absolutely* could believe it.

And then I wanted to laugh at myself for being shocked. Of course this was happening to me right now. Didn't I know better? Did I actually think it was just Jeff who was the scum of the earth? Why didn't I think that all men, given the chance, would turn into animals?

Rick undid his seatbelt and I could tell he was about to lunge for me.

For a second I froze.

It was just like when I knew I was about to get it from Jeff. I had that trapped animal feeling of knowing there was no escape. The horror of knowing a beating was coming, of knowing this time he might take it too far, *this* time I might die.

But the instant I heard the click of the seatbelt undoing, I shook my head and shouted at the top of my lungs, just like we did at the self-defense class, "NOOOOO!"

I shouted it so loudly and so suddenly that Jeff— No, Rick, *Rick*, jumped back from me, and I took that moment to shove against the door with all my weight and throw it open.

I all but fell out of the big rig cab as I scrambled down to the ground. I dangled by one hand, bearing my weight on the door while I got my footing.

"You fucking bitch, get back here," Rich shouted, and that was enough to have me dropping to the ground.

I landed on my knees but I was scrambling back to my feet quick enough.

And then I did what they told us constantly to do in the class if we ever got in a situation like this.

I *ran*.

I didn't even consciously pick a direction. It was dark, I ran. I took off in the direction I was facing as soon as I'd gotten to my feet.

I didn't even look behind me to see if he was chasing. I just freaking ran with every ounce of energy I had. I came to a metal gate in the darkness. I climbed it like a ladder, hiked a leg over the top of it, then jumped down on the other side and kept running.

Past the gate was a dirt road, not paved anymore, but I still just kept running.

Thank God for the stupid treadmill Jeff bought me years ago. He wanted his wife to be perfectly toned, so any time I wasn't suffering from a Jeff-inflicted injury that interfered, he had a strict 'training schedule.' That was what he called it. In reality, it was just another mechanism for control, but goddammit, I was glad for it now, because it meant I had stamina.

When I finally looked behind me after running for a good fifteen minutes, there was no one there.

Just a full moon that provided *just* enough light to make out a dirt road and wilderness prairie grass on all sides. And me. That was it.

Which was when it hit me. Maybe running into the wild wasn't exactly the brightest idea if Rick had a sadistic penchant for hunting down girls.

Just the thought sent chills down my spine and I took off again in the direction I'd been running. If there was a road, surely it had to lead somewhere, right? Someplace I could hide out for the night and wait out Texas Chainsaw Massacre truck driver?

I tried to take in calming breaths. It was much more likely he was the more mundane type of monster who wanted to avoid cardio as much as the next guy. He was likely already back on the highway. I could only pray.

But I wasn't a girl to take chances. I was all done doing this risky shit. I'd used up my lifetime's allotment, I decided right here and now. Getting the hell away from Jeff and getting here, wherever here was.

Embracing paranoia was going to be my new plan from here on out. Paranoia and low-risk living.

So I ran. Run, rabbit, run. Run, little mouse. I ran and then ran more. When I developed a crick in my side, I just held it with one hand and kept going.

And then, finally, like a lighthouse in the fog, I saw a break in the darkness up ahead. Light meant people, right? I laughed and staggered towards it. I looked over my shoulder and it still seemed clear. I couldn't imagine that Deliverance truck driver could have run as fast or for as long as I had, but I decided it would be stupid to slow down right at the end. Paranoia was my new best friend. So I kept up my giddyup until I'd made it to the driveway of a big, two-story ranch house with a wraparound porch. Light poured from a couple of rooms downstairs and I stumbled as I headed towards the porch stairs.

Which was when I heard a male voice call out, "Ruth, is that you?"

I froze. Shit, was that Rick? But when I looked, instead I saw a man with a ten-gallon hat walking with a flashlight up to a fence on the far side of the house. I doubted Rick could have circled around in front of me. Or found a cowboy hat out of the blue.

And as the man approached, I could hear tinny music coming from what I assumed was his phone, blaring out country music. I immediately stiffened, considering I'd been subjected to similar music all damn day.

But it wasn't Rick, that was clear. For one thing, this guy was big. He had massive shoulders. This was not a point in his favor, whoever he was.

"Thank God, Ruth," he said. "This heifer's having trouble. I've been waiting for you or Jer to get back."

I immediately started backing away as he approached the fence. A few wooden posts between us did not a solid barrier make.

"She's been in labor for two hours and oh—" He stopped mid-sentence, holding up his lantern flashlight and squinting, I assumed to get a better look at me. "You're not Ruth."

I shook my head. No, I wasn't, but I was very interested to know where this mysterious Ruth was. I'd feel much, much better with a woman around, that was for damn sure.

Behind the giant came the noise of cows mooing and what sounded like a fence rattling or the metal of a gate.

The giant looked over his shoulder.

"Son of a bitch," he said, head swinging back to the dark pasture. "She's not happy. I wouldn't be either if I had a breech calf half sticking out of me. Dammit, Jeremiah's gonna kill me if I screw up the first calving of the season."

He looked back my way. "Don't suppose you're good with grouchy

heifers having breech calves?”

I held up my hands. “I’m more of a city girl. Look, my ride... uh, broke down. I’m just looking for a...” What could I say? I needed more than just a phone call.

“Oh,” he said, his eyes going wide. “Oh. Sorry. I just figured you maybe lived here with Ruth. Jer and I, I mean Jeremiah. He’s my brother. We just got here today, too, to work the ranch. I mean to manage it. We’re the new managers. But we’re getting here right at the start of calving season and you know how crazy that can be.”

I lifted my shoulders, along with my eyebrows. “It’s a... big deal?”

He huffed out a laugh, then dragged a hand down the back of his neck. “Yeah, you could say that. And my brother’s gonna kill me if I don’t do right by this heifer.”

“Say,” he looked back into the darkness and then to me again. “I know this is a big ask, but I gotta get this lady in the chute and pull this calf or it’s not gonna have any chance at all. Could you help me? My brother and Ruth are out wrangling a bunch of cattle that got out ‘cause of some downed fencing. Basically we got here and everything was less in order than we’d been led to believe. It’s all been kinds of a huge mess.”

His words immediately set me on edge. Was he really inviting me into the dark pasture with him while no one else was around?

And I’d stupidly gone and admitted I was all alone and didn’t have a ride.

I backed away a step and the expression on his open, friendly face changed to one of chagrin.

“Shit,” he said, “I don’t know what I was thinking. You don’t know me.”

He pulled off his hat, ran his hand through his hair, then stuffed his hat back on his head. “Look, why don’t you go wait inside? There’s a phone in there you can feel free to use. Or if you want to wait on the porch—if that feels more comfortable... Again, feel free. I know it’s freezing out here, but hopefully Ruth will be back in soon. She’ll be happy to help you out, I’m sure.”

He took a step backwards, then cocked his head to the side. “Well, actually I don’t know her that well, but my brother and I can make sure you’re looked after and Ruth will at least be there to hopefully make you feel more at ease. Officially she still owns the house but we run the rest of the ranch so I’m sure we can make arrangements for you—”

He broke off and waved a hand with a short laugh. “Sorry, you don’t need

a novel. If you'll excuse me, I've gotta go deal with this grouchy heifer and see if I can't help her get her baby born. Good to meet you. I'm Reece, by the way."

He nodded to me, reached up and tipped his hat just the tiniest bit, then turned around and headed back into the pasture. The light from his flashlight bounced through the darkness as he went.

During his entire monologue I'd stood stiff as a statue, unsure what to say or do.

As he retreated, I stayed put, then after a few seconds, walked closer to the fence line. And then watched from a distance as he approached a cow that did indeed look agitated.

I couldn't hear everything he was saying since he was half a pasture away, just the occasional, "Come on now, mama."

The cow would buck or rear and Reece would scramble backwards, hands out. Obviously, he was trying to urge her in some particular direction, but she'd break and jog back and forth, so he'd back up and start all over again.

My mouth dropped open when during one of these lumbering jaunts, I caught a glimpse of small hooves sticking out the back end of the cow in the light of the flashlight.

Oh my God, he wasn't joking! That cow was literally mid-labor.

Now that I knew he wasn't pulling some sort of creepy redneck Ted Bundy come-help-my-injured-cow act to lure me into the dark, I scrambled into action. I had no clue if it was ill-advised or not, but I'd always had a soft spot for animals. I ignored the voice that was screaming that my whole new paranoia-approach-to-life oath had lasted all of five minutes. This was the *one* exemption, I decided as I climbed the gate of the fence and lowered myself over the other side. Because God, it had to be true. Not *all* men were Jeffs.

Still, I approached slowly. "How can I help?"

Reece's head swung my way in surprise, then a grateful smile lit his face.

"We gotta get her through that gate over there. Can you go open it and try to keep any of the other heifers from going through? Then I'll try to drive her your direction. Just stay clear when she gets close. Got it? She's upset and probably in plenty of discomfort. We gotta get this calf out of her pronto, but she doesn't understand we're trying to help and she could hurt us in the process."

I nodded. "Got it loud and clear."

I hurried over to the gate he indicated. It took me a second to figure out the latch system in the dark. The full moon helped.

I felt a rush of adrenaline once I got it open and flung it wide. My presence had disturbed the other cows in the pasture but luckily, none of them were too close.

Then Reece got behind the laboring cow and started clapping his hands and making a ruckus. The cow trotted away from him, coming straight my direction.

I got the hell out of the way, backing into the pasture and out of the way of the chute the gate opened into.

I wasn't exactly sure how my day had turned around from fleeing dirty old truck drivers to fleeing from angry cow mothers, but hey, who said life wasn't completely ludicrous sometimes?

"There you go, mama! That's right!" Reece called from behind her.

She ran straight through the open gate and through into the corral lane. Reece followed fearlessly behind her, even though she was not happy to find herself in a narrower, more confined space.

"Keep going, don't stop, mama," Reece said, continuing to clap. "On into the barn we go." Then to me over his shoulder, he called, "Close the gate up behind us, then follow outside the fence to the barn if you still wanna help."

I hurriedly closed the gate the same way I'd opened it. Reece and the cow were already moving down the corral lane towards the big barn that loomed in the distance.

I moved faster than I would have thought possible after the day I'd had and no real sustenance. But somehow the mother cow's drama seemed more pressing than mine.

I climbed the fence and then ran along the short, penned corral to the barn where Reece was trying to coerce the upset cow to go where he wanted her.

"Come on, mama. No, Jesus, don't charge me, dammit! Just go in the—"

By the time I got over the corral fencing again, I saw the cow had Reece cornered in one area of the barn.

Reece scrambled up on top of a tractor right as the cow charged towards him, hat flying off as he went. The cow trampled the spot where he'd just been standing, demolishing his hat. "Well, that was just uncalled for!" he said, flinging out an arm towards the cow. "That was my favorite."

I wasn't sure exactly what a 'chute' was, but a good guess said it was the big contraption with lots of metal bars the size of cow on the opposite side of

the barn from where Reece and the cow were tangling.

“How can I help?” I asked.

Reece looked my way. “Oh shit. Get outta here. She’s too unstable.”

The cow’s head swung my way. She took several steps toward me across the barn.

“Hi, pretty mama cow?” I said uncertainly, taking a few steps backwards.

She mooed angrily in my direction and stomped more steps towards me.

Reece took the few moments of distraction to leap down from the tractor. “In you go, Mama,” he said, shoving on her backside, then quickly dancing out of the way when she bucked with her back legs. But she did run forward—right into the chute.

Reece again moved quickly, faster than I would have thought possible. He locked in the bar behind her back legs and then closed the front of the chute bars around her neck to hold her in place.

His whole body slumped backwards after he got her locked in. The cow rammed back and forth in the chute, but was finally caught safe.

“Oh my God, are you okay?” I asked, running forwards towards Reece. I didn’t know the guy, but that was just— He’d almost been *trampled by a cow*.

Reece just sucked in a big breath and nodded. Then he said, “Okay, now we gotta get the calf out of her.”

Whoa, damn. I looked back at the cow in the chute, feeling my eyes go big. I’d been so concerned with catching the angry runaway cow, I’d all but forgotten about the reason we were trying to corral her in the first place.

“Do we call a vet?”

Reece had the flashlight up and was already yanking open cabinets and sorting through stuff on the shelves on the sturdiest of the barn’s walls. “Don’t I wish,” he said.

Then he must have found whatever he was looking for because he rushed back.

My mouth dropped open when I saw that he was holding a small length of *chain*. I backed away. “What are you going to do with *that*?”

“Pull the calf,” he said, not looking my direction. He was too intent on his task. “Can you hold this?” He shoved the flashlight at me. “Keep it pointed at the birth canal.”

I grabbed it because he was letting it go and moving on whether I was ready or not. I held the heavy flashlight and tried to keep it steady as he

wrapped the chain in small loops around the two hooved legs that were extending out the back end of the mother cow.

And then he did exactly what he'd described. He started *pulling* on the chains, literally yanking the calf out of its mother.

"Push, mama," he said, as if the mother could understand any of what he was saying. Whether or not the cow was pushing, Reece was definitely pulling. Pulling so hard his muscles strained against his flannel shirt.

It was cold outside, but after a few minutes of pulling, sweat beaded on his forehead. The calf had slid a few inches out, but if Reece's occasional slipped swear words were any indication, it wasn't going as smoothly as he hoped.

"Dammit, we're gonna need the big calf-puller. Can you hold this so it doesn't slip back inside?"

Oh crap, he was talking to me?

"Uh, okay."

He'd hooked a handle onto the chains and we did the most awkward handoff. "Just keep pulling," he instructed. "Don't let it slip back in."

Great. No pressure. I dug my feet into the dirt that made up the ground of the barn and pulled as hard as I could to keep up the pressure of pulling that Reece had started while he disappeared into the darkness.

The mother cow was no less restless now that we were yanking a calf from her womb, the poor calf straddled half-in, half-out.

"How long can the calf last like this?" I asked. "Isn't this bad for it?"

"Sorry, I should have told you. It's probably already gone. To be breech for that long, there's not much hope. But we've got to get it out to save the mother."

His words hit me like a brick to the face. *It's probably already gone.*

I didn't stop pulling, though. It was just a cow, I tried to remind myself. A commonplace enough tragedy.

Still, there were stupid tears in my eyes by the time Reece got back with a contraption even more medieval than the chains.

It was a long pole with a T shape on the end that he braced against the back end of the cow. Then he attached a crank to the handle of the pull chains. Instead of us pulling, he turned the crank. Braced against the back of the cow's behind and legs, it had far more pulling power than either of us.

And inch by inch, the calf emerged from its mother.

Finally, in one last *whoosh*, the calf came all the way out and fell in one

slippery plop onto the floor of the barn enclosure.

Reece immediately tossed the calf-puller pole down and leaned down. Then he let out a little whoop. "It's alive. Holy shit, I can't believe it. Little guy's actually alive!"

"Oh my God, really?"

I couldn't tell, it was lying limp on the ground. I leaned down, aiming the flashlight closer.

But Reece was getting right in there, sticking his fingers in the little calf's mouth, checking its airways were clear, I assumed. And indeed, little eyes blinked open against the light, befuddled.

The animal was wet and slick with blood and afterbirth, and then the wet had gotten dirty and muddy from the floor, but it was also one of the most amazing things I'd ever seen in my entire life.

I'd just witnessed the birth of *life*.

"What now?" I asked excitedly. "Will it nurse?" I looked back up at its mother who was still banging against the chute agitatedly. Maybe she was just trying to get to her new baby?

"First let's get them both out of here into the yard," Reece said. "It's cold out there but maybe if we give them some space Mama will clean..." Reece lifted one of the baby's legs, "*her* off and she can get to nursing like any other calf."

Reece tried to pick the little calf up to see if she would stand on her legs, but she just immediately collapsed right back into the dirt. "Come on, little lady," Reece said.

Then he lifted it into his arms like it was nothing, even though the calf had to weigh at least sixty pounds, probably more, and carried it towards the other end of the barn that opened to another much smaller pasture, more just a small yard.

He set the calf down and tried to get it to stand but it immediately crumpled back to the ground again. "Hmm," he said.

"What? Don't all baby calves take a while to figure out walking?"

He shook his head. "Calves should be able to do it right after birth. Or at least within a few hours. Let's bring Mom out here and see if she'll clean her off and bond with her at least."

Reece made me climb outside of the fence while he let out the mother, which I took to be responsible of him considering that the mother didn't seem any less agitated once she was free again.

She certainly didn't seem to be interested in the new baby we'd just pulled out of her.

Reece kept trying to entice her to take notice of her newborn, but she'd just charge right past the baby, looking for the exit of the yard back out into the bigger pasture.

Finally Reece climbed over the fence where I was. "Maybe it's just cause I'm here. We'll give her twenty minutes to figure it out for herself."

"What happens if she doesn't?"

Reece's mouth flattened into a hard line. "Well, then my brother will be pissed at me and we'll have to bottle feed the calf for a little bit while we keep trying to get her mom to take her in."

"That's terrible. How can she not connect with her? It's her own child!"

Reece looked my way and laughed. "Hey, it's okay. It happens."

I nodded absently. Yeah. Sure. I guess it would be weird to say I had a *thing* about mothers not loving their kids enough to fight for them when it mattered. But that was definitely more a *me* issue than this poor cow's fault.

"You cold?" Reece asked, looking over at me. "Jesus, where are my manners? We could go in and get some coffee and a bite to eat. Shit. If you came in from the main road, that's a long walk. And then I put you to work with the cows."

He wiped his hands on his jeans, but I wasn't sure that made much of a difference, considering what he'd just been handling with all that had been covering the little calf, hugging it to his chest as he carried it into the yard. Both of us were fairly stinky at this point, but at least I wasn't covered in cow birth.

I laughed. "Maybe you shouldn't go in the house but I could get *you* something to eat and drink. I'm pretty good around a kitchen if you just aim me in the right direction."

He looked down at himself and his look of dismay was comical when he looked back up at me. "Shit, this isn't the best first impression, huh?"

I laughed out loud at that. "You're doing just fine. I'm... Charlotte, by the way." *Charlotte*? Where the hell had that come from? I'd always thought it sounded pretty, like a name I might call a daughter if I ever had one. But then I suddenly panicked because what if I didn't answer when people called me it? Not that I'd be here long enough for—

"Charlie for short," I quickly amended. I was used to going by Penny, and Charlie would be a natural shift.

Reece just grinned, a mouthful of straight, white teeth, though one of his front teeth was just ever so slightly crooked. It made him look even more charming than he already did. My mind told me anyone so good looking could only be a heapful of trouble, but again, I wouldn't be here long enough for it to matter.

So I smiled back and basked in the moment. Just a woman, enjoying a man smiling at her. No past, no future. Just here in this moment.

"I'd shake your hand, but well..." He looked down at his dirty hand and we both laughed.

"Yeah, better not."

I had a brief out-of-body experience in that moment. Who the hell had body-snatched my life? Who was this person easily laughing with a stranger on a *ranch* in the middle of nowhere *Texas*?

It certainly wasn't Penelope Chambers, socialite and trophy wife extraordinaire. I blinked and took a step back from the fence. "So, um. The kitchen?"

"Right." Reece nodded and looked down, the smile dropping from his face as if he was embarrassed to have gotten so lost in the moment, too.

Oh God, had we just been having a moment?

I felt like a teenager again. I didn't know how real humans acted in the actual world. I'd grown too used to a plastic world of fake interactions, so busy keeping my secret that I didn't even know how genuine people interacted anymore.

I followed Reece across a wide yard to the big, two story house I'd seen when I first walked up the road. "You can head inside," he said. "I'm almost as new here as you are, so feel free to eat and drink whatever you find. If you could make me a sandwich if there's anything to make a sandwich of, that'd be great. I'll stay out here on the porch to wash up and keep an eye on the mom and calf."

He kept a respectful distance as he said it, and I wasn't sure, but I wondered if it was more than him being dirty that kept him outside while I went in. Was he remembering my first reaction to him? But still, was he really so trusting? I was a stranger and he was just going to let me wander around in his house?

"Are people around here always so trusting?" I asked before I could think better of it.

He barked out a laugh. "You gonna rip us off?"

I was glad it was dark because I could feel my face warm up and knew I was probably blushing. “I don’t know. It’s just where I come from people lock their doors and don’t just let anyone inside.”

But Reece just waved a hand. “It’s the good part about living in the country. We aren’t as paranoid. Also,” he grinned, “It’s not my house. That’s Ruth’s shi— I mean stuff, in there. So it’ll be her you’re robbing blind if you’re of a mind to.”

“Ha!” I said. “I’ll have to tell this Ruth when I meet her you were so free with her belongings.”

He rolled his eyes. “Serves her right. She sold this ranch to my boss but had her lawyers write in some crazy loopholes *his* lawyers didn’t catch so instead of selling all the land, he only gets to *lease* the land with all the buildings on it from her. And she gets to keep this tiny plot with the house. Don’t know why anyone would want to stay and be a landlady when they don’t even own the land around them anymore, but that’s Ruth for ya.”

I felt my eyebrows lift. “Really? Well, was the land in her family for a long time or something?”

“Apparently so. Four generations. Seems stubborn to hang on by a thread when you’ve sold off everything else, but what do I know? My mama wasn’t exactly big on passing down...” he paused, then shrugged, “well, anything, come to think of it.”

That perked my interest. I probably had an unhealthy fascination with people’s screwed up family dynamics. But getting into it in the middle of the night with a complete stranger was probably far too random, even for this new body-snatched version of myself.

So I punched a thumb over my shoulder. “Well, I better get to the food and coffee.”

Reece smirked. “And all that ransacking.”

I let out a surprised laugh. “Can’t forget the ransacking.”

I hurried up the stairs into the house, and so bad wanted to take one last look over my shoulder to see if he was watching me go. I stopped myself at the last second, because, dear God, what would I do if he was? And I didn’t want to be disappointed if he wasn’t.

Then I shook my head at myself for being ridiculous and went inside to make some damn sandwiches and brew some damn coffee.

By the time I got back outside, it was midnight. I was exhausted, but it wasn’t like I’d exactly figured out my sleeping arrangements. Plus, I was

starving, and the simple ham sandwiches I'd made had my mouth watering.

I brought out two plates stacked with four sandwiches and another little tray I'd found in the kitchen in my other hand holding two steaming cups of coffee.

Reece met me at the door and took the tray from me.

"Any change with mom and baby?" I asked as he set the tray down on a little outdoor table set up on the porch. He'd switched the flashlight to its lamp setting and put it down in the center of the table. I put the sandwiches down and pulled out the second plate from underneath the first, then portioned out the sandwiches.

Reece had indeed cleaned up, with water and soap from the barn or somewhere else, because while his clothes were still filthy, his hands were clean.

He didn't waste any time biting into the sandwich, shoving almost half of it into his mouth at once.

"No change," he said. At least that's what I think he said. His mouth was so full of sandwich, I could only guess. But when I looked out at the pasture beside the barn, I could see the heifer was still at a distance from where we'd left the calf. She was near the gate, like all she could think about was getting back to the wide open field.

"What's wrong with her? Why won't she go to her baby?" I asked before taking a bite of my own sandwich. I closed my eyes with the bite. They'd had lettuce and tomatoes, and the fresh ingredients tasted like absolute heaven after so many days of road junk food and then today of absolutely nothing. I wanted to do exactly what Reece had and shove the whole damn thing in my mouth. Instead I just chewed quickly so I could get to the next bite, and the next.

I didn't notice Reece was watching me until I realized there'd been silence and he was taking his time answering my question.

When I finally looked up at him, again feeling my cheeks heat, and our eyes met, he looked away and answered.

"She's a first-time mom. That's what makes a heifer different from a cow. Since she's never done it before, it's easier to get confused. Then with the difficult birth... I dunno, I guess she's agitated."

I nodded, trying to eat more slowly...but who was I kidding. I shoved the last few bites of food into my mouth and then started on the next sandwich, occasionally drinking some coffee and then eating more.

I swore a meal had never tasted better in my entire *life*. Not even those stupid high-dollar meals at the restaurants in San Francisco where Jeff liked to parade me around. I could never enjoy those dinners anyway. I was too busy being nervous about how Jeff would critique me later. Did I greet his friends the right way? Was I *overly* friendly with any of his friends? Was I not interested *enough*? Not that it mattered. No matter what I did, I inevitably did *something* that invited his wrath when we got home.

Sometimes he didn't even wait until we got home. Jeff was more than happy to hit me while we were driving home if he was good and riled.

"Sorry, you don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"What?" I looked up at Reece. He was looking at me, and I realized he'd asked a question I hadn't even heard.

"I didn't mean to pry."

"No, sorry, I just spaced out. What did you ask?"

"Oh." He'd finished both of his sandwiches and he rubbed his hand on the back of his neck. "I was just wondering if all your stuff was back in your car? You said you stalled on the road? Did you leave even like, your purse there?"

Oh. Right. Crap.

I reached for my coffee and took a big gulp. Shit. Too hot, too hot. I coughed and slammed the ceramic mug down on the table, waving my hand.

"Oh damn, are you okay?" Reece jumped up from his chair and I was even more embarrassed. "No, I'm fine," I gasped. "Just...*hot*."

"Here, let me get you some water."

Then, just like that, he disappeared inside the house and came back with some water. So obviously it hadn't been his dirtiness keeping him out earlier.

He returned with a glass of cool water and handed it over. I took it thankfully and took a long drink. "Thanks," I croaked afterwards. Then I looked back out towards the cows. "Do you think it's been twenty minutes yet?"

Reece let my not so smooth change of topic pass graciously, standing up. "Yeah, looks like she's not gonna let the calf nurse. And we gotta get some colostrum into the little buddy."

He did that thing where he rubbed his hand down the back of his neck, looked out at the dark ranch, then back at me.

"It's late, and if you don't have a place to stay for the night, I can't imagine Ruth would mind you crashing here tonight. She pointed out some

rooms for me and my brother. I can put you in mine. There's a bunkhouse for ranch hands and I'll stay out there for the night."

"Oh my God, no, I wouldn't want—"

But he held out a hand. "Look, I don't know your circumstances and I don't need to. But no way you're sleeping out in the cold or trying to find anywhere else when there's a perfectly good bed right upstairs. And I want you to feel comfortable, so I'll stay out in the bunkhouse. It's perfectly good for the hands and up until recently, that's what I been. I don't need to go getting fancy all of a sudden. Please. It'd mean a lot to me."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. Then I put my hands on my hips. "How did you just twist those words to make it sound like I'm doing *you* a favor by sleeping in your comfy bed and sending you out to the bunkhouse?"

It was not normal logic and half of me was amused while the other half was trying to search out the trick in it.

He cracked a grin. "Cause I'm just that good?"

I shook my head. "Fine, but I'm coming to help with the calf."

He started to wave his hand, but I butted in. "Surely you aren't going to *rob* me of the chance to see it through with this little baby calf. Plus earn a little bit of my room and board by helping out any way I can to salvage my dignity?"

His left eyebrow popped up. "Did you just twist those words to make it sound like trying to let you off the hook and knock off early would be insulting?"

I started down the porch stairs. "I guess I'm just that good?"

His laugh followed me.

Chapter Five

My eyes were crusty with sleep when I finally blinked them open against the bright morning sun.

And then I shot up in bed, panic spiking through me.

Bed.

I was in a soft bed.

But when I looked around, it wasn't pristine eggshell-white walls and the muted light from the morning San Francisco fog coming in the windows. Nope. It was all yellowing mid-century wallpaper and a window with bright sun shining through instead.

I collapsed back dramatically into the soft mattress and soft pillow.

Jesus Christ. I just hadn't slept anywhere soft since I'd left San Francisco.

Was this what it would be like for the rest of my life? Always terrified that my life now was a dream?

Duh. I was there for almost a decade. Did I think I my past was just *gone* because I'd physically left?

I groaned and covered my face with the pillow. Because um, yeah, part of me had hoped so.

I guess I'd just assumed the leaving was the *end* of the story. It was certainly as far as I got in most of my fantasies. Afterwards was always just this vague happily-ever-after that I tried not to think *too* much about because that felt like torment.

But as I dragged the pillow away from my face and looked around, it dawned on me... holy crap.

The leaving was just the *beginning*.

Now started the rest of my life. What the hell was I supposed to do with

that? The conundrum that struck me briefly on the bus hit me all over again. Who even *was* I if I wasn't *her*? The carefully crafted HER that was acceptable to *him*.

But who was *I*?

I swung my legs out of bed and landed heavily when I stood up, stiff and a little sore after last night.

I smiled, remembering going back out to tend to the little calf whose mother wouldn't attend to her.

We'd gotten towels from the barn and cleaned and dried her off. I'd never been that close to a baby cow. It was so... *sweet* was the only word that came to mind. Or maybe that was just my experience of the situation.

But the little cow, once we got her dried off, was so unsteady on her little coltish legs she couldn't even stand, she'd just keep collapsing when Reece tried to help her stand.

He decided to give her some colostrum to help her get the nourishment she needed. He had to use an esophageal feeding tube, but he stayed calm and was so kind and gentle to the animal the entire time.

I was overcome by emotion just watching this big man with the animal in his lap, coaxing the first life-saving liquid into her. The calf seemed to feel it, too, because she kept bumping her head into his chest, almost nuzzling into him.

I was probably anthropomorphizing. She was likely just searching him for more milk, but Reece had explained that cows are herd animals and touch and community and interaction is actually really important to them.

I was so moved, embarrassingly so, but Reece either didn't notice or was thoughtful enough not to make a big deal out of it. Maybe he was just good with creatures of all kinds like that.

There wasn't much left to do after that. We made sure the calf was snuggled up in some hay and Reece said he'd check on her in another few hours, but that we should get some rest. His brother and Ruth weren't back yet from their cow-wrangling, so he lent me some of his clothes to sleep in and said he'd throw mine in the overnight wash with his and have them ready for me in the morning.

I looked down at myself, engulfed in his large, faded Grateful Dead t-shirt that came just a few inches short of my knees and hugged my arms to myself. It was chilly in the room and my feet on the wood floor were cold.

I'd need to go hunt down my own clothes soon. For another second,

though, it was nice to just breathe in the cold air of this new life and wonder who I'd be today.

I was stretching my arms high above my head when the door suddenly pushed open and a tired-looking, mud-drenched woman came in the room. She was tall, with thick brown hair that escaped in all directions from a braid that was barely holding together anymore.

It was shocking to see a stranger opening the door. Shocking too, because apparently me trying to jam that chair underneath the doorknob wouldn't have done anything if Reece or anyone else had tried to intrude last night to molest or otherwise harm me. Ruth had pushed the door open and the chair had just bumped free and pushed along the ground with the door. Good Lord. The hairs on my arms raised.

Which was right about when the woman saw me and let out a little screech. Her face went immediately bright red. "Who the hell are *you*? And what the hell are you doing in my bed?"

"Oh, hi," I said, scrambling to my feet, then realizing I was in nothing but a shirt and underwear. She had to be Ruth.

Then I looked around in confusion. "Isn't this Reece's room?"

I waved awkwardly, deciding to start over. "Hi, I'm Charlie. God, I'm so sorry. This is your room? I must have gotten the rooms mixed up last night when he told me where to go. He said second door to the left, but I wasn't sure if he was counting the bathroom, and it was so late. I just saw the bed and kind of face-planted honestly. Reece said—"

If I thought her face was bright with color before, it was nothing to her reaction at my words.

"Get dressed," she snapped at me. "I can't believe he let his whore sleep in my bed."

My mouth dropped open. "Excuse me?"

But she just glared back at me. "Oh my fucking God. Get out of my bed and the fuck out of my room. Take the sheets with you, you can toss them in the washer on your way out."

My mouth dropped open. This woman had gotten the wrong impression, and maybe I couldn't blame her, I didn't know how I'd feel finding a strange woman in my bedroom. But I also did *not* appreciate being called a whore at whatever the hell o'clock it was in the morning.

At the same time, considering it had been her warm bed I'd slept in, the first in over a week, I just zipped my lip and gave her a single nod. "Sure,

whatever. I'm outta here, anyway."

She scoffed, then shook her head at me. Then she spun and stormed down the hall, yelling, "Reece Walker! We need to establish some house rules. Right the fuck now."

I shook my head and looked around. I didn't really have any *things* to gather. So I just gritted my teeth and pulled the sheets off the bed and balled them in my arms. I'd handed my dirty clothes through the door last night for Reece to wash, so there was nothing to do but walk downstairs if I was going to retrieve them.

At least I'd seen the washer and dryer on the way in yesterday. Easy, since they were in the mudroom we'd entered through last night. There hadn't been much in the way of a tour—just us tromping into the house, me following behind Reece as he gave me some clothes to sleep in, let me change in the bathroom and directed me on where to go upstairs to sleep. His pajama bottoms swamped me, but they were good enough for decency's sake while I made my way upstairs, basically holding them up the entire way.

I'd considered the fact that he didn't follow me upstairs to "show me the bedroom" really cool of him, as if he knew a woman alone in a house with a man would not appreciate that. Which I wouldn't have.

Now I was back holding up the pajama bottoms and trying not to trip as I made my way back downstairs. Right when I was near the bottom of the staircase, I heard the sound of raised voices.

"—didn't think it had to be stated, but I have a no-whores-allowed-in-my-bed policy. Where did you even find her? You were supposed to be putting in fence posts, not carousing at the local bar picking up chicks. Jesus, who did I just sell my daddy's ranch to?"

"Stop laying into my brother, Ruth. You're just cranky cause you were out all night chasing runaway cows."

"Will both of you just stop?" It sounded like Reece's voice.

I paused at the bottom of the stairs, listening.

"You've got it all wrong, Ruth. She's not— She's not what you called her. She helped me deliver the calf last night. She was good with the heifer. Maybe if you'd give her a chance, you'd see she was—"

"Oh, so you think you can just come in here and have little cowboy bunnies hanging around the place to service you whenever you get tired of bailing hay, is that it? This is exactly what I was afraid of, a bunch of men coming in and taking over the place. Disgusting, absolutely disgusting—"

“Number one,” came another masculine voice, I couldn’t tell if it was Reece or his brother, they sounded so much alike, “there’s no need to be so puritanical. We’re not likely to be abstinent while we’re working here. We’re not monks, and just because you’re leasing the place to us doesn’t mean you get to dictate our sex lives.”

“You’re twisting my words. I don’t give a shit about your sex lives! You can go fuck the whole county if you want and get every STD known to man. Just keep it the hell *out* of my room, and preferably out my sight.”

“Look, could we all just take it down a few notches? If you’d just give me a second to explain—” Okay, that was definitely Reece, but Ruth was not having it.

“Take it *down* a few notches? Oh, I’m sorry, big fella, is my voice too *shrill* for you? Do you have a problem with assertive women?”

“Jesus, Ruth, you need to back down. You are seriously barking up the wrong tree. Maybe get a chance to know my brother before you make such snap decisions about him.”

Ruth scoffed. “As far as I’m concerned, I’ve seen all I need to.”

I’d had enough of this woman. I marched straight into the kitchen, since I had to go through to get to the mudroom anyway.

Reece’s eyes shot my way, and he looked immediately concerned. Was he worried I’d overheard? Too late, buddy. That train had left the station.

“Thanks for the hospitality, Reece,” I said kindly. I wanted him to know I didn’t blame him for Ruth’s rudeness.

“It was very kind of you to put me up for the night when I didn’t have anywhere else to stay after that sleazy trucker kicked me out on the side of the road.” I looked at him, really hoping he could see the sincerity in my eyes. After it slipped out of my mouth, I realized I’d just admitted the truth, especially when I saw Reece’s eyes widen. Well shit, there went my attempt at a secret. But you know what? It felt liberating to just tell it like it was.

“I really don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t offered me a warm place to stay last night.”

Then I looked at Ruth. “And I get it that you didn’t know I was borrowing your bed, but thanks for it all the same.”

I lifted the balled-up sheets in my arms. “I’ll make sure and get these in the washer before I go.”

Ruth’s mouth was dropped open.

I just walked across the now silent kitchen and pushed into the mud room.

“Thanks again,” I called out to the room at large.

When I got to the laundry machines, I found my own clothes folded neatly on top of the dryer. Reece must have done it.

I tugged the pocket door shut behind me, then tugged on my jeans and socks. Last, I slipped my feet into my trusty Converse. Reece had even gone to the trouble of clearing the mud from them and as clean as they were, he’d likely thrown them in the wash with the rest of the clothes. One of my own favorite tricks for keeping tennis shoes and the like clean. It made my heart squeeze in an unfamiliar way.

No one ever did nice things for me. Ever. It was ridiculous that such little things could have me all but tearing up. I swiped at my face as I slid Reece’s shirt off and pulled my own worn flannel back on.

A knock on the door came a couple minutes later, right as I was finishing lacing up my shoes.

“Can I come in?” Reece called. “You decent?”

I smiled, then reached out and slid the door open.

He stood there, all six foot four of him, waiting with an anxious look on his face. “Look, I’m really sorry for her.” He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “We’re new here and she doesn’t really know us very well. She’s a little jumpy about having anyone on her family ranch, much less a couple of strange men.”

My insides softened even more. It was a compassionate and honest assessment of the situation. If it had been Jeff, he would have just called Ruth a bitch.

Not this guy, though. He was willing to try to understand Ruth’s side of it, even when he didn’t like how she acted.

I reached out on impulse and touched his arm, smiling up at him. “Don’t even worry about it. I get it.”

It was a mistake to touch him, though. I jerked my hand back almost immediately after making contact with the hard muscle of his forearm. He was warm, and solid, and did I mention warm?

I swallowed and took a step back.

“Well, I guess I’ll be getting on my way now.” I shoved Ruth’s sheets into the washer and filled the top catch with detergent that was on a little shelf above the machines. I looked back at Reece after I’d turned it on. “I really do appreciate you helping me out last night.”

He shook his head. “No, you were the one who helped *me*. I needed an

extra pair of hands and you showed up out of the blue.”

I laughed at that. “Pretty sure all I did was open and close a couple gates.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Uh, and you helped distract that angry heifer when I was cornered on top of that tractor. It was both of us that got her in that chute. And if it had been any longer, who knows if she would’ve had a live birth.”

Well damn, now I felt all warm and fuzzy. Jeff only ever tore me down, he never *ever* complimented me or said anything nice. It was ridiculous that even the smallest bit of kindness could make me feel so lovely and lit up inside.

Yep, it was definitely time to make my exit. My emotions were too all over the place around this guy. I was like a little puppy who’d been kicked so many times that I was hungry for any scrap of kindness. I couldn’t decide if it was pathetic or refreshing. But it was definitely all far too confusing for whatever time in the morning it was.

Still, when I looked back up at Reece, I was caught in his blue-gray eyes and his gentle smile. He was handsome—in a rugged, genuine way that was completely different from Jeff’s suave, over-moisturized face and perfectly coifed hair. Reece’s hair flopped this way and that—a little too long, with some bits that stuck out in funny angles that was the result of genuine bed-head and not the artfully arranged city boy version.

Reece was just so *real*. I had the most absurd impulse to throw myself in his arms and hug him. I bet he gave really great hugs. I hadn’t been hugged, just *hugged* and reassured that it would be okay, in so long I couldn’t even remember when.

It was a ridiculous impulse and instead I swallowed hard again and stepped back.

“Well.” I nodded. “Thanks again.”

He looked like he wanted to say something, but before he could—

“That goddamned bastard! How dare he show his face here?” Ruth yelled, and then, before either Reece or I could move, she stormed into the mud room. Both Reece and I barely had time to jump back before she barreled between us and out the door.

“What now?” Reece’s brother asked, sounding exasperated as he followed her out. Reece went after his brother and well, I was in no hurry so I went out to see too. As long as Ruth was aiming her ire at someone other than me.

It was cold as all get out and I regretted not grabbing a coat, but the humongous truck had pulled to a stop in front of the ranch house, gravel and dust only just now settling. It was no time to go back for my hoodie.

A relatively short man jumped down from the tall cab, giant ten-gallon hat balanced on his head and wranglers about two sizes too tight suckered to his legs. I crossed my arms, glad I at least had my flannel as I settled in to watch the drama.

“Get off my property,” Ruth called out. “You aren’t welcome here.”

“Ain’t your property no more, Ruthie,” the man called out. “I came by to introduce myself to the new owners.”

“That’s us,” Reece’s brother said, stepping forward. “Jeremiah Walker. This here’s my brother, Reece. We’re part owners and we’re working the place now. You are?”

The man stepped forward, hand out.

“A snake in the grass,” Ruth said at the same time as the man said, “Trent. Trent Patterson of Patterson Ranch.”

Jeremiah shook Trent’s hand. Trent had a wide smile. Wide and charming. I shivered. It was a Jeff smile. Fake as a plastic toy from a fast-food joint—it’d make you smile for an hour and then it breaks and you’re crying in disappointment.

Trent kept on smiling at Jeremiah, then at Reece. He didn’t even look at Ruth. Or at me for that matter.

So he was one of *those*. The kind that only considered other men as worthy of their notice. I’d met plenty of the sort when Jeff paraded me around as his trophy wife. Sometimes they’d look my way—or at least my *body’s* way. They’d just never quite get to looking at my face, or bother with learning my name.

I was glad for my oversized flannel and short, boyish haircut.

“I’m your neighbor to the east. Always good to make friends with the new neighbor, don’t you think?” He was still shaking hands with Jeremiah.

Jeremiah wasn’t smiling. He finally yanked his hand back from Trent. Jeremiah shrugged. “Got enough friends.”

I didn’t miss the tick in Trent’s jaw but his smile never wavered. My impulse was to take a step back from him. I had a feeling Ruth was right about the snake part. I liked that Reece’s brother didn’t seem taken in by him either.

Trent laughed, obviously aiming for good-natured. “Don’t know where

you boys are from, but this here's Texas. You need your friends in Texas. We look out for our own."

"Oh please, Trent," Ruth laughed. "You woulda begged, borrowed, or stole to get this piece of land. God knows you tried. But these boys swooped in and outbid you, thank God. I know your daddy's been trying to get my land since the time I was in pigtails. But it's over. He's not getting it. The HB will never be y'all's. The end."

Anger flashed in Trent's eyes and he pointed his finger at Ruth. "You never did know your place or when to shut that mouth of yours. Your daddy was a loser and a gambler and a nobody, and the fact that you're still trying to hold onto this farm when it was sold out from under you is *pathetic*, everybody thinks so."

Yep, there it was. They never could keep it in for long. Narcissists had the most fragile egos of anyone on earth. You poked them and they lashed out, every time.

"Only one who looks pathetic here is you." The words were outta my mouth before I could really think about what I was doing or saying.

Trent's head swung my way, disbelief all over his features. "What'd you say, dyke?"

I laughed. Laughed in his face. It felt so good. Absolutely liberating, actually. "Bullies like you are all the same, aren't you?" I shook my head at him.

Then I looked over at his truck. "Though guessing by the size of that truck, you're overcompensating for a little something, aren't you?" I let my eyes fall to his waist, just in case his thick head couldn't follow my innuendo all the way through.

"You little bitch!" he snapped. I saw it in his eyes the second he lunged for me. The same way Jeff regularly snapped. It was that instinct for violence that insecure men had when you threatened their oh-so-fragile egos.

So no, I wasn't surprised, but I still froze.

Except, unlike when Jeff came for me, this time there were two large protectors who leapt in front of me.

Reece and Jeremiah grabbed Trent and threw him backwards to the ground. He landed hard on his ass.

And Reece, gentle, calm Reece was suddenly on fire mad. "You think you can lay hands on a woman? Or even *talk* to a woman that way? Get the fuck off our ranch. You ever step foot on it again, we'll call the authorities."

Trent scrambled backwards, furious as he stumbled back to his feet. He pointed his finger at Jeremiah, then Reece. “You just made a mistake. A big mistake.”

“I’m quaking in my boots,” Jeremiah said, deadpan. “Now get the fuck off my property. This is Texas, right? I hear you can shoot trespassers on sight here.”

Trent didn’t say another word. He just climbed back in his truck—and I do mean climbed. He was so short, he had to grab onto the rung and heft himself up into the thing, it was so tall.

He spun around and spit dust and dirt our way but we were all already back on the porch and heading back inside.

I wasn’t sure what to expect once we got there.

I figured Ruth would be pissed at me again for stepping in when I was a stranger. I’d hoped for a cup of coffee before I hit the road, but I might have to make a quicker exit now.

Sixty miles wasn’t really that far. I could walk it. Maybe two or three days and I’d be there.

But as soon as we got in the house, Ruth threw her arms around my neck. “You’re a badass,” she said, squeezing me tight and giving me that hug I’d been longing for so badly only minutes before.

Startled, I hugged her back. She was wiry but sturdy, and a surprisingly good hugger.

When she pulled back, she was grinning at me. “I always wanted to say that to his face about that stupid truck of his.”

Then she linked her arm through mine and pulled me back into the kitchen. “So you were passing through? Hitchhiking? Oh honey, we girls gotta stick together. You’re good people. I’m sorry I was such a bitch this morning. I haven’t slept. I was up all night chasing cows that had escaped out onto the 284 back onto the property. Then we had to fix the damn fence so they didn’t wander right back out again.”

“You got a new calf,” Reece cut in. “First of the season.”

Ruth beamed even bigger. “See. Eat your heart out, motherfucker!” she shouted, giving the finger with both hands at the window in the direction of Trent’s retreating truck. “The HB is *back*.”

Jeremiah rolled his eyes. “How about we start with some breakfast and then finish fixing the pen to keep the cows we just rounded up, ’cause those two troublemakers were already eyeing the temporary cow pens like they

were planning the Great Escape Part Two.”

“Sit, sit,” Ruth waved us all to sit down. “I’ll make my grandma’s famous flapjacks and eggs.”

Jeremiah just lifted his eyebrows at Reece as if to say, is this the same woman who was just screaming at all of us ten minutes ago? but we all sat as instructed.

Well, Jeremiah sat and half-dozed while Reece insisted on helping with coffee and I volunteered to help with cooking.

Chapter Six

“So shit, girl, you were hitchhiking last night?” Ruth asked almost as soon as I started frying up some bacon. “That’s nuts.”

Apparently she wasn’t one for beating around the bush. Or the bacon, as it were.

I shrugged, noticing how Reece had quieted while his brother talked on about all the chores that needed doing that day. Was he listening?

“Just trying to get where I’m going.”

“Where’s that?” Ruth asked.

“Austin.”

She nodded. “You got family there?”

“Um... No, not really.”

“Friends?”

I shook my head as I reached for a fork and flipped the sizzling bacon. “Just looking for a fresh start, I guess.”

Ruth let out a low whistle. If the guys hadn’t been listening before, I didn’t know how they weren’t now.

“I don’t really like to talk about it,” I said hurriedly.

“Oh sure, sure,” Ruth said, pausing as she whipped the pancake batter.

But as soon as she’d plugged in a big griddle, after I’d finished the first round of bacon and was starting the second, she continued.

“I respect that. A brand new start. God knows I’m not exactly one for letting go of the past.” She let out a humorless laugh, but then gazed out the window.

It was a beautiful view, I had to admit. We were in a part of Texas I didn’t even know existed. Instead of being flat like the rest of the state, there

were dramatic, rolling hills. Cattle dotted the hills, and it was a bit breathtaking, to be honest.

“Well, some pasts can be hard to let go of,” I said quietly.

Ruth still heard me, I knew because her head swung my way. She nodded, before her attention got taken away by the pancakes which needed flipping. “Yeah, I guess that’s true,” she said a few minutes later, startling me because I didn’t imagine she was still thinking about my words.

“So how ya gonna get to Austin? I hope you don’t try hitchhiking again. I’m happy to take you, but I gotta hit the hay first after breakfast. I’m swamped and a two-hour roundtrip journey might be a little much at the moment after the all-nighter I just pulled.”

“Oh my God,” I almost dropped the fork I was flipping bacon with. “Are you serious? That would be amazing! But of course, of course, get all the sleep you need.”

“Sure. No problem. We gals gotta stick together, right?”

Again, I was struck by the urge to hug her. To hug *someone*.

And to cry. Because here was the second person in as many days to prove that there *were* actually good people in the world, despite all evidence to the contrary in my previous lived experience.

“Thanks,” I said, trying my damndest to swallow back my emotions. “I would really appreciate that. You have no idea.”

She looked over and her eyes softened. “I know what it’s like to need someone to just throw you a rope once in a while.” Then she huffed out, her mouth hardening into a line. “And how much it bites when there’s no one there with any ropes in sight.”

I nodded. Yeah. Yeah, that, I knew exactly what she meant.

“So we pick ourselves up by our own bootstraps?”

She huffed out again. “More like crawl out of one hole of doom and hope for a less doomy hole tomorrow.”

I laughed out loud at that. “Yup.”

Which was also when I saw Reece look my way, as if startled and then pleased to hear me laugh.

Which made me... feel things.

Good Lord, being an unleashed human in the real world was intense and overwhelming, and I’d only been at it for a few days. I felt like unfamiliar emotions kept assaulting me left and right. I barely knew what to do with one before another one hit. Part of me wanted to go back to bed, curl into a ball,

and pull the covers over my head for a long, long time.

I decided instead I should just focus on cooking bacon, and then eggs, something I *actually* knew how to do. One foot in front of the other. I'd figure this all out as I went...right?

Meanwhile Ruth turned her attention on Jeremiah, getting into an argument with him about the best way to go about hiring ranch hands.

She thought they should get some hands as soon as possible, as many projects as needed tackling. Jeremiah said he'd rather have the *right* man than the first man to walk through the door.

Ruth countered back, asking why the hell he assumed it needed to be a *man* at all.

Jeremiah rolled his eyes. "I meant man in the universal mankind way."

Ruth just lifted an eyebrow. "Gendered language matters."

I smiled, enjoy them ribbing each other. That was the theme of the entire breakfast. It was nice not being the only odd man out there. None of us besides the twin brothers knew each other. And Ruth was not shy about grilling the brothers on their qualifications to do the job.

Jeremiah especially, grilled her back about the state of the facilities and ranch.

Ruth bristled any time he insinuated her family ranch wasn't up to snuff. But even she admitted that a lot of the equipment *had* been sold off to pay her father's debts. "We sent accurate pictures and representations of the property to the buyer."

Jeremiah scoffed at that. "Please. Those pictures had to be at least ten years old. The stable is all but falling apart and the bunkhouse only has one working toilet."

Ruth shrugged. "Your boss bought the ranch in AS IS condition, all cash. It's why he got the place for such a steal."

"You call five point eight million dollars a *steal*?"

Ruth just shrugged. "America lives on beef. We're a vital part of the economy. It's an exciting venture capital opportunity that a whole new generation is invigorated to be a part of. Reconnecting with the land, discovering a whole different pace of life."

Reece laughed at that. "Great sales pitch, but we're already sold. We love the life. So does our boss. He knows this place is a money sink, but he's a rich bastard and believes enough good people falling in love and reconnecting to the land is the only hope this planet has."

I could only stare at him, a little appalled by the naïve conviction of anyone who stated *anything* with such easy hope. At the same time it was such a beautiful sentiment. Who the hell *were* these people?

Jeremiah did not seem moved by his brother's argument either. "Yes, but what you and our idealistic employer fail to realize is that there's still a very important bottom line we have to think about for *any* of this to be a successful endeavor. There's no point in wasting a ton of exhaustive labor for shockingly thin profit margins. It's time we take this ranch into the twenty-first century or there's no point to any of it."

"And how exactly do you propose we do that?" Ruth asked, shoving the last bite of pancake into her mouth.

I had to give it to her, her grandma's pancake recipe *was* to die for. They almost tasted like *cake*. A thin drizzle of syrup and a thick pat of butter and I was in freaking heaven.

Pancakes were absolutely on the No list from Jeff. He had a hate-hate relationship with any wife of his consuming carbohydrates.

I was busy enjoying the absolute divinity of the pancakes while Ruth and Jeremiah continued arguing the best ways to take the ranch forward.

Finally Jeremiah threw down. "Obviously, your ideas for the ranch didn't work. Your family drove the place into such overwhelming debt it was about to go into foreclosure if you didn't accept a short sale on the place. I don't even know why I'm arguing with you."

I looked up from my plate, my mouth stuffed full of pancake, eyes wide as Ruth's face turned beet red. She threw down her napkin and stood up so abruptly her chair scraped the linoleum as it went backwards.

"I never had a chance to run anything. My father didn't get the son he wanted so he never listened to a damn thing I had to say. He was the one who ran this place into the ground." Then she looked at me. "Charlie, this might not be my ranch anymore, but it's still *my house*, and you're my guest. You're welcome to stay a few more days or I can take you into Austin later today. Just let me know. But first I'm gonna go upstairs and get some damn sleep after chasing *your* cows all night."

She glared at Jeremiah and then turned and stormed up the stairs.

Reece let out a low whistle.

Jeremiah glared at him. "Don't even start with me, brother. We didn't sign on to deal with that woman or her issues when Xavier bought the place and sent us here. This is our shot and I'm not going to let anyone think they

can second-guess my decisions constantly. Xavier trusted me to know what I'm doing." With that he shoved the last bite of eggs in his mouth then stood up and grabbed his coat from the door.

"Jer, you need to sleep too," Reece said.

"I'll sleep after I get the cows fed."

"Jesus, Xavier didn't just send you down here. We're equal partners," Reece said. He stood up, leaving half his breakfast uneaten. It was probably wrong that I eyed the food covetously. I was already stuffed and if I ate anymore, I'd probably feel sick. Jeff had just monitored everything I ate so strictly, it felt ridiculously liberating to eat whatever the hell I wanted for once. No one here gave a damn.

And the thought struck me—no one would give a damn what I ate for the rest of my life. I could have ice cream for *dinner* if I wanted to.

I was startled out of my thoughts by the continuing drama between the brothers.

"You don't know how to work the tractor or the bailer," Jeremiah said. "There's nine hundred cows to feed. This is different than the fifty head back at Mel's."

Reece looked frustrated, but then his tired-looking twin put a hand on his shoulder and looked him in the eye. "Plus, someone needs to keep an eye on the heifers and cows. And there's the calf that needs feeding. This ranch needs the both of us."

Reece nodded. "I'll go feed the calf and check on the ladies to see if there's any progress with them. Then I can make a list of all we'll need to fix up the bunkhouse and stable."

Jeremiah smiled tiredly. "Good man."

"Okay, but after you do the morning feed, then you'll at least take a damn nap?" Reece asked.

Jeremiah shrugged and Reece rolled his eyes.

"It's the first day on the job. I'm not gonna sleep through it."

"All I'm asking for is a power nap somewhere along the way. The place survived whatever the hell piss poor management was happening before we got here. It can last another couple hours while you catch some shut-eye."

Jeremiah cocked an eyebrow. "Since when did you become big brother? I'm the one who looks out for you, remember, little brother?"

"Seven minutes does *not* make you my big brother."

"You lost that argument a hell of a long time ago, little brother." Jeremiah

grabbed Reece in a headlock and I could only watch on in a sort of astonished joy at seeing the obvious love and camaraderie between them. Holy crap, was this what real family looked like?

Reece fought his way out of the hold and shoved his brother, but they both had smiles on their faces and then Jeremiah was all serious again. “Okay, okay, back to business.” Jeremiah reached for his worn and dirty cowboy hat that was on a peg beside where his coat had been.

He looked my way. “Nice to meet you, Charlotte,” he said with a nod. Then he was out the door.

Leaving me and Reece in the kitchen, which felt a lot smaller all of a sudden with me and the big man in it.

Our eyes met and locked for a moment, then I jerked my gaze away as I felt my cheeks heat. I started gathering up dishes, if only for something to do with my hands.

I expected Reece to head out the door after his brother, but instead he surprised me by saying, “Those can wait. Want to come with me to see how Bessie is doing this morning?”

I looked up. “Bessie?”

He grinned, and he looked both rakish and endearingly boyish in the morning light, a mixture that hit me straight in the belly. “That’s what I named the baby calf.”

I laughed and put down the stack of plates I’d gathered. “Of course I want to see her.”

He waved an arm. “Come on, then. Let’s get her her morning bottle.”

“Um.” I looked around at the mess from breakfast. But he was right, it could wait. I wasn’t sure why I even thought it was my responsibility to clean it up. Because I’d cooked and they’d given me free room and board for the night? Because cleaning and making things pristine was always what I’d done and it was now my instinctual go to?

“Yeah, that sounds amazing.”

“Here, I’m sure Ruth won’t mind you borrowing her coat.” He pointed towards Ruth’s coat.

I raised my eyebrows. “Considering how she reacted to me borrowing her *bed*...”

He waved. “That was just a misunderstanding.” He grabbed the coat and held it out to me. “It’s cold as a steer’s balls out there. Come on.”

I smiled, how could I not, and took the coat. It had been cold when we’d

gone out earlier.

When we stepped out, I was greeted by the sight of the ranch in its full glory by the light of the morning sun.

I hadn't really had the chance to take it in earlier when we'd all piled out to deal with Trent the Asshole.

But I took it in now. It was cold and quiet, but not still. There was a wind that moved the grass on the surrounding hills that seemed to fold into themselves all around us. There were a few trees on the property and their bare winter branches were alive and dancing in the morning breeze. The same breeze that cut through my thin jeans and had me zipping up Ruth's coat and shoving my hands in the pockets as Reece led the way back to the barn.

It wasn't much warmer in the barn, especially considering it was open to the elements on one side, but the break from the wind did help. But our little calf was nestled underneath the roof in the dry hay, all curled up.

Reece immediately went to the corner of the barn where there was a small counter with a big drop sink. He turned on the water from the spigot and waited for it to run warm before filling up about half of a big four-pint bottle. Then he opened a big plastic bucket and scooped some powder into the bottle. He closed the top and shook it vigorously. He finished by snapping on a big rubber nipple before coming back to me where I stood beside the calf.

"How's she doing?" I asked.

"I got her up on her feet in the middle of the night, so that was encouraging. But we've got to make sure she can get up as much as possible today if we're gonna keep her alive."

My heart lurched at the idea that we could still lose this precious little life.

She looked up at us with big moon-black eyes.

"Here, you feed her." He handed me the oversized bottle. "I'm gonna see if I can get her standing again. Maybe the food will encourage her to try out her legs more."

I looked up at him in alarm, holding the bottle awkwardly. "I don't know how."

He smiled at me. "Just hold it upside down. Don't worry. We used to have the little kids do this back where I worked before. You never want a bottle calf, but the kids always loved them. They become like the family pet."

Okay, well, that did make me feel a little better.

"Come on, Bessie, up you go." He hooked a leg over the calf, then leaned

over and grabbed the calf from its middle to help her up onto her legs.

Bessie extended her wobbly legs, collapsing a few times before she got them underneath her. She was still unsteady, and Reece helped keep her up while I held the bottle for her.

She bumped it with her nose a few times curiously. When milk dribbled out onto her lip and her little pink tongue came out to lick it, then she got more interested and started to suckle at the nipple.

“Oh my gosh, she’s doing it!” I grinned at Reece, feeling like an absolute superstar, even though all I was doing was barely keeping hold of the bottle while Bessie did all the work.

But Reece smiled just as wide back at me, the smile where he showed all his teeth. “Told you you could do it. You’re a natural.”

Bessie suckled a little too hard and almost yanked the bottle out of my hands and I yelped and snatched it back before it fell. But I took it as a good sign if she was attacking it so vigorously.

“Look at her go,” I couldn’t help announcing, still delighted down to my bones as the liquid disappeared from the bottle. “She’s amazing!”

“Of course she is. She’s Bessie, firstborn of the HB’s new heritage.”

“The HB?” I asked.

“Harshbarger Ranch. Jer and I didn’t see any reason to change the ranch’s name. Especially with Ruth staying on, it’ll probably mean even more not to change it. Besides, what’s Xavier gonna call it? He’d just name it after his wife again and we’d have another Mel’s Ranch.”

I smiled. “That’s sweet.”

“He’s crazy about her. And the kids. His family’s the guy’s whole world.”

I shook my head, looking down at Bessie as she finished up the bottle. “I can’t imagine,” I said before thinking better of it, then announced, “All done!”

Bessie was still bumping her nose at the bottle and trying to suckle it.

“Here, trade off,” Reece said. “You see if you can help her stand up and walk around while I prepare the second bottle.” He let go of Bessie and she actually wobbled forward a few steps uncertainly.

“Way to go, baby!” I cooed.

Then she stumbled backwards and went down again, landing on the soft hay. Reece took the bottle from me. “Keep working with her,” he said, walking back to the other side of the barn.

“Uh,” I started saying, but he was already turning on the spigot.

So I hauled a leg to straddle the calf like he had, then reached down and picked Bessie up, stabilizing her between my legs. When I let go, she stood for a little bit and took another step furtively forward.

It was amazing. Human babies took months to learn how to walk, but cow babies somehow came out just knowing how to do it? I’d had no idea.

And as if invigorated by the first bottle, she stayed on her feet, awkwardly stumbling forward on her long, coltish legs. By the time Reece got back with the second bottle, she was moving around the pen like a little champ.

“Look!” I said.

Reece grinned. “I leave you ladies alone for two minutes and look at this.”

I giggled, delighted even though I knew I hadn’t really done anything.

“You want to feed her again?” he asked, holding out the bottle to me.

Was he kidding? Of course I did. I took the bottle and Bessie was getting along with the program at this point. When I went over to where she stood, she latched right on and started suckling.

I thought she might get full and not finish the whole thing, but nope, she sucked down every last ounce of liquid from the bottle, and then trounced with a little more sturdiness with each step.

“Oh my gosh, look at her go.”

When I looked over at Reece, expecting him to be watching Bessie like I was, instead his eyes were on me, and they were quizzical.

I immediately felt self-conscious. I’d forgotten myself. For the first time in... well, years, I hadn’t been stuck in my head. I’d just been in the moment. In the wonderful moment, present with the animal, and the crisp morning air, and with him, unselfconsciously.

But now I was entirely self-conscious again. I handed him the bottle and hugged my arms around me, suddenly very aware that I was in another woman’s coat. Wearing the only pair of clothes that I had. Standing somewhere I didn’t belong.

“Well, I should go back and see to the dishes,” I said. “Thanks for letting me tag along and see how Bessie is.”

I turned to go and was almost at the open edge of the barn when Reece called out, “Wait!”

I paused, looking over my shoulder. He strode forward, his eyebrows drawn.

When he got to me, he had to lift a hand over his eyes to block the bright morning sun that had crested with a vengeance over the hill behind the house.

“Look, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I overheard what you said to Ruth. That you were hitch-hiking and heading into Austin without any friends or family there. That doesn’t— I mean... Do you even have any money? What are you gonna do when you get there?”

I felt all the blood drain from my face. I suppose it was better than blushing with embarrassment, but the mortification was no less humiliating.

I tried to wave a hand. “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about it.” I tried to turn to go again but he put out a hand to stop me. Though he stopped short of actually touching my arm or grabbing me.

His hand just paused, hovered in the air. “Wait. Sorry, I’m saying all this badly. I’m not always so good with words. What I’m trying to say is, I’ve been where you are. Or shit, no. I have no idea what your situation is. Just that me and Jer...”

He huffed out a quick breath like he was frustrated at himself for not being able to get out the words he wanted to. “We haven’t always been... *this*. We grew up shit poor, bouncing from foster home to foster home. And when we were seventeen, we split altogether. Lived on the streets for a few years.”

I paused, my need to flee the conversation at all costs suddenly withering up.

“You?” I asked incredulously. “But you guys seem so...” I trailed off, looking out towards the horizon where Jeremiah was out with the tractor on a hill, unwinding a bale of hay in a long line behind him, cows trailing after him for their morning meal. I met Reece’s eyes. “You guys have your shit so together.”

Reece scoffed at that, then rubbed his hand on the back of his neck. “Yeah? That how it seems to you.”

He nodded. “Well, that’s good, I guess. At least we can pull off looking like we know what we’re doing.”

That made me laugh and he smiled. The sun caught his blue eyes and made them almost translucent.

The next breath of air I sucked in had nothing to do with my embarrassment at being caught at having nothing and little plan of where the hell to go next—and everything to do with the handsome cowboy standing in front of me.

Which was absolutely ridiculous and the *last* thing I needed right now.

“Well... dishes,” I said, hiking a thumb over my shoulder towards the house again.

But Reece took another step forward. “Ruth said you could stay a few days. Why don’t you take her up on that? At least rest for a while. Look, I don’t know where you been or why you’re headed where you’re headed, but it couldn’t hurt to take a minute and take a breather for a few days, could it?”

I hugged my arms around myself, feeling the chill of the morning for the first time since I’d stepped out of the house. “Why?” I asked, shaking my head. “What’s the point? I might as well get on with what’s ahead.”

“Is there something waiting for you?” he pressed, not letting the point go. “Someone?”

I let out a long exhale, then answered honestly. “No.”

“You don’t even have a bag. Do you have any money? Forgive me for asking. I know I’m being a jackass. But you show up here, you help out so much last night and I— Look, there were people who helped Jer and me when we were down and out and had no place to go and what kind of man am I if I don’t try to pay that forward?”

I made a helpless noise and tossed my hands out. “That’s not how the world actually works. People don’t just...” I tossed my hands outwards. “Help strangers. I don’t know what your angle is, but I’m just trying to get a new start. I left a bad situation and I want a new start.”

Reece nodded vigorously, eyes wide. He took a step back and held his hands up. “That’s fine. Look, I get it. I probably wouldn’t believe me either ’cause I’ve known my share of users and takers. Just a few days is all I’m saying. Get a few more good meals in you. A few more good nights’ rest. Then Ruth can drive you into Austin like she said.”

I frowned at him.

“You can help out around here, if that makes you feel better. You cooked this morning. You’re earning your keep. It’s not charity. God knows we can use all the help we can get. The bunkhouse is a goddamned disaster. If you wanted to do some cleaning in there, it’d be a godsend.”

I blinked. Okay, well... Well, maybe that was different. “I guess if I was working for it...”

He immediately brightened. “I can give you a list of chores.”

I laughed, still skeptical.

“Look, plus you’re helping my karma here.”

I rolled my eyes. “You don’t believe in karma.”

He looked offended. “Are you kidding? My fourth foster family was all hard-core hippies. I still meditate and everything.”

“A meditating cowboy?” I smiled, charmed in spite of myself.

“If you hang out for even a few days, you’ll see that ranch work is monotonous. Cowboys and Zen monks have more in common than people think, I bet. Long days with no one around, doing the same thing over and over, connecting to the land and living things around you. It’s a trip, I’m telling ya.”

“Huh,” I said, not sure what the hell to make of Reece Walker. “Okay, well, um, I’ll think about it. But I might as well put myself to good use while Ruth sleeps. So I’ll go clean up the kitchen then I can start on the bunkhouse. Where’s it at?”

Reece grinned like he’d just won the lottery. “Epic. Here, I’ll show you since that’s where I’m headed next.”

And he talked my ear off the whole way about his Buddhist hippie foster family and all the things he’d learned from them, like we’d been best friends for years and not strangers who’d met the night before.

How was it that two days ago I’d felt all alone in the world and now I had enough people in my life to fill a breakfast table?

Chapter Seven

Doing hard work that day felt good. The bunk house was in a disastrous state. A deep clean was the least of its worries, as Reece and I soon discovered when I joined him after cleaning up breakfast.

I entered the building he'd pointed out and was immediately hit by the smell.

"Oh, dear Lord," I said and Reece grimaced.

"I know," he said, looking around. The building was a doublewide trailer that had been set up on the property, but it was pretty trashed inside.

"You slept here last night?" I asked him, feeling even worse, especially since I'd slept in the wrong room and he might as well have had his own bed last night.

He smirked and waved a hand. "Oh, this is nothing compared to some of the places I've spent the night. Plus, I found a cot that was pretty clean." He pointed to a cot he'd set up near the kitchen. There was a suitcase underneath it and more piled up beside, a reminder that he and his brother were as new here as I was.

I looked around the place, then back at him. He'd slept in worse? Then I remembered—he'd said he and his brother had lived on the streets. What kind of life had this man had? What kinds of things had he seen?

"Still, it would be good to do a deep clean so we can even start to see where the problems are," he said, finally frowning as he looked around.

There was just so much *stuff*, like whoever had last lived here had left in a hurry and almost willingly trashed the place on the way out. Either that or they'd just *lived* in this pigsty. There were beer bottles and stray clothing all over the floor. The kitchen had cups with molded over contents still in them.

“If you don’t mind tackling the kitchen,” he said, “I’ll go wrestle the plumbing in the back.” He grimaced. “It’s not pretty back there.”

“Oh my God, I’ll take your word for it.”

“Smart woman. Here, I’ve got some thick rubber gloves if you’re gonna dig in here.”

“I hope you have some industrial cleaning supplies too.”

He laughed at that, but pointed to a bucket on the floor beside the disgusting kitchen counter. There were all sorts of bottles and sprays in the bucket, along with the rubber gloves he’d mentioned.

“Sorry I don’t have a gas mask, but we can open the windows to at least get some fresh air in here. Cold, but fresh.”

I didn’t even wait for him, I just immediately went to the windows and started opening them.

“What kinda tunes you want?” he asked, holding up his phone. “Country or 70’s rock?”

I thought of my long truck ride with Rick yesterday and scrunched my nose. “Anything but country.”

He grinned. “Lynyrd Skynyrd and Kansas it is.” He thumbed through his phone and then “Highway to Hell” started blaring more loudly than I would have expected from the small device.

He left it on a shelf in the living room between the back bathroom and the kitchen where I was. Then I snapped on the rubber gloves and got to work.

It was surprisingly cathartic to clean a really dirty room while rocking out to the classics. By the time “Hotel California” came on, I was swinging my hips and dancing along while I shoved item after item into the first of what would be many big black trash bags.

Song by song, bag by bag, order came from chaos and space began to open up from the disgusting clutter.

Occasionally I’d hear noises or Reece cursing from the back room where he worked on the plumbing.

If I stopped and thought about it, it should be shocking to me that I was in an enclosed space with a man and not freaking the hell out.

I was in the middle of nowhere with a guy who was all but a stranger to me. Ruth was asleep in her bed in another building and Jeremiah was God knows where.

But I... wasn’t afraid.

I paused scrubbing the counter in shock when that realization hit me. In

fact, dancing along to the music while I cleaned—something I never would have dared at home—was almost *fun*.

And this feeling I was feeling right now... this was what it felt like to *not feel afraid*. Holy crap.

I stumbled back, bumping against the counter at the thought. Sometimes it would happen at home, but only while Jeff was gone at work, and even then, there was always the underlying anxiety knowing he'd be coming home soon and wondering what sort of mood he'd be in.

I could never really... *unclench*.

But here I was, dancing around this strange bunkhouse, cleaning, doing whatever the hell I wanted, about to leave tomorrow and go somewhere completely new still and—

No one had a hold of me or a say on what I did.

I put down the rag I'd been scrubbing so diligently and let my head fall back as Aerosmith hit the high notes in "Dream On." I threw my arms out and then drew them dramatically back to my chest along with the lyrics.

Dream on, dream on, dream on.

I spun around, ready to throw my arms out again when I saw Reece standing in the hallway, arm leaned against the doorway, watching me.

"Oh!" I yelped, reaching out and steadying myself against the counter.

He was smiling. "Sorry to interrupt. Just wanted to know if you wanted any lunch? I'm gonna go grab some and feed Bessie her midday bottle."

"Oh!" I picked up the cleaning rag, feeling my cheeks flushed pink. "Oh. Um. Shouldn't it be me getting you the lunch?"

He frowned and laughed, then gestured around at all the bags of trash. "Looks like you're getting more done in here than I am back there wrestling with those pipes. But feel free to take a break for lunch." Then he rubbed the back of his neck with his hand, "Or however long you want, obviously. I had no idea you'd get so much done, frankly."

"Oh, I haven't even really gotten to the kitchen yet," I said. "There's about a decade's worth of grime to get off that stove."

He just paused and smiled a little quizzically at me. "Where on earth did you come from, Charlotte..." He trailed off at the end, like he was waiting for me to fill in my last name, but I didn't.

I just held up my now-brown-formerly-yellow sponge. "Well, I guess I better get back to it. I'll have whatever you're having for lunch if you wanna bring me back a sandwich."

He nodded. “Sure thing,” he said, but for another long moment he just stood there, watching me with his head tilted like he was trying to figure me out. It was a little unnerving.

“What?” I finally asked and he blinked like he was embarrassed to have been caught staring.

“Nothing. Sandwiches. Right. Got it. Aye aye, Captain Charlotte.”

I laughed at him when he swept up his hand in an over-exaggerated salute before heading out the door.

I didn’t miss that he left his music behind for me.

Wow, he was sweet.

And sexy, cut in a foreign voice in my head. A voice I’d all but forgotten.

Holy crap, was this what it felt like to be... to be *attracted* to a man? I blinked, and not just from the astringent cleaner I was using to degrease the oven.

I was attracted to this guy. I thought of the way his muscles had bulged when he’d leaned against the wall.

You’re married, said another appalled voice.

To an abusive asshole. Who I never intended to *ever* see again, in my entire life. Besides, I’d considered myself his wife in name only for most of our nine-year marriage. After he— After he—

Well, some things were unforgivable, and that was that.

Familiar pain lanced through my chest and defiantly, I shoved it away.

No. I wasn’t going to sit and wallow in my pain anymore, not here in this new life.

My eyes strayed towards the rickety door Reece had exited through.

“Don’t Fear the Reaper” came on, blaring throughout the trailer. Now that I’d cleared it out, the music echoed around the room to greater effect.

And I had a wild hair of an impulse, because dear God, I wanted to fly too, for real.

No more strings holding me down, no take backs. What if I did the one thing that would erase Jeff forever? Exorcise him from my body.

I wanted to claim this future for myself, in a way that would actually make me believe it was real.

Tomorrow I’d take Ruth up on her offer and have her drive me in to Austin. I’d hit the city early in the morning, look for work, find myself a women’s shelter to stay at if I had to while I figured things out.

Yes, just one more night here and then I’d be gone.

My eyes flew back to the door as Reece came back in, a friendly smile on his face as he held up two plates, one with a sandwich for each of us.

Tomorrow I'd be gone, but tonight...

Well, tonight was a night to fly.

* * *

I worked hard all day on the bunkhouse trailer, fairly nonstop. Reece was in and out throughout the day between working on the plumbing and checking on the pregnant cows to see if any more were "dropping calves," as he put it. By sunset, he'd replaced the entire toilet and carried out several bags of trash from the bathroom and back room—they'd smelled so badly I'd had to hold my nose while he went by.

And apparently the ranch had two new baby calves, born without complications this time. I thought they would put the mother and baby calves up in the barn, but over dinner I was informed differently. They just let the mothers give birth to the calves wherever they happen to be out at pasture. Apparently, it was less stressful and cleaner than having them all penned up where it could get swampy with manure.

They talked about manure a shocking amount over the dining room table, that was something I was coming to find. But then again, it seemed no topic was off limits.

"Well, that's a good start to the season," Ruth said when Reece mentioned the second calf of the day he'd tagged just before coming in for dinner. "Three already. I saw the bottle calf running around outside so it looks like he's gonna make it after all."

"She," I corrected. "Her name's Bessie." Reece and I had both showered—me in the main house and him in the bunkhouse bathroom. Apparently the shower was passable enough to use. I glanced across the table at Reece, wondering if he was even single. Maybe he had a girl back in—where was it he'd said he and his brother had just moved from—Wyoming? Maybe he had a girl back in Wyoming and she just hadn't had a chance to move here yet.

Ruth lifted her eyebrows. "Don't go and start naming them now. They all end up at the beef processing plant sooner or later."

"First of the season always gets a name," Reece countered. "For luck."

Ruth rolled her eyes. "Sentimental."

I glanced across the table at Reece, wondering if he was even single. Reece just grinned and shoved a buttered roll in his mouth. I watched in fascination. How did he even make eating a roll look sexy? Maybe he had a girl back in—where was it he'd said he and his brother had just moved from—Wyoming? Maybe he had a girl back in Wyoming and she just hadn't had a chance to move here yet.

Blinking, I yanked my gaze away from his mouth. His lips in particular. They were full and wide, much fuller than I'd expect for a man.

I licked my own lips and then reached for my lemonade. Was the heat set a little high in here? I took a long drink. I was likely overcompensating. This was all a way to avoid thinking about trauma, right? Getting distracted by a good looking man? Giving in to the feelings he made twist in my stomach.

And then a rebellious streak inside me asked, so what? What if it was?

When I looked back at the table, it was to find Reece watching me. He looked immediately away, like he was the one embarrassed to be caught looking at me.

Which made my cheeks flush and my stomach do a little swoop.

Conversation swirled on around the table. Jeremiah started grilling Ruth about when the cows had last been vaccinated and where was the best place to get equipment they'd need to start reseeding grasses.

I tucked into the food, meatloaf Ruth had made for everyone, and enjoyed the laidback atmosphere of being around *people*. It had been so long since I'd been in a room anything like this. With conversation that was by turns easy, occasionally contentious between Jeremiah and Ruth, but always real. With real people talking about real things.

Was this what it could be like? Wherever I actually landed, when I got friends of my own, anyway. I swigged the overly sweet lemonade, another treat Jeff never would have allowed, and wondered when I'd stop comparing everything to my life with him, if ever.

After dinner everyone went their separate ways and I settled onto the bed in the room Reece had given up for me.

I was tired after the day of cleaning and scrubbing, it was true. But being tired after a day of actually *using* my body was so different from being tired from a day of tense muscles and dread of what might come when Jeff came home.

I felt exhilarated, flushed, and unable to sleep.

And the absurd, ridiculous impulse I'd had earlier in the day while

watching Reece flitted back through my mind.

I turned off the light, got in bed, and tried to sleep.

Hours later, I was still trying.

I pulled the pillow over my head. God, no. It was ridiculous! I was Penelope Chambers, I couldn't...

But even thinking that name had me sitting up in revolt.

No.

NO.

I wasn't her anymore.

I'd never be her again, goddammit.

I looked at the clock. Ten at night. And then I yanked on the leggings Ruth had let me borrow, shoved my feet into the slippers—also from Ruth, and ran downstairs before I could think better of it.

* * *

I knocked on the door of the bunkhouse. No answer.

Crap. I looked over my shoulder at the bigger house and suddenly felt ridiculous. What the hell did I actually think I was doing here? Just showing up like something out of a movie, and what exactly had I planned on saying? *Hi, you're sexy, wanna have sex?*

God, I was such an idiot.

I took a step back from the door, about to turn around, when it suddenly swung open.

And there was Reece, looking disheveled, one hand on the hem of his shirt like he'd just yanked it on to come to the door.

"Charlie." He looked very surprised to see me of all people standing on his doorstep. He moved his body behind the door and it was only then that I realized he wore just his boxers and the undershirt. Right. He'd probably expected his brother.

I gulped.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, looking behind me to the big house, which I knew was completely dark.

And I was just standing there frozen like an idiotic statue in the middle of the night being a complete freak—

"You're sexy and I wanted to have sex with you."

Oh shit. Did I really just blurt that out? My hand slapped over my mouth like it couldn't believe I'd just said it either.

Reece just stood there, still looking stunned in front of me, one hand on the top of the door, the other on the door frame. Wow, he looked *really* sexy standing like that.

Holy shit, what the hell was I thinking?

Abort! Abort!

I yanked my hand down from my mouth and took a step back. "Shit. I'm so sorry. That was completely inappropriate of me. God." I waved my arm in the air. "Forget I ever said anything. Look I'm leaving tomorrow, so we can just—"

But before I could say another word, Reece had grabbed my flailing hand and pulled me inside the bunk house.

He closed the door behind me and for a second we just stood there inside the dark bunkhouse—there was only a nightstand lamp set up on the kitchen counter beside his cot to illuminate the large space.

I blinked, my breaths short and heavy, feeling goosebumps rise but also a flash of heat making me sweat at the same time.

And then we crashed together. I threw my arms around his thick, corded neck and dug my fingers into that unruly hair of his.

And oh my God, it felt good to have a warm body against me that *wasn't* Jeff.

This was a man I chose.

A man who was safe.

Although thinking that... I completely froze up. Because what if now that he had me alone in his space, I *wasn't* safe? What if I changed my mind and said no? Would he stop? I was nuts to be here. I didn't know anything about this guy, not really.

I yanked back from him.

And waited for hands to follow. I waited for his voice to turn cruel. I waited for fingers at my throat shoving me up against the wall, calling me a fucking tease.

Instead, Reece's hands went limp, then lowered as he looked in my eyes. "Charlie? Is everything okay?"

My heart was racing a mile a minute, a war raging inside me. Fornicate or flight?

I don't think I'd ever wanted a man between my legs more—I was

shocked to even have an impulse like this, so raw and needy and... and *dirty*.

But I just needed to know—

“You’ll stop if I say stop?” I whispered anxiously, my hands reaching out and clenching reflexively around his shoulders.

His eyes widened, like almost for a second he looked horrified, and his hands dropped off me completely. “Charlie, look, we don’t have to do anything. Why don’t we slow down? I’ve got some tea I can make and we can talk—”

“That’s sweet,” I said as I grabbed his jaw and went to kiss him desperately again.

I paused just a tiny moment before meeting his lips, allowing him the choice too. He chose the second I offered, and our lips met in the most—

It was like being lifted out of my body and coming back into it for the very first time.

I blinked open in shock and looked into his blue-gray chameleon eyes. They changed colors, I realized now, depending on what he was wearing. In his gray nightshirt, they were stone gray.

We kissed again and *wow*. I cemented my body against him, needing to touch as much of him as possible, all at once. Surface area, I needed surface area.

Why were our stupid clothes still on, anyway? What the hell? I wanted to be touching his skin. I wanted *my skin* to be touching *his skin*. I wanted *all the skin* to be rubbing, and sliding against each other, and I wanted to lick all the way down his—

I broke the most glorious kiss on God’s green earth to grab for his hem. He met me and together we yanked his shirt up and off over his head. It got caught on his forehead and we both laughed and then kissed, and then laughed through our kiss. And then kissed until there was nothing more to laugh about.

I reached down and pulled my long-sleeved shirt off over my head. I wasn’t wearing a bra. I *had* had a plan in mind when coming here. There was a yellowing bruise on my back from where Jeff had kicked me last week, but it was fading. As long as we stayed facing each other, it should be fine.

But all my plans seemed silly now that I was faced with the reality of Reece in the flesh. Dear Lord, I’d had no idea, I’d been a little fool thinking I’d just try to get something out of my system when—

Reece reached down, his hand slipping directly underneath my leggings

and my panties all at once. And just like *that*, he found the spot.

I gasped and arched into him at the cool touch of his middle finger against me. It was so intimate for him to touch me there. Reece. Oh God, Reece was touching me *there*. He tickled inside me, pushing in my channel just a tease and then pulling out again and expertly finding my clit.

Holy shit, who was this guy??? I thought guys being able to do this, well, were a myth.

At the moment, I didn't fucking care who he was, just that he was here, and he was with *me*.

He circled deep, and I mewled. Yes. Mewled. But now he was *stroking* with his finger, deep in the channel, then circling my lips and landing on my clit, then pulsing with his palm in hard, round rubs right where I'd always ever wanted. Oh shit. Oh God. Holy— Yes, that, holy shit, *that*—

His mouth on my mouth silenced my shouts. I wasn't being quiet because I couldn't, I couldn't, because now he was flicking my clit with that devilish middle finger of his flicking and then circling, flicking and circling—

So I cried my pleasure into his mouth because it— It—

It just felt like I was bursting out in a starburst. My whole body flying upwards, like energy had burst out from my sternum and then resounded back in through my pussy.

And when I landed back in my body, holy shit. Holy shit, it was him and me. He was there, and his mouth was still demanding and in charge of mine.

I met him, aftershocks rolling through my body, pulsing through our kisses.

“Bed,” I gasped, glazed tears of pleasure at the edges of my eyes, realizing only now we were still just standing in the doorway, me clutching Reece's body while he played my mine like an instrument.

“Bed. Let's do this.” My breaths came out panted and I couldn't say much more than that.

He slid his finger out of me *achingly* slowly; only to grab my waist and tug me over to the cot.

Which was when we both realized that yeah, it was a cot.

I put my hand over my mouth and started giggling. Reece just grinned, kicked off his boxers, and sat down to straddle the thing. He leaned over and reached down in his dusty suitcase that was still under the cot and pulled out a condom.

“Very good boy,” I said. I arched an eyebrow, to which he grinned and

held out his hands in a ridiculous *ta da* motion. Dear Lord, the fact that I was managing human speech at all after what he'd just done to me... *Somebody give me a damn prize.*

“Ready and waiting, honey.”

Then he reached out his arms for me as he lay backwards on the cot, legs still straddling either side like he was bracing for me. He was cocky and confident as hell, but also had a twinkle in his eye that told you he didn't take himself too seriously at the same time. I'd never seen anything more attractive and my sex contracted remembering the orgasm he'd coaxed out of me with just the twitches of his finger.

I went forward, pushing off my leggings and panties and glad for the dim light. I was standing completely naked in front of a man. A man who was not my husband. It was terrifying and exhilarating. For once in my life, I leaned *in* to both emotions instead of running away towards numbness. I wanted to feel everything tonight. I wanted to feel alive.

Reece just grinned and I couldn't help giggling with lightness as he grasped my hips and helped me get situated atop him. His strong hands clutched my hips and helped shift me into place as I lifted and lowered myself onto him. And *hello*, he was very ready for me.

He slid into me slow, meaningfully, and one inch at a time.

For a few moments there during the transition, I'd lost track of the intensity that zinged down through to my bones, it felt like.

But then, within moments, we were back in the thick of *it*—that ridiculous connection and chemistry I hadn't known or even suspected was actually possible in the real world.

A spasm rocked my lower half at the memory, leftover from the earlier high he'd taken me to.

Another inch down. He grasped my hips, hands so large the edges of his fingertips were squeezing my buttocks. I clenched around him, convulsing even as my next orgasm started rising. I'd never been so conscious of my body, inside and out, as I was right in that moment.

And gah, where he took me... It wasn't an orgasm as I'd experienced before in any recognizable form. This was— This was—

It was bright sunlight from inside me and then these pulses started coming, lashing me higher and higher and—

His hand came between our lips to cover my mouth. Because oh, apparently that high-pitched squealing was coming from *me*.

It didn't slow either of us down. He just held my gaze, kept his hand over my mouth, and dragged me down onto him with his other hand.

My whole body shuddered. As the peak hit me, I blinked and looked at him. Unable to look away, to look anywhere but at him, tears leaking from the edges of my eyes.

He yanked his hand away from my mouth and sat up, kissing me hard and pushing up into me at the same time I ground down. I ground down and rode him, shamelessly chasing more pleasure.

He pulled away from my lips and he was just watching me in wonder, almost, in awe—

And then he gently cupped my face and kissed me soft while he began to thrust from beneath me.

He was—

I didn't know this man. He was a complete stranger. But he wasn't at the same time.

I threw my arms around him and clutched him to me. I kissed him more frantically than I even knew I knew how.

He met my lips with his, calm to my frantic, and then frantic to my frantic, and then both of us calm and languorous. All as he made love to me in turns slow and then *hard* and then grinding and then slow and torturously again.

Until I dug my fingernails into his hair and dragged his chest against mine.

He grinned, and kissed me deep, and thrust several more times, long, long and deep. Over and over and over again.

Until finally, in his time, but not too long, I felt the moment he came. And I saw it on his face, that agonized pleasure, his eyes cracked *just the tiniest bit* so he could keep his eyes on me even in that moment. Maybe *most* in that moment.

My thighs shuddered and we were left gasping and clasped in each other's arms.

I dropped my head against his chest, laughing. Oh my *God*, that had felt good. I'd needed that.

I felt his big chest rumble as he started laughing, too.

“What are you laughing at?” he asked.

I giggled harder. “What are *you* laughing at.”

“I'm laughing at you, giggling and jiggling up and down on my cock.

You keep it up much longer and we're gonna be ready for round two."

At which point he proceeded to flex his cock inside me to remind me that, oh yes, he was still very much inside me.

I giggled so hard I thought my red face was going to explode. I climbed off him. He made a disgruntled noise, but let go of my waist. After I got off, he turned to the side and discreetly disposed of the condom. Ah, yes. This was not his first rodeo.

Well, I supposed not, as good looking as he was. The fact that he *didn't* have a girlfriend or wife was probably the real indicator. Ruth—ever the interrogator-in-chief—had pressed both him and Jeremiah about their relationship statuses.

Of course it was all for the better if he was one of those kinds of guys who might take a number to be polite, but never call it anyway.

I was leaving tomorrow—well, *this* morning, considering it was now likely far past midnight.

I reached down for my shirt, still careful to make sure my back was angled away from him, and started to tug it on over my head when he reached and tugged on the fingers of my hand.

"Hey, what's your hurry?" He hopped off the cot and held out his arms in a gentlemanly gesture, only *slightly* undercut by the fact that he was buck naked. "Look, the mattress is yours even."

I giggled and leaned over, then grabbed his shirt and tossed it in his directions.

"I'd say, 'Another night,' Romeo," I said with a wistfulness I wasn't sure was trying to be funny bravado or genuine, "but unfortunately, I leave in the morning."

Suddenly neither of us was laughing.

And he crossed the distance between us and pulled me into his arms. It didn't feel sexual. He just held me.

I clung to him back, feeling something desperate in my chest at the thought of leaving in the morning.

I broke away as soon as I could, and tried to smile breezily as I turned and hurried towards the door, then out it, and all but raced back to the house and up to my own bed.

Where I would fretfully reimagine everything that happened back down in that bunkhouse in *exquisite* detail, on repeat, torturing myself until morning light broke.

Chapter Eight

I finally fell asleep for twenty minutes before my alarm went off, which was *not* conducive to preparing myself for the day I had ahead of me.

I'd only be starting my new life today. No biggie. Not like I might need *all* of my mental and physical capacity at *full* this morning.

I climbed out of bed—the *correct* bed this time, and couldn't help my hand caressing the mattress. What would be Reece's mattress.

Ridiculous, thinking about a man when there were so many bigger things to contend with today. It was probably just a defense mechanism or something. My brain focusing on the hot guy I'd had the incredible sex with last night instead of all the scary things that lay in front of me.

I nodded, deciding that was it as I pulled on my jeans and got dressed.

Ruth was kind and, realizing I didn't have any other clothes except the ones I'd shown up with, had given me some extra shirts and an old pair of her jeans, along with a couple pairs of faded leggings. The jeans were loose and too long, but I just leaned over and rolled them up, grateful I didn't have to go downstairs again in sleep clothes just to change into my own in the laundry room.

I folded the few other items, then wrapped them all up in the largest shirt, using the arm sleeves to tie the bundle shut.

It was a pathetically tiny bundle of belongings, but hey, compared to what I'd had just days ago, it was improvement. I was moving up in the world.

I rolled my eyes and then headed down for breakfast.

Or what I assumed would be breakfast. Instead, I walked into a stand-off between Ruth sitting at the table with her arms crossed over her chest, glaring at Jeremiah who looked like he'd just walked in the door, Reece behind him.

“What?” Ruth asked. “You expect me to just make you breakfast every morning and help around the ranch? Why should I? It’s not like you’re paying me. And you didn’t inherit a wife with the property, buddy.”

Jeremiah just glared her down as he yanked off his hat. “Never thought I did. Didn’t intend to inherit a landlady with the property either.” He jammed his wide-brimmed hat on the hook. “And I can cook myself breakfast just fine, thank you very much.”

“Oh, let me!” I said, hurrying into the kitchen.

Ruth swung her head towards me, as if I’d just betrayed all womankind. Shit, I hadn’t meant that.

I held up my hands. “Or not. Just trying to be helpful in return for hospitality. Sorry if I’m overstepping.”

But Jeremiah’s gaze landed on me, and it didn’t glance off immediately like it had all yesterday. Instead he paused and seemed like he was assessing something.

“I saw the work you did out on the bunkhouse yesterday,” he said. “I can’t believe you cleaned up that whole place by yourself.”

“Oh.” I shrugged, not expecting the compliment. “I don’t mind a little hard work. And I’m so grateful you all gave me a safe place to stay when I needed it.”

He nodded. “Reece said you were good with the calf, too.”

I smiled. “Bessie’s a pleasure. Can I see her again before we leave?” I asked Reece, then looked to Ruth. “I know we’ll need to get going soon, but maybe I can feed her one last time?”

Ruth opened her mouth to say something, but Jeremiah cut her off. “What if you didn’t leave?”

“What?” I choked out right at the same time as Ruth said, “First good idea you’ve had since I met you.”

I looked back and forth between Jeremiah and Ruth, suddenly acutely feeling Reece’s presence in the room, but not able to bring myself to look at him. Who was I kidding, the entire time since I’d stepped in the room, he was all I could think about, all I could sense, but I’d refused, *refused* to look his direction. So what if I felt even an iota of the heat I had from last night? God, I’d die of embarrassment of anybody else here sensed any of that.

So I kept my gaze firmly averted.

Until his brother suddenly came out with the ludicrous question about me not leaving.

I met Reece's eyes and they were staring right at me, steely gray to match his dark gray Henley shirt he wore.

"I agree," he said. "You should stay. No need to move on so soon if there's no one waiting for you."

I blinked, then looked back at Jeremiah, if only for my sanity. "But I'm not strong enough to be a ranch hand."

Ruth scoffed. "That's bullshit. You think women haven't been doing this work for centuries? Plus, machines do most of the heavy lifting these days. I kept the ranch afloat almost a whole month and all the cows fed and watered before these two showed up. All by myself." She waved her arms toward the twins.

"No wonder—"

Ruth pointed her finger in Jeremiah's face. "Finish that sentence and I'll put this boot so far up your ass you'll be coughing leather. You try running this place by yourself. I about dropped with exhaustion at the end of every night. And guess what. No one was paying me shit. It was just for love of these stupid animals and this land."

Jeremiah's face gentled, just the slightest bit, but he didn't say a word to her, he just moved his eyes from her, back to me. "See? I've known plenty of women who worked side by side with a man and were more reliable by half. I know you got your own plans and being a ranch hand probably ain't on that list. But the way I see it, we're short-handed at the moment, and you probably need some cash to make an easier start of it. At least stay through calving season. That's two months' pay to set you on your way, and two months for me to find more permanent steady labor."

I blinked and felt stupid that I didn't know what to say at his offer.

It made sense when he explained it like that.

But I'd made plans. I'd had it all mapped out so clearly in my head.

My eyes flicked involuntarily to Reece, and I realized what was really stopping me from accepting.

I never would have been so forward and slept with him like that, been so uninhibited, if I knew I'd be staying on.

But what did I really have in Austin?

The hope of *maybe* finding a women's shelter and hoping they had a spot for me. I'd googled several on Ruth's computer last night and had their addresses. Yeah, I could call ahead, but even if they did have space, what if I couldn't find a job right off?

Jobs required things like social security numbers and IDs. I'd have to find someone willing to pay me under the table and who knew what kind of work that would end up being.

I didn't feel comfortable bringing it up right now, with all three of them staring at me, but something told me that Jeremiah and Reece would understand the need of paying off-the-books. Dear God, not that I ever wanted to explain just what the hell my *situation* was, but I could probably get away with some half-truths.

It was certainly a much better option than trying to befriend a whole new strange employer when I had a good potential one right here in front of me.

So I made a split decision and held out my hand to Jeremiah, focusing all my attention on him and not the searing gaze I could feel from his twin coming from behind him. "When can I start?"

He sat down beside Ruth at the breakfast table and held out a hand. "Right now, if you're rested enough, with breakfast. Reece is good with a quick camp breakfast too, if you want to take the morning off to get your bearings and start later this afternoon."

"Oh, no!" I held up a hand to stop Reece in his tracks. I wasn't sure I could handle any closer proximity to where he stood, still by the door. "I got it. Take a load off with your brother."

And that was how it began.

My first day on the job.

Cooking breakfast and then Jeremiah suggesting after we were all finished that I should go out with Reece for the morning rounds to learn what to look for and how to tag the newborn calves myself so I could take over the job.

He said it so casually. Just ride out with Reece.

Meanwhile, I was freaking out more and more on the inside because when I'd accepted the job, I'd just assumed yesterday was a one off, that I wouldn't be working anywhere *near* Reece on a regular basis.

Only to find myself staring down the business end of a four-wheeler ATV with a single seat, with Reece asking if I wanted to drive or ride behind.

"B-behind," I stuttered, feeling my cheeks go scarlet.

He just grinned.

I glared at him, as a thought struck me. "Did you tell your brother to offer me the job? Because look, last night was just a one-off. Don't go thinking that—"

He held up his hands before I could go any further. “Nothing of the sort. I did tell him he should come by and see how much we’d gotten done on the bunkhouse, but that was all. I swear I didn’t say another word. Your work impressed him all on its own.”

“Oh.” I stood there, feeling a little silly. “Well.”

“So last night was just a one-off, huh?”

My head jerked up, just in time to meet his gaze. I nodded firmly. “Yes,” I said, before climbing on the back of the long four-wheeler seat. It was like an extended motorcycle seat that forced you to straddle it.

Reece came up and climbed on in front of me, grabbing hold of the handles and revving it to life.

He looked over his shoulder at me. “Hold on to me. It can get bumpy.”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

He shrugged. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

With that last ominous statement, the four-wheeler jerked forward. My hands flew to the frame of the ATV underneath and behind me. Anything so I didn’t have to grab onto *him*.

Though as smooshed together as the rest of our bodies became as the four-wheeler jolted forward, it was all but a moot point. I still clutched onto the back frame, refusing to hold on to him.

He didn’t go too fast though, and I had a feeling he was taking it slower than he usually would, for my benefit.

It was chilly out and without any gloves on, my hands and fingers were immediately freezing. But as the crisp February air blasted me in the face and we drove straight out into the pasture, leaving the house in the distance behind us... well, it was surprisingly sort of *exhilarating*.

Riding ATVs was definitely not anything Jeff would have let me do. Certainly not in the cold open air like this.

We crested one small hill and then a whole valley opened up, the winter sun bearing down through the heavy white clouds onto the wheat-colored land. Nothing was green here. It was all spun-honey-brown, as far as the eye could see. Faded grasses shivered and listed as the wind blew through.

And then we finally got to where the cattle were. I gasped when I saw them herded together, munching on both sides at a line of hay that had been unspooled down the field for them. There were so many. I tried to count but quickly gave up.

There had to be hundreds between this pasture and the next hill we

crested. We slowed down when we came to the next group all bunched up together.

“Look, see there’s one of the calves from yesterday,” Reece said, pointing to a cow and a small calf standing in amongst its legs. Let’s go check up on him.”

Without waiting for my response, the ATV shot forward again. The cows barely turned their heads our direction. The must be used to the four-wheeler. That was good.

Only a few looked disgruntled when we stopped amongst them and Reece sat with his hands loose on the handles, watching on.

The small calf rooted around at his mother’s udder, then began to feed. Reece nodded and reached for the handles again. “Sometimes a check-in can be as easy as this. All you need is to see that the calf is on its feet and bonding with its mother. She should be doing most of the work taking care of him.”

I nodded, glad he was treating this as instructional and that I hadn’t ruined everything by sleeping with him. Some guys could probably turn into real jackasses once you slept with them if you had to work together. Any other time I would have kicked myself for doing what I did last night... But considering how damn good the sex had been, I just couldn’t bring myself to. I wasn’t sorry, even if it made things a smidge awkward today. Sorry, not sorry, but it had been worth it to feel that way, even if only once.

This was my new life. And I was going to grab it by the balls, goddammit. I’d been terrified of making a move for ten years. Enough was enough. I was making decisions now, for better or worse. Last night I had and that had seemed to work out well for all involved. I bit my lip and tried not to remember exactly *how* well as we left calf #2 in peace and moved on.

We drove on, crested yet another hill and then Reece stopped by a wooden wall that looked like one side of a building that no one had ever finished.

“What’s this?” I asked Reece as we slowed down.

“Wind break,” he answered. “It gives the cows a good place to stay warm on windy days. And look, here’s our newest addition and Mama.”

He pulled the ATV to a stop and got out. Again I saw another mother/calf pair, but the calf was lying at the feet of the mother cow. “Alright #3, it’s up and at ‘em time.” All the calves were only known by their tag number, not given names like Bessie since that was only reserved for the first born of

every season. Information I'd gathered like a good little sponge at the first stop. Because this was simply instructional. We had a professional relationship now and that was *all*.

He smiled at me and it was harder to remember the professional BS I'd just been trying to convince myself of. I mean, it wasn't like we were in corporate America or anything.

"I swear all the newborns hate me 'cause all I do is come around and disturb their rest during calving time. But you'll have to do this too. In fact, here, come on over." He gestured me to join him.

I climbed off the ATV, my legs feeling a little wobbly once I hit land again after the vibrations of the four-wheeler, but I managed.

"Help him stand up like you did Bess the other day," he instructed. "See if he can walk around. It's important the first few days to make sure they're always able to get up so we can double check that they aren't having any problems."

I nodded and walked over to where the little calf was laying nestled in some hay. The mother snorted and took a step my direction.

"Whoa, Mama," Reece said, voice calm but his hands out low and wide, stepping between me and the mother. "But be careful. Not all the mothers are excited by the idea of you messing with their babies. We just have to remind them that we're here to help them, that's all. We want your baby to thrive just as much as you do, Mama," he said, directly to the cow.

I reached down and grabbed the torso of the big baby calf and hefted him up. He was a heavy fella, maybe seventy-five pounds, so a little more than half my body weight. But he was doing some of the work. At my coaxing, he got right up on his feet and then started walking around his mother like it was no big deal. He started nosing at her utter and nursing.

"It worked!" I looked over at Reece.

He smiled at me. "Of course it did. You're a natural." I couldn't tell if he was just blowing smoke up my ass, but I'd take it.

I went to climb on the back of the ATV again, but then paused. "All right, so I guess if I'm gonna be doing this I should get comfortable driving this thing, huh?"

The sooner I could do this myself, the sooner I could get out of his proximity. Plus, I wanted to be useful, not have a babysitter.

He tossed me the keys. "You're up, Captain."

"Oh," I said, only just managing to catch the keys. A good thing,

considering there was a cow pie on the ground right in front of where I stood.

I climbed on the front of the ATV and put the keys in, turning it on. Reece gave me a brief rundown on how to work it. It had a button shifter on the handle, hand and foot brakes. Nothing too hard. Plus, driving it looked... well, *fun*.

The only moment I got a little trepidatious was when Reece climbed on behind me. He didn't put his arms around my waist or anything, but I was suddenly very aware of the inside of his thighs cupping the outside of mine.

"Okay. Where to?" I called over my shoulder.

He reached forward, bringing his face into near contact with mine, so near I could smell the mixture of mint from his toothpaste mixed with his morning coffee. "Up over the ridge. You'll see there's a sort of trail that's been worn down between the grass."

I had the ridiculous thought of how easy it would be to turn my head and kiss him.

Which was one of those absurd, fleeting thoughts that just turned your face red and made you think: what the *hell*?

And simultaneously made me think with a sort of wonder—holy crap, was this what attraction felt like? When being close to a person feels like a torture and a tease both at the same time? It had been so long, I'd forgotten.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yup!" I said too quickly, in a voice that was a little too squeaky. I cleared my throat. "Just... I mean, I'm ready when you are."

He chuckled, a warm sound in that husky voice of his. "Ready to go, Captain."

I pushed on the gas with the handle and the ATV launched forward with such suddenness that Reece's arms immediately grabbed for my hips. He let go a second later, as if he'd been as surprised by the four-wheeler's quick takeoff as I was. Not that I let up. This was way too much fun.

We couldn't be going faster than ten or fifteen miles an hour but it felt exhilarating to be flying across the pasture with the air rushing against my face and through my short hair. We came up to another group of cows and Reece tapped on my shoulder.

"Slow down," he called out in my ear from behind, his chest pressed up full against my back.

I nodded and down-shifted with the button like he'd shown me, slowing us, still a good distance from the cows. "What is it?" I asked him.

“We want to watch to see if any of them look like they’re about to drop a calf.”

I pulled the ATV to a stop. “How do you tell? What are the signs?”

He shrugged, eyes still examining the herd. “You start to learn how to tell.”

“Not helpful. If I’m supposed to be out here looking for this by myself, I’ll need more to go on.”

“Okay, well, legs hanging out of a cow are a pretty good sign.”

“Gee, thanks, I’d have never figured that part out for myself.”

He chuckled again. “But there are some other tried and true ways.”

“Such as—” I waved a hand.

“Well, if you see a cow acting weird. Not like herself.”

I could feel my eyebrows lift. “How am I supposed to know how cows normally act?”

“You’ll learn.”

He spoke so confidently. And as if I’d be around long enough to learn the ins and outs of cow behavior.

“I’ll still come out twice a day the first week to teach you what to watch for. But it’ll be helpful to have you doing all the other trips so I can work with Jer to get the ranch up and running. Your job will be with the newborns, checking on them like we just did, making sure they’re up and moving. Plus keeping an eye on the moms who are laboring. Some days it’ll be busy and some days we might not have any newborns at all. But since the calves are the most important part of the ranch, we try not to lose a single one.”

I nodded, suddenly feeling a little wowed that they were allowing me to be part of such an important task. And then immediately worried. “Wait, don’t you think you should give this job to someone who has more experience? Like Ruth?”

Reece just smiled. He had a bad habit of doing that, especially since his smile was particularly lethal to parts of me I’d rather not acknowledge at the current moment. Okay, my nether regions, it was my nether regions. Every time he smiled at me it made me go liquid. Not helpful for my concentration.

Case in point, I blinked, realizing I’d lost track of what he was talking about. “Wait, sorry, sorry,” I said, waving my hand. “Can you repeat that last part?”

“I was just saying that whenever we do find a calf, I’ll show you how to tag the ear. Ninety percent of the time, there won’t be a problem and we’ll

just find a calf on the ground, mama's taking good care, and all we need to do is tag the baby and log them into our system."

I nodded. Okay, that didn't seem too hard, except for the tagging part. "Does it hurt them?"

That smile again from Reece.

I blinked and looked away, squirming on the seat of the ATV. Not especially helpful, since it was still rumbling between my legs. I'd never, in my whole life, had my body feel so... well, so *awake* on me.

"Oh look, over there," Reece said suddenly. "See that red lady?"

I frowned and held a hand over my eyes in the direction he was pointing. I saw a group of cows. Most of them were brown, a few a lighter brown.

"Her. Look, the one that's separating herself a little from the others."

Okay, I did see one pulling away a little. She was sort of waddling, shuffling back and forth. It was definitely easy to tell the pregnant ones from the non-pregnant ones. They looked like they'd swallowed a barrel.

"I think she's about to pop," Reece said. "You can see she's uncomfortable. A cow about to give birth will separate out from the herd like that, and go between lying down and standing up. It's the first stage of labor, and it ends when the fetal membrane or water bag breaks. It can last from two to six hours."

"Should we go closer?"

"Nope. Just means we should keep an eye on her. And clock the time." He pulled out his phone. "It's ten o'clock now. Next time we come around we will go closer and see if her water's broken. Then comes hard labor, which shouldn't take longer than two hours. If it does, we start to get concerned, like we did with Bessie's birth."

"Cause it can mean something's wrong?"

He nodded. "Exactly."

I shivered. "What do I do if I'm out here alone and run into that?"

"Come get one of us."

"That's the answer I was hoping for."

"Don't worry, we don't expect you to know what you're doing. You're just our eyes on the ground so I don't have to be out here riding around all the time doing the basics. That's all we're asking of you, just the basics. The complicated stuff we'll still handle."

I nodded. Okay, the more he talked, the more I felt I could *probably* handle this.

Until a few hours later when we came back by to check on Red as Reece had taken to calling her, and it seemed, magically, there was now a calf on the ground beside her!

“Oh my gosh!” I cried as we drove up. “Look! Look!”

We’d gotten lunch after Reece had driven me around the rest of the pastures. He’d sketched out a rough map of the land to help me orient myself—it was a bit overwhelming. The ranch was two thousand acres large. Two thousand!

Then we’d done a little more work on the bunkhouse. I hadn’t quite finished yesterday. And now, here we were again. And there was a new baby cow!

“Excellent,” Reece said, hopping off the ATV and then unzipping a bag on the back of it.

He showed me how to load the tagging gun, then held it out to me. “Just grab the ear and push the trigger as quick as you can. You don’t always have a lot of time since the moms can be protective of their newborns.”

I blanched. “Don’t you think I should watch you do one first?”

He smiled his Reece smile. “No better way to learn than by doing. The more you do while I watch and can run interference with Mama cow, the better.”

I gulped. “Um. Sure.”

I wore a pair of gloves Ruth had lent me and I awkwardly grabbed the gun from him. A tag with #4 stuck out from what was essentially a giant ear-piercing gun.

“Just get the ear in between here,” Reece pointed at the little slot in the gun, “and pull the trigger.”

I looked around at all the cows milling around us to see where their ear tags were placed and they all seemed to be in the flappy part, but not too near the edge. Okay, okay, I could do this. I could totally do this.

Except, as we got closer and closer to Red and her small baby, still wet from afterbirth, I was pretty sure, nope, no way could I do this!

But Reece was there beside me, talking to the mama calmly and jovially, congratulating her on her baby and then he was all, “Go, do it now. You got this. Go for it before she gets riled.”

So I approached as quick as I could and leaned down. The calf scrambled to its feet. Oh my gosh, yay, it could get to its feet all on its own! I was so excited I almost lost the little guy, or girl, crap, that was something else I was

supposed to look for.

“Straddle ‘em,” Reece called, again stepping between me and the mom. Something Mama Red did not seem happy about at all. “And do it quick. Don’t know how long mom’s gonna be distracted over here.”

Shit! I got a leg over the baby cow who started wiggling like it wanted to bolt and grabbed its ear.

Its little head started waving back and forth but somehow I slipped the ear in between the flap on the gun. I slammed my finger on the trigger. I jolted with the impact of the piercer, but the cow didn’t flinch at all as the tag went in.

I jumped off and was about to scramble away when Reece called, “See if it’s a boy or a girl. Grab a back leg and peek under the skirt.”

Good Lord, this was no time for jokes. But I did it. Before the calf could scramble away again, I awkwardly grabbed the wet back leg and peeked underneath.

“Girl!” I called triumphantly. “It’s a girl!” I let go and then jumped back and looked at Reece. “I think, anyway. Not sure what a boy would look like.”

He laughed. “Pretty sure you’d know when you saw it.”

“Will you double check just in case?”

He laughed but did. The mother cow mooed at us, but Reece was able to confirm that it was indeed a female calf. The mother moved in and continued licking at her calf, but not for long before the calf was out of her reach, nuzzling for one of her nipples and sucking earnestly, if ineptly.

“How’d I do?” I asked, watching in pride as the little tag bounced in the calf’s ear. I handed the tagging gun back to Reece.

“Just like a pro. Next time, though,” he grinned, “the tag does go the other direction.”

“What? Oh!” I said, looking back down at the calf. Unlike all the other animals around us, the number wasn’t actually visible because I had indeed tagged her backwards.

I rolled my eyes to the sky, but Reece just laughed and patted me on the back. “It was an excellent first tag. Come on, I’ll show you how to enter the new calf in the system.”

And so I learned.

Chapter Nine

A week later, I was driving the ATV by myself with confidence. Tagging newborn calves still freaked me out, but at least I was putting tags on the right direction.

A couple of days ago, one of the cows who'd given birth had mastitis—I wouldn't have even known what to call it. But her teats were gigantic and swollen. So much so the calf—#9—wasn't able to nurse, and we'd had to take him back into the barn on the back of the ATV.

Nine would have to be a bottle calf. Which was good news for Bessie, because now she had a buddy to play with. They were herd animals, so that was important. But it had been touch and go for a bit making sure Nine would make it. So Reece had stayed on with me another couple days. But they'd gone perfectly smoothly, so today I was on my own. We were now on calf #16 and since calving season was now really cooking, I was busier than ever.

Each day it felt like I gained yet another skill that would have felt completely foreign and alien to the woman I had been only a month ago.

There wasn't a lot of time to stop and think about it, but at the end of another long day, I slowed the ATV to a stop at the top of a hill as the sun dropped behind the western horizon. There'd been another two calves born today and I'd handled tagging and logging them all on my own, no problems.

I'd been completely terrified when I'd seen the mothers in labor earlier. My first instinct had been to drive the ATV back to home base to grab Reece from whatever project he and Jeremiah were working on, and drag him back out to... do what? Watch me tag the animal? Protect me from the mother cow?

I kept my cool and everything went fine. Reece was right, mostly the births went along fine without any help from us.

It felt great to finally be going it alone because I hated keeping Reece from his other duties when I was getting paid to do a job. It made me anxious to think I wasn't carrying my weight. So I'd been cooking and doing anything else I could think of to make up for it while still getting trained.

This meant I dropped into bed absolutely exhausted each night.

But keeping busy meant there wasn't time to think, and that was a plus. I was a big fan of not thinking.

It was harder than I'd imagined. For example, it had been pretty hard not to think about Reece when I was constantly cemented up against him as we drove the ATV all over the thousands of acres of ranch together day in and day out.

We hadn't talked once about *that night* since after the first morning when I'd said it was a one-off.

He'd been completely professional. He'd been kind, patient, and joked with me like he did with Ruth around the kitchen table.

But just because we didn't talk about that night didn't mean I didn't think about it. And trying *not* to think about something was the absolutely surest way *to* think about something, nonstop. That I had discovered this past week.

So I'd expected today to be better.

And it was.

Sort of.

Without Reece here to distract me, his big warm body and those strong thighs of his wrapped around mine from behind... see, there I went again.

I huffed out a laugh at myself as I watched the sunset. God, there was nothing like these Texas sunsets.

I swallowed hard at the same time. Because there was still an instinctive dread that struck every time the sun started to go down. Borne of a decade's worth of fear that the sun going down meant that *he'd* be home soon.

My fingers gripped the handlebars tightly and I closed my eyes, feeling the wind on my face and breathing in the fresh air that was so foreign from the stale, Lysol scent of my house back in California. I was in a pasture with cattle, so there was a slight scent of manure in the air.

Jeff would hate it here.

He hated camping and anything outdoorsy other than jogging. Even that he preferred to do indoors at the 24-hour gym two blocks down.

I looked down at myself—my mud-covered boots, flannel shirt, blue jeans with a rip in the knees. None of it was mine. Ruth had lent me every single item of clothes I was wearing, down to the underwear and socks. I wouldn't have any money to buy my own clothes until my first paycheck.

Jeff hated the idea of charity—though he gave publicly for appearances' sake, I knew in private he despised those who took it. Of course he did. Empathy was as foreign a concept to the man as compassion.

Great. Now that I didn't have Reece to distract me, I was thinking of Jeff.

I sat back in the ATV seat.

Did I always have to define myself in relation to the men in my life? Did that mean I was weak? Or broken, somewhere deep down inside?

I looked up at the sky. Neon pinks bursting through bright oranges, with deep blues and electric purples bleeding on the edges.

It was so beautiful, it didn't look real.

I looked around at the rolling hills, the animals, the brown grass waving in the wind, the clusters of cacti. Land, land as far as the eye could see. No people. No cars. Not even any planes overhead.

Just me and the open space.

I took in a deep breath and held it in my chest.

This, right here, was everything I hadn't even known to dream for. I hadn't known life like this was possible, but I'd suspected it could be, deep down in my soul.

And now here I was. I felt as free and open as the land, stretching outward on all sides and the wide, wide sky splashed with color above me.

My nose stung and I bowed my head as if that could keep the tears from falling, but of course, it couldn't. They fell down my cheeks. Defiantly, I raised my face back to the sky and watched the sunset. The wind hit my tears and made me even more aware of them.

"You're here," I whispered to myself. "You're really here. You made it, honey. You're safe."

I didn't think about anyone else. I didn't think about a man. Or where I would go next. Or where I'd been before.

I wrapped my arms around my torso and held myself, and watched the sunset, and cried.

Chapter Ten

I was just pulling biscuits out of the oven while keeping an eye on the sausages sizzling on the griddle when Ruth came downstairs a few days later.

It was only eight-thirty in the morning but I'd already been out and done my first round checking on the newborns, as well as feeding Bessie and Nine their morning bottles.

I was dancing to a song on my mp3 player as I turned and smiled at Ruth. "Morning!"

She stared at me, then her eyebrows furrowed. "You realize you haven't had a day off since you came here."

I set the tray of biscuits down and hustled to grab the spatula and move the sausages around. "Oh, it's okay. I don't mind. Plus, isn't that the whole gig? Life on a ranch never stops? The cows don't take a day off, so neither can we?"

Ruth laughed. "Dear God, it's like you were meant for this life. Or you just haven't shoveled enough manure yet. Dealing with the calves is the best part, I will admit."

She sidled up to me by the counter. "But you don't own this place. You just work here. And you get time off. Pretty sure it's the law."

"Oh," I said. I hadn't really thought about it. Frankly, I was glad to have things to do every day. What would I do with time off? Ruminating on things better off forgotten. No, better to keep busy.

"I don't mind," I started to say, but just then, the door off the kitchen opened and Reece and Jeremiah came in, and they came in loudly, mid-conversation, like they often did.

“I’m telling you, we need to move them in,” Reece said.

“We can’t,” his brother answered. “The pastures are a mess. They gave no thought to recovery periods or optimal growth cycles, and the soil! Jesus, the soil!”

Reece just shook his head. “But another fence was downed in the west pasture and I’m telling you, I don’t think it was the cows. When I looked closer—”

“Hey,” Ruth interrupted. “You ever gonna give your employee a day off?”

They both looked up at us. I started to wave my hand and say it was okay, when Jeremiah took off his hat, putting it on the hook, and said, “Of course. I know it’s been busy while we trained you, Charlie, but we can set up a schedule now. Xavier always gave us one day a week off, so if that sounds fair to you—”

“Absolutely,” I said, and didn’t miss Ruth rolling her eyes.

“How about I take her into town with me today?” Ruth said. “We can even get more cake. I saw you were running low.”

“Cake?” I asked, laughing.

“Cottonseed meal, dried grains, maybe sunflower meal,” Reece said. “Plus the minerals and protein cows need. It tastes good and they’re usually excited to get it.”

“You need more and how about I take our girl in town to get it? You set up an account with Mr. Rivera, didn’t you?”

Jeremiah nodded. “Apparently, I’ll be spending the morning chasing down lost cows again, and we’ll need both ATVs anyway.”

“Perfect!” Ruth declared, grinning and throwing an arm around my shoulders. “Then I’m sure you won’t mind fixing yourselves lunch, too, while I kidnap our girl here for lunch out.”

“Oh, I don’t have to be away that long,” I said hurriedly. “Especially if I’m needed here.”

“No, no,” Reece said. “Go. You deserve some time for a breather.”

I looked up and met his gaze, something I tried not to do most of the time for exactly this reason, this zap of electricity or energy that hit me every time I did. He’d taken a step forward but then stopped, and the way it looked in his eyes, it was as if he was intentionally holding himself back, even though he wanted to come closer. “Enjoy town. You’ve been working your butt off. We got it and like Jer said, we’ll be on both ATVs anyway.”

“Okay,” I whispered. Then cleared my throat a little and nodded, still not looking away from Reece. “If you guys are sure.”

I finally dragged my gaze off Reece and looked at his brother. Who was also looking at Reece, his brows drawn together slightly. Oh crap, had he noticed something? Was there something to notice? Reece was just being friendly. He was a friendly guy.

I smelled something burning and then turned back to the sausages. “Shit!” I yelped, grabbing the pan and yanking them off the stove. One side of the sausages was blackened.

I flinched, freaking out and terror-stricken as I looked down at the ruined sausages. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry. I’ll make a fresh batch. And you can take this batch out of my salary, I’m so sorry—”

“Hey,” Ruth said, touching my arm. “It’s no biggie. It’s just packaged meat, honey.”

Which was when I looked up and realized they were all looking at me strangely. And not because I’d burned the meat.

I looked from one face to another. “I... um...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Reece said, stepping forward and grabbing one of the sausages that had to still be way too hot to handle from the plate where I’d flipped them from the pan. He took a big bite off the end and even though I heard the audible *crunch* from the burned side, he just grinned at me. “Tastes great to me.”

And I wanted to burst out in tears. Ridiculous, stupid tears. Because of course burning a little pan of sausages wasn’t a big deal.

Except it would have gotten me beaten black and blue only weeks ago. And apparently I couldn’t switch off a body’s instincts that had been honed over a decade. Dear God, would I always be such a mess?

I nodded and turned away from all of them, taking the pan to the kitchen sink. Of course it wasn’t necessary to clean it right now, but I couldn’t bear for them to see the emotion on my face. I shoved the water lever to hot and started scrubbing the pan, blinking rapidly to try to get rid of the tears that were *still* threatening.

Ridiculous, completely ridiculous. I was furious at myself and at my stupid unwieldy emotions. For ten years I’d been stone cold, the master of control. So what the hell was wrong with me now?

At least the others had begun talking again behind me. I was too overwhelmed to actually hear what they were saying, but the buzz of their

voices was calming, knowing attention wasn't on me anymore.

At least I thought so, until I felt a presence and looked over to see Reece's big body looming beside me.

"Hey, you okay?" he asked.

"Fine," I said, turning the water colder as I rinsed the pan, angling my body away from him to put it in the drying rack. I wanted to run away to the bathroom to cry, not be interrogated by anyone, least of all him.

And maybe he sensed that, because he backed off again. "Okay," he said. "Just, if you ever need to talk. I can be a friend. I hope we are friends."

I looked over at him in spite of myself, which I immediately regretted because I didn't know what emotions were still on my face. And I wanted to control myself around this man, desperately, because he made me feel out of control. He made me *feel* things that were out of control. He made me want to *do* things that were out of control.

And when a stupid tear slipped out of my eye and down my cheek and he saw it, I wanted to—

I didn't know what I wanted, honestly.

But then he reached over and swiped it away with his thumb and leaned in and said, "It's okay to cry, you know. You can cry over burned sausages or spilled milk or any damn thing you want."

He said it quiet, and Jeremiah and Ruth were still talking in the background—okay arguing, it seemed they were always arguing. But that meant the moment Reece and I were having was genuinely private, and I appreciated all of them so much in this moment.

"Sometimes it's not," I said back to Reece. "It's not okay to cry."

He shook his head. "Whoever taught you that didn't understand pain. That's bullshit. You let it out, whenever you need. No one here will judge you."

I frowned at him, feeling too many things, and gave a half-nod-half-shrug, and turned away again.

I pasted on a bright smile, something that felt familiar. The familiar felt good right now, so I stuck with it. "Who wants biscuits?"

* * *

"All right, Jesus, finally it's just us girls," Ruth said as soon as she shoved the

truck into drive and jammed her foot on the pedal, spitting gravel as we shot forward.

I grabbed the bar overhead, then quickly yanked my seatbelt on.

She looked over at me and grinned. “So tell me everything. God, I can’t believe we haven’t had a chance to talk since you got here. Sorry, I should have pulled you aside earlier for girl time but I’ve been dealing with my own shit.” She waved a hand. “Dad left a shitstorm when he passed that I’ve been cleaning up ever since.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

She waved her hand again, but I didn’t miss the slight tightening of her mouth. “He was a mean bastard. He certainly never bothered to give a shit about me when he was still around so why should I now that he’s gone?”

“Don’t let the bastards get you down,” I said. I’d always loved the quote.

Ruth looked over at me and grinned like she was surprised. “Fuck yeah.”

We drove a little further and then she looked at me. “So. Spill. You just show up out of nowhere. What’s your story?”

“Oh.” I blinked. I’d been grateful that nobody had pressed me about my past. But I guess I should have known that out of everyone, Ruth would be the one to eventually ask. She wasn’t exactly big on tact. That much was obvious by how much she bickered with Jeremiah all the time, even though they barely knew each other.

“Oh you know, I just needed a change of scenery. So I decided to start over somewhere new.”

She made a scoffing noise. “Honey, people do not just decide to start over without any luggage or money and end up hitchhiking on highway 284 in the middle of nowhere Texas. I mean, believe me, I’ve lived here my whole life, and good looking strangers don’t just go showing up out of nowhere.”

“Reece and Jeremiah showed up out of nowhere,” I countered.

She looked at me and slow-grinned. “So you think they’re hot, huh?”

“What? No, I was just—” I waved a hand, flustered. “Shouldn’t you be watching the road?”

She finally moved her eyes back to the dirt road, just in time to slow down because we’d come to the gate. “Hold that thought.” She pointed at me. “We’re going to come right back to this.”

Dear God, did we have to? She jammed the truck in park and hopped out to go open the gate. I rolled my eyes and sat back heavily in my seat, looking at the ceiling of the truck. I wouldn’t have agreed to come if I knew I’d be in

for a game of twenty questions.

Far sooner than I would have liked, Ruth was back in the truck and we were rumbling over the cattle grate.

“I’ll close it up,” I volunteered before Ruth could lob any other intrusive questions or get out her pointy finger again.

I gulped in a few deep breaths as I closed the gate, and one last deep breath for good measure before I climbed back up into the truck. I hoped that Ruth would have moved on as she pulled back onto the pot-holed road that I thought was generously called a “highway.” It was just a two-lane road.

“So, you and Reece. I’ve caught him looking at you a couple times. He’s cute. If you’re into that big, dumb cowboy sort of thing.”

“He’s not dumb,” I said, a little outraged on Reece’s behalf. “He’s really smart. And good with the animals.”

She raised an eyebrow like I was just making my point for her. “I knew you liked him.”

Well damn, I walked right into that one.

“Let’s not talk about them. We work with them for God’s sake. That’s just...” Immediately scenes of Reece’s body beneath mine, hands clenching my hips flashed vividly through my head. I wiped my hands on my jeans. “Awkward,” I finished lamely.

“Oh, fine,” Ruth said. “Then tell me what it was like where you came from. Let me live vicariously through you.”

Her head swung my way, immediately making me nervous that she wasn’t watching the road. “Unless you’re on the run from something. Did you rob a bank? Commit petty larceny? Breaking and entering? Did you poison a lover?”

“What? Jesus, how long have you been thinking about this?”

She shrugged. “My mom always told me I had an overactive imagination.”

“God, well, it’s not any of that, okay? I’m just a boring, normal ol’ person. I just needed—”

“Needed a change of scenery, blah blah blah.” She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, you said.” She slit her eyes over in my direction, suspiciously.

I shook my head. “What even *is* petty larceny?”

“The fuck I know,” she said, laughing. She punched me on the shoulder. “Lighten up. You wanna be Miss Mysterious, fine. But I’m an open book. You can ask me anything, I’ll tell you, no problemo.”

“Okay.” I shifted on the truck bench to look at her. “What’s a strong woman like you doing clinging to this ranch when you’re obviously capable and motivated to get what you want when you put your mind to it?”

I still thought it was impressive the way she’d outwitted the twins to keep her small slice of the property—the most important slice, in fact. I just didn’t understand *why* she’d done it.

“Oh, you won’t dish on your story but then you want me to spill mine?”

I shrugged. “You don’t have to, no pressure. I was just curious.”

She laughed. “I’m just fucking with you. I’m not good with boundaries, if you can’t tell. It’s a problem. I used to be really concerned with doing everything right and not stepping on anyone’s toes. But then Dad was an asshole who screwed over the entire town and almost everyone I knew turned on me, so I stopped giving a fuck.”

I frowned. “So why don’t you *leave*?”

She scoffed. “And give them all the satisfaction of driving me out of town? Never.” She all but spit out the last word. “This is *my* home. This land has been in my family for four generations. Four *generations*. Then last year my dad goes and gambles what should have been my birthright into the ground because he didn’t think a daughter was important enough to save it for.”

I could tell she was seething, even just talking about it. And I felt immediately bad for asking. “Look, I’m sorry. I of all people should know I have no business to pry.”

But she went on as if she hadn’t even heard me. “Yeah, I get it, Mom was the glue holding us together, and when she died it all sort of fell apart. He and I were just going through the motions the past few years. At least I *thought* we were. I kept trying to get him to listen to my ideas about sustainable ranching but he could not give *less* of a shit. *It’s been working my way for thirty years, Ruthie, it’ll hold out another year just fine,*” she intoned, lowering her voice in imitation. “And another. And another. Except it *wasn’t*. And he just refused to look at the numbers. The only thing he ever wanted to do was be done by five so he could hit up the gambling halls and try his luck with the desperate bar bunnies.”

She shook her head and shuddered. “Disgusting. Everyone in town loved Mom. It was a disgrace.”

She looked my way. “Sorry.”

“No, please. Go ahead and talk.” Especially if it meant she stopped

grilling me. But also, I was curious about her since she didn't seem to mind sharing. "What was your mom like?"

She sighed. "Mom was... She was great, I mean. She loved me. I don't know why she put up with Dad, but they loved each other, I guess. In their way. He was never awesome, but at least when she was alive he *tried*. He never made a secret of the fact he wanted a son. But she had a really hard time getting pregnant with me. There were a lot of miscarriages. It was a miracle she managed to carry me to term, so she always called me her miracle baby. But she had a lot of problems and had to have a hysterectomy a couple years after I was born. Which meant Dad was stuck with just me."

"Parents suck," I offered. And then, because it seemed safe, I shared, "My mom's pretty much a nightmare. Of course I didn't realize it till I was older, but she's a narcissist. So growing up, I was just really confused and hurt a lot of the time by how she was treating me. It sucks."

Ruth looked surprised when she glanced my way again, probably because I'd said anything about my past. I was a little surprised, too, frankly.

"Yeah? So what'd you do when you realized why she was like that?"

I let out a breath. "Well, by that point..." Screw it, I decided to just go ahead and tell her. "Well, when you grow up with a narcissist, the problem is, it can screw up how you relate to people. You end up picking relationships that feel familiar. So of course I was with a guy who was one too."

Ruth's eyebrows went up. "Shit."

"Yeah." Understatement. "Which was so funny because when I graduated high school and went to college, I was thrilled to get out of her house. I didn't know she was a narcissist, but I knew it didn't feel good to live there. I thought, oh, I'm finally free! And then I just went and jumped from the frying pan into the fire..." I trailed off and shook my head, looking out the window.

"What'd you go to college for?"

I rolled my eyes. "Literature. I was so clueless. I couldn't have picked a more useless degree."

Ruth shrugged. "I don't know. I was always shit at English, but I admired the kids who were good at it. I was dyslexic but it wasn't like I had teachers around here who recognized that kind of thing. They just barely passed me. It was my mom who helped me learn to read more than my teachers."

"Wow, that's amazing. Your mom sounds really cool."

Ruth nodded and swallowed. "She was. I miss her. All she wanted out of

life was to be a mom and have a big family and instead she got stuck out on this lonely ranch with my dad who barely talked.”

“And you. She had you.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Ruth said. “Just doesn’t seem like much of a life.”

Now she really had me confused. “But... Then why do you want to stay on the land so bad?”

She frowned. “Because... well, I’m the last of us. Of the Harshbargers. It was originally Hirschberger, but they changed the spelling during World War I to make it sound less German. My ancestors came here in the 1840’s with a wave of German immigrants. They were badasses seeking a better life. My great *great* grandmother married Hermann Hirschberger after her husband died on the passage over and had three sons, only one of whom survived to adulthood. They renamed him Hermann Jr when his older brother died and he bought the ranch and built the first farmstead. Each generation fought and *barely* managed to keep hold of it. There were so many tragedies... And then for it all to end like this with *me*. God, it makes me sick.”

She was staring straight out the front now, her jaw tight.

“But it wasn’t *you*,” I said, sitting up in my chair. “It was your dad. There wasn’t anything you could do by the time you got control of things, it sounds like.”

She shrugged. “Maybe there was some way I couldn’t think of to hold onto it. Maybe if I’d been smarter or tried harder, I could’ve gotten the bank to extend the loan or something...”

I raised my eyebrows. “Well, it sounds like you were pretty tricky in whatever you did to keep hold of the bit of land you did, where the house is. The twins definitely weren’t happy about it.”

She grinned at that. “Fuck yeah. I’ll never forget the look on Jeremiah’s face when he realized.” She laughed out loud. “Thanks, I needed that. See, I knew we’d be friends. And look! We’re here.”

We were indeed finally slowing down and I could see buildings ahead instead of more pasture on both sides of the road.

“Welcome to town.”

Town was a street, just one street apparently, but to be fair, I did count... two restaurants, a small grocery, and a nail/hair salon in addition to the hardware store/feed shop Ruth pulled the truck into. And there were people out and about, the first I’d seen in weeks other than those on the ranch.

But it also made me slink down in the truck. This was exactly the kind of

place I had *not* wanted to land for just this reason.

“Sheesh, what’s the population of this town?” I asked, trying to keep my voice light.

Ruth laughed. “You noticed we don’t even have a stoplight, did you? I don’t know, probably about three hundred give or take.”

My heart sank. This was the sort of place where everyone knew everyone. If Jeff ever sniffed me out and came through, all he had to do was flash my picture and all fingers would point to the new girl, number three hundred and one. Dammit, I never should have agreed to come into town.

Ruth shoved open her door.

“Maybe I’ll just stay here,” I said.

She frowned. “Don’t be silly. I know we’re hicks, but we don’t bite. Besides, I’ll need help with the feed.”

Dammit, she had me there. I nodded and tried not to let the panic show on my face as I hopped down out of the truck.

Suddenly I really wished I had my old hoodie. Though maybe that would make me look even more out of place. My flannel and jeans were probably the best camouflage. Plus, any photo Jeff had was of the old Penelope. Fully made up, dressed to the nines, glossy blonde hair.

Besides, Jeff wasn’t going to find me. I’d covered my tracks. I’d switched buses so many times, been so careful...

I took a deep breath and slouched as I walked with Ruth into the hardware store that looked like it had seen better days. Penelope Chambers had perfect posture. *Charlie* slouched.

The little bell rung as we stepped through the door.

“Hey, Ruth,” said an aging man who had to be in his 70’s. He stepped out from behind the counter and grinned at Ruth. “What can I do ya for today, Ruthie?”

A big grin spread across Ruth’s face. “Heya, Sam. How’s Gracie doing? She feeling better after that stomach bug?”

Sam nodded. “You know nothing’s gonna keep my Gracie down for long. She’s getting all excited about planting spring roses.”

Ruth smiled. “Just have her give me a call if she needs any help. You know I always love digging in the dirt with her.”

“I’ll do that.” Sam seemed very pleased by the offer. Then his face got serious. “How you doing out on that ranch? I heard the new owners showed up. They treating you well?”

Ruth laughed. "You gonna come chase them off if they weren't?"

Sam looked completely serious as he moved back to the counter, reached underneath the counter and pulled up the hilt of a shotgun. "Don't think I wouldn't. Ain't nobody gonna hurt our little missy. Especially no outsiders."

"Dear Lord, Sam, put that thing away." But Ruth was laughing, she didn't seem alarmed at seeing the weapon. My heart was pounding. Holy crap, I'd always heard that everyone in Texas was packing, but I was alarmed to find out how true it was.

"Everything's fine. No need to call out the militia just yet. They seem like good guys. We're making it work."

Sam didn't seem so sure and he kept one eyebrow cocked. "Well, you just call me if that changes."

Ruth shook her head and rolled her eyes. "I'm not the little girl Gracie used to babysit anymore. You don't have to worry about me so much. I can take care of myself just fine."

Sam grumbled something under his breath, but Ruth was already moving on.

"Sam, let me introduce you to Charlie. She's a new hire out at the ranch."

I waved. "Nice to meet you."

Sam turned his friendly smile on me. "Lovely to meet you, Miss Charlie. What brings you to our neck of the woods?"

"Oh," I laughed nervously and waved a hand.

Ruth came to my rescue. "Not much time to chat today, I'm afraid, Sam. I'm here to pick up some cake for the cows, and some sheetrock if you've got any in. If not, we'll need to put some on order. The brothers who are managing the ranch are finally fixing up the bunkhouse."

A beep sounded from Ruth's pocket and she pulled out her phone. Her eyebrows went up. "And as many fence posts as you've got, apparently."

"Something wrong?" Sam asked, obviously noting her expression like I had.

Ruth frowned but shook her head as she quickly typed a text message back and then shoved it back in her pocket. "I'm sure it's nothing. They've just been having trouble with the fencing. So, what do ya got for me?"

"Well, you're in luck," Sam said. "Just got in a shipment of sheetrock so you've got your pick. And we always got posts. Just up to how much space you got in the bed of your truck."

Ruth smiled. "Oh, I can get creative. I brought plenty of rope."

“You always were crazy with your loads, girl.” Sam shook his head. “You know my policy. After you buy it and it leaves my store, no returns, no matter what fool thing you do to it after it leaves my shop door. Don’t matter you’re as close as family. I gotta make a living too.”

Ruth threw a hand to her chest dramatically. “I would never,” she said, making Sam chuckle.

“Better not,” was all he said, before leading us to the back.

We’d just reached the section in the large back of the shop that was more like a big, covered garage when I saw him—the obnoxious guy who’d stopped by in the big truck that first day after I’d arrived. He stood by the wheelbarrows on the other side of the small garage.

Ruth saw him at the same time and her step hitched.

It was too late, though, because he’d seen us too.

He smirked and immediately started strutting toward us. “Well, if it ain’t Ruthie and her new little girlfriend.”

I just tilted my head and stared at him.

Ruth went tense beside me. Then she looked back to Sam and gave him a smile that was obviously tight. “We’ll take five of the big sheetrock panels, thanks, Sam. A half pallet of cake and ten of the fence posts. Is Carlos around? Could he help us load the truck?”

“Come on, Ruthie, don’t be like that,” said the asshole from across the room.

God, the man was obnoxious.

There were a few others milling around this back area of the store, and they were alternately openly staring or obviously trying *not* to stare, but still looking out the side of their eye at Ruth and Fuckface. What was his name again? I didn’t bother too hard at registering idiot’s names.

“For the hundredth time, my name is Ruth, not Ruthie. I’m not a child or a dog. Nicknames are only for people I *like*.” She grinned daggers at him. “And we both know that’s not you, Trent.”

Anger flashed across his face. “How many times have I told you not to get uppity. Look what happened to your uppity dad. They would have thrown him in jail if he hadn’t gone and died. You should be happy he didn’t have the chance to disgrace the family like that. I mean, after all, you do a good job of that all on your own.”

“And you do such a good job of showing off what complete *tools* your parents must be to have raised an entitled, whiny, little bitch-boy like you.”

Okay, I was officially becoming more and more of a fan of Ruth Harshbarger with each passing day I knew her.

I intentionally stayed out of it this time, though, because I did not need to get involved with something that was not my business.

Trent's face got red and he leaned in, having stalked towards us so that he was now only a couple of feet away. He sneered at Ruth. "That's not what you said when we dated and you begged me to fuck you hard. You thought I was plenty man, then, huh, little Ruthie? Remember how slick you used to get for me?"

"You're a pig." Ruth said in disgust, shoving him in the chest when he took another step closer.

"Enough of that, young man," Sam said, stepping between them and glaring Trent down.

Trent looked incredulous. "Did you see that? *She* shoved me!" He looked around the garage. "You all saw. You're witnesses!"

Sam growled at him. "I witnessed you being a jackass, that's all I saw. Now get the hell outta my shop."

Trent scoffed at him. "Please, old man. You wouldn't survive without me and my dad's money keeping this place afloat. But you're in luck." He held up his hands. "I happen to be done shopping for the day."

He shoved a dollar disrespectfully in the shirt pocket of Sam's flannel, then grabbed a beef jerky off the wall, opened it, and bit into it while he laughed and walked out of the open garage.

"Charmer," I remarked dryly as soon as he was gone.

Ruth let out a frustrated breath. "Pain in my ass is more like." She looked to Sam, her eyes remorseful. "I'm sorry, Sam. I know you don't need trouble from him or his dad blowing back on you."

He just patted her on the shoulder. "Ain't your fault that boy came out wrong, honey. And don't worry about me." He smiled. "I been around since long before that boy was just a gleam in his papa's eye. He don't scare me none. Now, come on and I'll get you checked out."

Ruth smiled and followed him back to the front of the store.

* * *

Twenty minutes later we'd stopped by *Juniper's Hair and Nails* and picked

up Ruth's friend Olivia, along with Ruth introducing me to every *single* woman in the shop. This included Juniper herself, an older woman with snow-white corkscrew curly hair down to her shoulders that went out in all directions. She wore a bright turquoise tunic-dress and sandals.

Juniper had taken one look at my hair and declared that I just *had* to come in for a cut and color.

I'd thanked her and looked to Ruth for rescue. She'd obliged and gotten us out of there, which had still taken another ten minutes between all the women saying extended goodbyes.

Now we were in one of the two restaurants in town—Alejandro's Bar and Grill, and Ruth was treating us to fajitas and she and Olivia were downing big pink margaritas like they were water.

"You shoulda seen him," Ruth cackled. "Trent was all, you can't survive without my daddy's money. And Sam was like, fuck off, little boy."

"He did not!" Olivia slammed the table, pink margarita sloshing over the edge of her glass and onto her bright, sparkly jeweled nails. "Oh shit," she laughed and sucked the margarita slushy mix off.

Olivia had definitely embraced the colorful spirit of her mentor, Juniper. She had bright pink hair and a peacock tattoo that took up the entirety of her left arm. She would have fit right in back in San Francisco. In the middle of Central Texas? Not so much. From my whole ten minutes of exposure to her, she seemed fabulous. Bubbly and expressive in a way I'd only ever dreamed of being.

"Okay, okay, he didn't exactly say it like that," Ruth admitted. "But he still put that little bastard in his place and it was classic. And you know the gossip mill in this town. Mariah Jones was in there, so you know the story will be everywhere by Sunday afternoon after church."

Olivia's eyes went wide, then she laughed even harder. "Oh damn, Mariah was there. That's hilarious. Her sister was always so jealous of you, remember?"

"Dear God, don't remind me."

"I can't believe you actually *dated* that douche bag."

"I said don't remind me, I'm trying to eat here!" Ruth said as she shoveled fajita mixings into a tortilla.

"How did that even happen? Was he a lot different back in high school?" I asked. They both looked at me, like they were shocked I'd actually said something. Which made me feel like maybe I shouldn't have. I was an

outsider, and just because they were talking so freely in front of me, God, it was stupid to think that they—

“Sorry,” I said, grabbing for my water. “I didn’t mean to pry. You don’t have to say.” I waved my hand and took a big drink, wanting to disappear. I hadn’t been out with actual humans in society in a long while and I was terrible at this.

But Ruth reached out and put a hand on my arm as if she could feel my embarrassment. “No, it’s cool. It’s just weird for someone not to know my entire history from the time I was a baby. Refreshing, actually.”

“Seriously, you don’t have to say. Forget I said anything.”

“Stop it,” she said. “It’s a totally valid question. Especially since no, Trent was always an asshole.”

“I tried to tell her at the time,” Olivia cut in, shoving a big, messy bite of fajita in her mouth.

Ruth rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, and I didn’t listen. I was really naïve and wanted to believe the best about everybody. I was like, just because he’s the town’s football star quarterback doesn’t automatically mean he’s gonna be a douchebag—”

“Except when it does,” Olivia coughed into her hand.

“Yeah, yeah. I mean, this town is really cliché Texas. You’ll see in the fall. They treat the football team like they’re gods.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say I wouldn’t still be here in the fall, but I kept quiet so she could keep telling her story.

“We almost went to state in our division the year Trent was a junior and the town *still* talks about it. And his dad and my dad owned two of the biggest ranches in the county, and they share a border too. So almost as soon as we were born within a few months of each other, the whole town had talked about how we’d grow up and get married and unite the two ranches into one mega-ranch.”

“That’s so messed up,” I said.

She laughed. “Exactly. I was totally outraged by the idea as a little girl. *I* was gonna grow up and run my daddy’s ranch, not some boy, so I totally ignored him. But then the older I got Dad kept talking about how I’d need to get married so he could have another man around to work the ranch after he was gone.”

“So fucked uuuu-ppp,” Olivia sing-songed, reaching for her margarita glass and sucking loudly on the neon green straw.

Ruth narrowed her eyes at her friend. "I'm sorry, what were your aspirations in high school? Pretty sure all you wanted to do was be a roadie for your college boyfriend, what was his name? Spike?"

Olivia sighed and sat back against the booth. "Spike. God, I haven't thought about him in forever. I wonder what the hell he's up to these days."

"Dear God, save us all," Ruth muttered. "Where was I?"

"Your dad was talking bullshit about you getting married so you could have access to your own inheritance like you're back in Jane Austen's time," I supplied.

Olivia pointed at me. "I like her."

Ruth grinned. "Right? She cussed out Trent the first time she met him. She's good people."

Okay, I was glowing a little inside. I hadn't had friends in... well, a really long time.

"Anyway, when we first started dating, Trent seemed like a good guy. Not a great guy or anything, but nice enough."

"Except all he wanted was to get in your pants."

Ruth shrugged. "I'd never had a boyfriend before. I thought that's what all boys wanted."

"Well..." Olivia said.

Ruth shook her head though. "No, there *are* good guys out there, I believe it still. They just don't live around here."

I bit my lip, thinking about Reece. Was *he* a good guy? He hadn't pressed to 'get in my pants' since that first time, and even then, I was the one doing most of the pressing.

"Anyway, then Mom died and Dad went off the rails, and Trent was... *there*. Dad liked Trent and he'd always hated guys I brought around before. I didn't find out till later that he was already getting in debt and he'd hoped Trent's dad would buy us out. So I started sleeping with Trent and trying to pretend everything was fine." Her lips twisted and she took a long drink of her margarita.

"Until?" I asked, because obviously there was an *until* coming.

Olivia finished for her. "Until we learned what an asshole he was behind that façade of his. He was cheating on her almost from the beginning. And when she found out, he tried to blame *her*."

"He asked what he was supposed to do," Ruth said with a bitter scoff, "since I wouldn't put out for two months when we'd started dating. What

about after that? I asked. When we *did* start having sex? Why had he kept up sleeping around? Not just with one girl, either. He'd slept with a bunch of them. And everyone knew but me."

"I didn't know either," Olivia said. "And I told you as soon as I learned."

"You did, babe. You're the best." She leaned over the table and hugged Olivia, only just nearly missing getting a shirtful of fajita, sour cream, and guacamole. I pulled the platter out of the way just in time. "Always looking out for me."

"Sisters for life. Always."

Looking at the two of them, my chest squeezed. I'd always wanted that kind of friendship. Family. People, I'd always just wanted *people* who'd be there for me.

Maybe when I got to Austin. Maybe I could finally start to build a little tribe for myself. Found family, that was what they called it, right? Or was that just another dream, something other people were able to have, but not me. Maybe I just wasn't built for it.

When Ruth pulled back, she looked at me. "Even then, that bastard still tried to turn it around on me. He said I had unrealistic expectations and that this was what all guys were really like and it was better I get used to it now."

She huffed out a laugh. "It just never even occurred to him with his giant ego that I wouldn't be okay with that and that I'd break up with him."

"Yeah, no," I murmured. "Guys like that don't do well with rejection."

"Oh, so you know the type?"

I nodded. "Really well, actually. They're fine until you challenge them, then all hell breaks loose."

She nodded, frowning. "Yeah, exactly like that."

"Well, here's to cutting all the douchebags out of our lives, ladies!" Olivia raised her almost-empty margarita glass. "Huzzah!"

"Down with the douchebags!" Ruth lifted her glass.

I didn't have anything else, so I lifted my water glass and said, "Don't let the bastards get you down!"

We all clinked our glasses together and laughed, Olivia letting out a whoop for emphasis.

* * *

I drove home since Ruth and Olivia had both ordered second margaritas. I hadn't laughed so much in... well, *years*.

It felt good. Really, really good.

But as soon as I saw Jeremiah and Reece waiting for us in the driveway, both with their arms crossed over their chests and identical frowns on their identical faces, I knew something was wrong.

And I felt immediately stupid for not being on alert. Because anytime things were going too well, didn't I know that meant everything was about to turn to shit?

My hands started to shake, old feelings rising up as I put the truck in park. Ruth obviously saw what I saw because she said, "Oh Jesus, what now?"

She jumped down from the truck and walked up to the boys. I followed, a little more hesitantly. I sensed a confrontation coming—I had a Spidey sense for these sorts of things now. I could feel it in the air.

I wanted to grab Ruth and tell her to get back in the truck. But it was too late. She just kept barreling ahead.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Jeremiah took an angry step forward and I flinched back. Reece's eyes came to me and his brow furrowed, as if he was concerned by my reaction. He definitely noticed.

But I was too concerned by what was happening between his brother and my new friend.

"What's wrong," Jeremiah seethed, "is that you're trying to sabotage us. I should have known from the beginning this situation was fucked up. There's no reason for you to still be here. This ranch isn't yours anymore, and if you think you can run us off and get the land back, lady, I've got news for you. I've called the sheriff, and he's—"

"The sheriff?" I squeaked, feeling lightheaded.

Who knew how far Jeff had circulated wanted posters of his 'missing' wife? Or what story he'd told about my disappearance?

When I'd run away before and gotten as far as Portland, he'd gotten the cops involved—claiming I was mentally disturbed and had threatened to kill *him*. I didn't know if he'd paid them off or if they'd genuinely believed his story. They certainly hadn't helped *me* when I'd begged them not to let him take me back.

Ruth held up a hand, looking irritated to the point of pissed. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, buddy, would you slow down with the accusations for a second

and tell me what the hell happened?”

Jeremiah sneered. “As if you don’t know. Don’t try to play the helpless, innocent female with me. I know you’re cunning.”

Ruth arched an eyebrow at him. “Damn straight I am. I still have no idea what the hell you’re talking about.”

Ruth turned to Reece, ignoring Jeremiah. “Would you tell me what your ignorant brother here is so worked up over?”

Would it sound really out of place to hold up my hand and ask, *so um, about the sheriff—what time are they showing up?* I looked at the road behind us. I didn’t hear or see another car coming up the drive, but God, it could be any second. I felt sweat breaking out all over my body. And like I was going to be sick. The fajita that had been so delicious only an hour ago was suddenly churning in my stomach.

“Someone’s been intentionally taking down the fence posts and letting out the cattle,” Reece offered cautiously, obviously still wary of the situation. “But they haven’t been stealing the cows.”

My eyebrows rose, distracted by Reece’s words. Whoa. Damn. I didn’t know much about cattle or ranching yet, but that seemed like a big deal. For a second I forgot about the sheriff and zoomed back into the drama.

“Son of a *bitch*,” Ruth said, hands on her waist as she started pacing back and forth.

Jeremiah rolled his eyes. “What? You’re saying it’s not you? Who then?”

Ruth laughed bitterly as she looked back his direction. “My father was *not* popular by the end of his time on this earth. It wasn’t just the bank he was in debt up to his eyeballs to.”

“But didn’t you clear all those debts when you sold this place?” Reece asked, far more kindly than I imagined his brother would have.

Ruth nodded frowning, and then her mouth dropped open and she twisted, looking at me. “Fuckface.”

My eyes widened. “Of course,” I said. I’d told her and Olivia about my internal nickname for Trent, to their great amusement.

“Of course, *what?*” Jeremiah butted in, sounding annoyed but also curious. “*Who?*”

“The guy from that day,” I said, looking between him and Reece. “The one who came over in the pickup truck who was so rude. We ran into him in town again today and he was really nasty. He and Ruth’s family have a past. He thinks this ranch should be his.” I felt my cheeks warm with anger just

thinking about that asshole.

“Oh,” Jeremiah said, his eyebrows furrowing.

“Yeah,” Ruth said. “Oh. Maybe you should wait and get all the facts next time before you go around accusing people of shit.”

His eyes narrowed on her. “You aren’t off the hook. We don’t even know you and I still don’t understand your motives for being here.”

Ruth threw her arms in the air. “Would everybody shut up about that? I’m tired of people telling me how stupid they think I am to stay. My grandfather was born in a shack on that hill, right there.” She pointed to a rise to the left of the barn.

“My dad was a son of a bitch but I loved him and he spent his *life* trying to hold onto the land that his daddy and his daddy before him fought for. I grew up riding horses here and dreaming of raising a family of my own here someday. So I’m *sorry* if me trying to hold onto even a tiny square acre of that legacy is so hard for you to understand.”

With that she stormed past Jeremiah and up the stairs of the porch, slamming into the house.

Reece immediately smacked his brother on the arm. “I told you to go about it *delicately*. How was that delicate?”

Jeremiah shrugged off his brother, his face dark as he looked after where Ruth had disappeared into the house.

Reece looked at me, his features gentler than his brother’s. They usually were. It was one reason it was so easy to tell the brothers apart in spite of the fact they were otherwise identical.

“Can you tell us a little more about what happened in town? Who is this guy?”

“I don’t know much more than she told you.” I would let Ruth reveal more of her past with Trent if she wanted to. It wasn’t my story to tell. “But you should know, he seemed connected around here. He threatened to take his business away from the hardware store like it would make a big impact, as if he and his father are the old man’s biggest customers. I guess they have one of the biggest ranches around here.”

And given my experience with entitled assholes, I added, “I wouldn’t underestimate him.” Then, because I felt bad about it, “I probably shouldn’t have antagonized him like that when he came here that day.”

Reece let out a scoffing noise. “You were awesome. Don’t ever let any assholes talk to you that way.”

Well, that had my insides warming. I found myself smiling up at Reece in spite of myself.

“It’s a clusterfuck any way you look at it,” Jeremiah said, then he looked at me. “Pardon my language.”

I held up my hands. “Please, not on my account. Besides, you think Ruth wasn’t cussing like a sailor the whole way into town and back?”

Jeremiah smiled at that, a little reluctantly, and his eyes went back to the house. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he admired her... Or was it more than admiration? They certainly sparked off each other, that was for sure.

The door opened again and I hoped it was Ruth coming back out, but instead it was Buck, the other hand they’d hired a few days ago, stuffing a sandwich in his mouth with one hand and a beer in the other.

“Jesus, Buck,” Jeremiah said. “No drinking on the job.”

“I’m takin’ a lunch break,” Buck said. “So I’m not really on the job.”

Reece laughed. “He’s got a point.”

Jeremiah glared at his brother. “Don’t encourage him. You know Xavier never let us drink until after work.” Jeremiah walked over to Buck and pulled the beer out of his hand, then kept on going to the kitchen. “I’ll get you a cold coke instead.”

Buck shrugged. “Whatever you say, Boss.” He took another huge bite of his sandwich and looked between Reece and me. “What’d I miss?”

Reece shook his head. “Nothing.”

Jeremiah popped his head back out. “Don’t wander far, Buck. We’re gonna have to bring in all the cows from the far pastures to keep them closer to the main house.”

“Isn’t that the pasture we just rotated them out of?” Reece asked. “There’s not enough feed there for them.”

“Which is why we’ll have to go buy some hay bales and haul them out there later today. While Buck’s having lunch, you and Charlotte go check the heifers. Last thing we can afford is to take our eyes off the ladies.”

Reece looked surprised, but nodded. “Sure thing.”

His eyes came to me and then they dropped down to the ground. Almost like he was self-conscious or something.

My stomach did a weird swoopy thing, and then my breath hitched.

Alarm bells rang in my head at my body’s reaction to him.

But I just smiled and nodded at Jeremiah and started walking out to the field behind the barn. Anything to get out of sight when the sheriff showed

up.

Poor Ruth. I knew all too well what it was like to have a horrible man try to sabotage what little happiness and future you were trying to carve out for yourself. I hoped they caught the bastard red-handed.

Chapter Eleven

I stared down at the crème anglaise in horror. It had split, and I didn't have time to remake it.

Shit!

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.

I felt panicky sweat break out everywhere as I looked around. The fresh berries were in their pristine white bowls and a peek in the oven showed the filet mignon was cooked to perfection.

"It'll be okay," I whispered to myself. "It'll be okay." I grabbed the split crème and rushed to the sink, furiously trying to clean it and hide the evidence of my failure. It'd be fine. Fine. Fine fine fine. I'd been so perfect lately. I hadn't given him any cause to—

But I was too late. Too late, I heard the sound of keys jingling in the front door.

I poured out the soapy water from the glass mixing dish, threw the dirty mixer beaters in the bowl, then in a rush, grabbed the oven mitts.

Swearing internally and hearing my own heartbeat rushing in my ears, I yanked the filet mignon out of the oven and shoved the still-dirty glass bowl in the stove instead to hide it.

I pushed the door shut and turned off the oven just in time, because the next *second*, Jeff came around the corner into the kitchen.

I grinned my brightest grin at him and greeted, "Hi honey, how was work?"

His eagle eyes took a survey of the kitchen and I was sweating bullets. Had I missed any evidence of the crème anglaise disaster? Would he discover my deception? Dear God, please. Not tonight, not tonight.

I prayed that the bright smile on my face didn't waver.

Jeff narrowed his eyes at me. "That asshole Barry is trying to weasel in on my case, can you believe that?" He yanked at his tie to loosen it and came further into the kitchen, recounting the many ills of his day. The ways he was slighted, not appreciated enough, and how he could run the firm so much better than the senior partners.

It was a similar litany every day.

I nodded and made sympathetic noises. I made to carry the dishes of filet mignon to the dining room when he frowned.

"Where's the crème? You know I prefer crème with fruit for dessert."

I gulped. "I thought it might be nice one night to try without," I said in a rush.

I immediately knew it was the wrong thing to say from the expression on his face.

"You *thought*? But you didn't check with me? You *thought* you'd just ruin one of the few single pleasures I get in my day because, what? You had a fucking *whim*?"

"I'm so sorry," I apologized, knowing from long experience that groveling was the only way to avoid worse consequences. "I'm so sorry, honey. It won't happen again."

He shook his head, snorting. "You know, I expect this kind of disrespect at work. But in my own goddamn *home*? This is supposed to be where I can come home and relax after a long day providing for the both of us. I don't ask for much from you, do I?"

"No," I shook my head vigorously. "You're so good. You don't ask for a thing."

"But the little that I do expect, you can't even fucking do that right."

I flinched as his voice rose and he took a step towards me when all the sudden he paused, frowned, and sniffed. "What's that smell?"

"What?"

"That smell." He looked at me like I was a criminal and then he walked over to the oven and yanked it open.

My anxiety spiked through the roof and I held out a hand uselessly as we both looked at the leftover cream that was now steaming and smelling strange from the residual heat that had been leftover after cooking the filet mignon.

"I can explain," I scrambled. "I know you love the crème anglaise with the fruit, so I tried. I really tried, but it split, and there wasn't time to remake

it, so I panicked. I'm so sorry, it was stupid—"

"So you *lied to me*?" he roared, turning to me. "You thought *lying* to me was better than admitting and owning up to your failure?"

He grabbed one of the small ceramic bowls of perfectly selected berries and threw it against the wall. It shattered into pieces and my entire body jolted with the *crash*. Blue and red berries scattered all over the floor.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," I said pathetically. "I'll never do it again!"

But he'd already crossed the room and the next thing I knew, his heavy hand was swinging towards me.

"No!"

I woke up.

I woke up covered in sweat, curled in a ball, my arms over my stomach. As if it would do any good now.

And then I kicked the mattress furiously and threw one of my pillows across the room.

I flopped back on the bed, swiping angrily at the tears springing from my eyes. I stared at the ceiling in the dark room.

That fucking *crème anglaise*.

How was I ever supposed to move on if—

The aching well of grief opened up inside me, a never-ending abyss. Sometimes, in the light of day, it felt like I could trick myself into believing a new beginning was possible here.

But then all it took was closing my eyes and I was dragged right back to hell.

I felt the dark gulf creeping at the edges of my vision.

How many times had I given in before? Disappearing inside the darkness was so much easier, it almost felt welcome.

It had taken everything in me to climb out this last time, to cling to dreams of something better, to crawl towards the pin-prick of light in the distance.

But always there was this leaden mud threatening to drag me back down. I wore it like a veil, a wedding veil that had wrapped itself around my neck to choke me and drag me backwards.

Some things a person could never forgive themselves for.

The fucking crème anglaise.

I turned over and moaned into the pillow still left on the bed, the dense material swallowing the grief-filled noise. I curled in on myself.

But as I laid there, shaking in the dark, I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand myself. Being in my own skin. It *hurt*. Every second that ticked by on the clock on the nightstand felt like a stab of pain. Being alive *hurt*.

I threw off my covers and stood up. I'd go out of my goddamned mind if I lay there another second.

My entire body shook as I paced around my small room. I scrubbed my hands through my hair, then reached to the bedside table for my water glass. It was empty.

Good, I couldn't stand to be in this tiny room a second longer. It felt too much like a cage and God knew I couldn't stand to be fucking caged for another second of my goddamned life.

I yanked on a pair of leggings, my robe and slippers. Then I eased out of my room and down the stairs, empty glass in hand.

But when I got to the kitchen, and drank a cup-full of water, I still felt like I wanted to crawl out of my own skin. I looked out the kitchen window at the moon, slammed the cup down on the counter and then went to the door. I pulled it open and walked out.

The blast of cold air on my face felt good. Bracing. Like a shock of awakesness.

I was alive.

I was here.

I wasn't *her* anymore. I wasn't. I *wasn't*, dammit.

I looked up at the sky, my nose stinging as I fought back tears and wrapped my arms around myself. The moon wasn't completely full, but it was close. And the sky was full of stars. So many stars it was almost unbelievable. Always a city girl, I'd sort of thought pictures of skies like this were photoshopped, but here it was, right above me.

I gulped the cold air into my hot lungs. It felt like a knife, but in a good way. It made me feel my body, from the insides and the outsides at the same time.

I was here.

I was here, I'd made it.

This was life.

Being alive in this body.

Free.

"I thought I was the only one who liked to stargaze in the middle of the night."

I yelped and jerked backwards.

“Shit, sorry, didn’t mean to scare you.” Reece waved from about fifteen feet away where he stood, leaned back against the fence with a cigarette in his hand.

My hand went to my heart. “Jesus,” I said, breathing hard. “You scared the crap out of me.”

“Sorry, I got that.” He did sound like he genuinely felt sorry. “I wasn’t sure how to let you know I was here. Guess I did that wrong.”

I laughed, the sudden build and release of tension making me feel ridiculous. I was like a jumpy cat around these people.

I sniffed and swallowed, blinking back any tears that had built up. “No, it’s fine,” I said, my voice a little shaky. “I just had a nightmare, so I came out for some fresh air. Guess I’m still a little jumpy.” I uncrossed my arms, then recrossed them, looking around. “What time even is it?”

“A little after two in the morning.”

“So what’s your excuse? What are you doing up at this hour? You have to be up at dawn. And I didn’t know you smoked.”

“Oh, well. Only sometimes.” He looked down at his cigarette. “It’s weed.”

“Oh!” Then I felt silly for being surprised. Lots of people smoked in California obviously, I just didn’t realize it was easy to get in Texas. Or that Reece... I shook my head at myself.

He leaned down and stubbed it out on the ground, his face a little sheepish when he looked back up at me. “Jeremiah doesn’t approve, naturally.”

“Hence being out here at two a.m.?” I asked.

He shrugged. “And I can’t sleep sometimes.”

“You?”

“That surprises you?”

I shrugged, feeling a little embarrassed. “I don’t know. You just seem so... I don’t know. Solid. Unperturbed by life.”

He laughed. “That’s a new one.”

“What? Are you kidding?”

He shook his head. “No way. Jer considers me the fuck up. The one he always has to look out for.”

I frowned. “That’s nuts. You’re great.”

“Huh.” He sounded surprised. “Well. Thanks.” He rubbed a hand on the

back of his neck. “So, nightmare? Wanna share?”

I shuddered, holding my arms even tighter. “No. Definitely not.”

Though I had to say, being out here with him was a better distraction than I could have hoped to find. I was finally calming down and the shaking had almost stopped.

Reece nodded.

I looked at the cigarette, which I guess could more accurately be called a blunt, that he’d tucked behind his ear. Then I asked, completely on a reckless impulse, “Could I have a hit?”

His eyebrows went up but he nodded. “Sure. Sorry, it was rude of me not to offer.”

Reece lit up the joint again, sucking in and hollowing out his cheeks. Then he passed it to me.

I put my lips around it, acutely conscious that his lips had just been in the exact same spot. Then I sucked and breathed in at the same time.

And coughed so hard I almost doubled over.

“Shit,” Reece said, reaching for me but pulling back at the last second like he wasn’t sure I wanted hands on me.

“I’m fine,” I coughed out, laughing at the same time. Tears from the smoke pricked at my eyes but before I could think better of it or Reece could try to take it away, I sucked in another long inhale.

And coughed all over again.

“Jesus, woman,” Reece said, snatching for the joint.

But I danced back from him.

“Uh uh,” I said in between coughs. “You are not stealing my first,” *cough*, “weed experience from me,” *cough cough cough*.

“Oh shit, it’s your first time?” Reece’s eyes went wide. “Then no more. This shit’s the good stuff.”

I handed it back. I was already laughing, though I doubted the weed could hit that fast. It just felt... ridiculously good to do something reckless. It helped settle me back into *this* life and made the nightmare life feel worlds away. Where it belonged.

I was this new woman. I was Charlie.

I closed my eyes as my body started to feel a little lighter. I held out my arms and dropped my head back, opening my eyes and looking up at the star-filled sky.

“I’m so *serious* all the time.” I shook out my arms and then my whole

body, then slowly started spinning. The sky above rotated as I spun. “The whole point of leaving was so I could start to *live*,” I murmured. My body started to relax, and it felt like relief. Relief to be rid of *her*.

“Looks like you’re doing a fine job of living to me,” Reece said and he sounded earnest, not like he was laughing at me or making fun.

I looked over at him and his head was leaned back, also looking up at the stars.

“I grew up in the city,” he said. “I didn’t know so many stars could even be real.”

“Shut the front door,” I said. “That’s just what I was thinking when I came out! Mind-reader.”

He smiled my way, that special smile I’d never seen him give to anyone else. “Nah, it’s just that great minds think alike.”

I grinned, and for the first time in forever, it felt easy. My facial features just sort of *relaxed* into it instead of having to force my lips to curve upwards. Could a person even go from devastation to smiling in such a short time, or was swinging that far on a pendulum just another indication of how fucked up I truly was?

God, in this second I didn’t care. I was just grateful for the relief, so I clung to it. The feeling was so foreign. *Is this what... is this what being happy feels like?*

Reece laughed. “I don’t know. Is this what being happy feels like? I sure hope so.”

Shit, did I say that out loud?

He laughed even harder. “Yep, you said it out loud.”

I clapped a hand over my mouth, but I was grinning too hard, so I dropped it. “Screw it. Is it really so bad to just say whatever’s on my mind?”

Reece shook his head. “I certainly hope not. I do it all the time.”

“Does it get you into trouble?”

He nodded. “Fuck yeah, it has.”

I laughed. And I mean *laughed*, like doubled over laughing, holding my gut.

“Okay, okay, why don’t we get you somewhere you can sit down. I think the weed’s hitting.”

He came over and put his hand at the small of my back. I leaned into his touch because it felt heavenly. I suddenly wished the robe I had on wasn’t so thick.

He led me forward, which meant he was close. I looked up at him. He was looking ahead so I could just stare at his strong jaw in the light from the moon and stars. Before I could fully think it through, my hand was up, and the tips of my fingers traced along his jawline. Stubbly and prickly.

“I’m obsessed with your jaw,” I said. “Every time I look at you, all I want to do is this.” I ran my thumb back and forth across the bristles and then pressed harder, feeling the shape of the firm bones underneath.

He swallowed hard, and I watched in abject fascination as his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. “Maybe I should get you back inside, Captain.”

I licked my lips. “Or maybe we should go into the stables and make out.”

He opened his mouth like he was gonna say something else and I moved in front of him, reaching up with both hands to caress his jaw with both hands.

His face was dark, shadowed, but I imagined mine was clear in the moonlight as he looked down at me.

“Don’t you want to kiss me?” I asked, and I couldn’t help the vulnerability in the question.

He was silent and it hit me that, oh my God, what if I was making a fool out of myself? Yes, we’d slept together once, but he probably did that kind of thing all the time. It didn’t mean he wanted a repeat performance, and certainly not with some high, sloppy chick—

“Are you fucking kidding?” He didn’t say anything else. He just leaned down and kissed me.

Not hard. Not demanding.

Just perfect. Eager. Like it was something he’d been waiting to do again.

His lips, so wide and thick, covered mine and the wild roar of wanting roared to life inside me. Foreign, but also familiar. Like it was something my body instinctually knew even though I’d never experienced it before meeting Reece’s mouth.

He pulled away, then looked around us. I could see his face looked a little dazed as he blinked. “We shouldn’t be doing this out here in the open.”

I giggled. “Why not? Who’s going to catch us?”

He pulled me against his body and I felt his desire for me. He leaned down. “Because I imagine public indecency is still frowned upon even if you’re out in the sticks.”

Oh. *Oh*. He wanted to have sex with me again.

Yes. Yes, I wanted that, too.

“So let’s go to the stables,” I said at the same time he said, “So I should probably get you back inside, Cinderella.”

His eyes went wide. “The stables?”

I felt self-conscious again. “Unless you don’t want to.” But the thought of going back in the house... compared to how good it felt to be out here with him. It was a no-brainer which one I wanted.

He coughed. “Are you kidding? I just... It’s your first time with weed.”

I shrugged and nodded. I decided that being self-conscious was bullshit.

I felt amazing, light and tingly and electric, but not completely out of control. I didn’t want to go back to my bedroom. No, no, I did not want to go back there with the ghosts.

Penelope Chambers was my ghost and I wanted to exorcise her. I wanted her gone forever. I wanted this new life. I wanted this feeling, right here. I wanted to reach out and touch Reece’s face again. I wanted him to touch my body. *I wanted to touch my body.*

What if an exorcism didn’t have to be about hell and damnation, but with, like, baptisms of pleasure instead? Over and over, pleasure, until I was made new. Reincarnating me into my own body but with a new life. That was the kind of rebirth *I* wanted.

I wanted no boundaries, no one telling me *don’t touch, don’t taste, not for you*. No more constraints.

So to Reece, I said, “Well, I’m going to the stable. To touch myself. You can come if you want.”

And then I pulled away from him and walked towards the stables, swaying my hips as I went.

I did smile when I heard footsteps behind me though.

I felt like a teenager as I tried to walk steadily across the yard, past the barn, to the stable. The teenager I should have been, without a mother weighing my food and making me journal my caloric intake. The college kid I should have been, high on weed and seducing the boy *she* wanted, the boy *she* chose. Making reckless but exhilarating choices that were all *mine*.

I was breathless by the time I got to the stable. I didn’t turn around once, but I could tell that Reece was still following by the sound of his feet on the dry grass behind me.

The work they’d done so far on restoring the stable was impressive. It was dry and warmer inside than outside. The floor was swept clean, as were the few stalls that had been repaired.

It smelled like wood and hay and *ranch*, but in a good way.

I spun and turned to Reece.

“What if we played pretend?” I asked impetuously.

He frowned, stopped at the doorway. “How do you mean?”

“Like the first night when I went to your cabin. We were strangers, and think how sexy that was. What if we pretended to be strangers again? Just a game of pretend. In the daytime, everything goes on like normal. But maybe for just one night...” I took a step towards him, and ran a hand down his shirt, “you could pretend to be my teacher.”

I arched an eyebrow up at him, feeling a wild thrill even as I said the words that I didn’t think had anything to do with the weed heightening everything I was feeling, “And I could be your very, very naughty student.”

I went up on my tiptoes, one hand still on his chest as I whispered in his ear. “Professor Walker, I know I failed that last exam, but maybe I could convince you to take mercy on me if I promise to be a very good girl from now on?”

“Jesus,” Reece swore, wiping a forearm across his brow in spite of the chill. But I could feel how warm he was through his shirt. His skin was burning up, begging to be touched.

Some twisted part of me recognized that this was fucked up. That this was a twisted version of what had *actually* happened to me with Jeff. But at the same time it was different. I was in control this time. I wasn’t being manipulated.

And... and maybe this made all the difference... I was with someone I felt I could genuinely *trust*.

So I leaned into the fantasy.

“I see the way you stare at me in class, Professor,” I said, dropping my hand down Reece’s chest and letting it rest at the waist of his jeans, my fingertips toying just inside where it buttoned.

His chest heaved as he looked down at me. I waited for his decision to see if he would play along or push me away, say that no, we had to be responsible and go back inside the house. I expected it—Reece was like that. He always seemed to do the right thing, and work so hard at everything he did.

But to my surprise and delight, one of his eyebrows lifted and he dropped his head down as his voice came out in a gravelly tone. “Well, it depends, Miss, on how well you do on the pop quiz I’ve just decided to give you. If

you do well, I might be able to bump your grade up to passing.”

A shiver of delight passed through my body, landing right in my sex. I’d never really experienced a sensation like it before. I blinked rapidly, then licked my lips, captivated when his eyes zeroed in on the motion. “What kind of quiz is this?” I asked tremulously.

Reece grinned, and he’d never looked more rakish. “Let’s call it an oral exam. Now, this is advanced material. I’m not sure you’re up for it.”

He pulled back from me, making me lose my grip on the waist of his jeans. “No, I am,” I said, taking a step after him.

I reached for him but he caught my wrist, his eyes going serious. “I guess you’ll have to convince me, then. You might even have to,” his voice dropped, “*beg me.*”

Holy shit, that did something to my nether-regions. I swallowed and then backed up into the stable. It was darker inside, but that only added to the illicit heat burning low in my belly. There was a beam of light from the open doorway. It was colder as I opened my robe, exposing my thin camisole and leggings. I shivered, but I didn’t stop.

I teased a finger down along the top of my camisole where it plunged dangerously into my cleavage. “Please, Professor Walker. Please let me make it up to you. I promise I’ll do so good at oral. I’ll give you the best oral you’ve ever had.” Then I opened my mouth and licked around my lips from the bottom to the top. “I’ve always had something of an oral fixation, it turns out.”

I shoved my thumb in my mouth, sucking just the tip of it and then dragging it down between my breasts.

“Oh, really,” Reece said, stepping inside the stables with me as I dropped my robe to the ground. I let the straps of my camisole fall down my shoulders, exposing the tops of my breasts.

I shrugged and bit my bottom lip. “When I watch you in class, I always want to suck on something. It’s why my grades are so bad. You distract me...”

He stepped forward and grasped me by the waist, pulling me up against him, so close I could feel his erection through his jeans and my slim leggings. He yanked his shirt off over his head and I couldn’t help it. My hands were drawn to the lines of his muscled chest, down to his abs... and lower. I traced the V that led into his jeans and swallowed.

“Beg me,” he demanded again.

My eyes flicked up towards his and suddenly it wasn't a game. It was me and Reece. This was his natural dominance shining through and it didn't scare me. It electrified me.

"I— I—" I started, then blinked several times. "I want you."

"Baby, that's all you ever have to say."

And then his mouth crashed down on mine and his hands were everywhere, on my ass, slipping underneath my leggings, moving around to my clit.

Before I knew it, he was bearing me down to the ground. But instead of coming over top of me, he'd moved down my body, dragging my leggings with him.

He shouldered my legs open and growled, "God, I've been dying to taste this pretty pussy," and before I could say, wait, no, that wasn't the kind of oral I thought we'd been talking about—

His mouth was on my center.

And. All. Thought. Stopped.

Because dear all things holy—

My hands dug into his hair as my legs fell open wider, and then my thighs clamped around his head as the first spasms of pleasure hit, and then fell open again. Oh God, I'd never had— No one had ever done this to me— I didn't know it could feel so—

I lifted one hand from his head to shove in my own mouth because I could barely hold back the scream of pleasure trying to come out of my throat.

The orgasm hit me before I was ready and it was— Holy *shit!* It was higher and heavenlier than anything I'd known was possible. Between his tongue and the weed, I couldn't—

I was trembling with aftershocks by the time he lifted his head, grinning in satisfaction as he swiped his mouth with his arm. I'd never wanted anyone more.

My legs flopped open but I wasn't done with him. "I'm begging you," I whispered, tears of pleasure coursing down my cheeks. "Please, fuck me now. I need to feel you inside me."

His eyes widened. Maybe he'd thought the one orgasm was all I'd want, but no, I needed to feel him inside me, plus, I— I couldn't have this just be one way. I needed him to—I needed the closeness and reassurance of him with me, I couldn't even explain it to myself.

But when I reached my arms down to him, he didn't deny me.

He climbed up between my open legs, shoved his jeans down, and he was hard, gloriously hard. He reached in the pocket of the jeans and pulled out a wallet, then a condom out of the wallet, sheathed himself, and was finally, gloriously pushing inside my swollen, readied sex.

We both groaned in pleasure at his entrance.

But it was all getting a little too real. Desperate, I needed to take it back to the pretend world, especially when I looked up into Reece's intense, gorgeous eyes.

"Fuck me, Professor, and tell me what a good student I am now."

If there was the briefest flicker of disappointment in his eyes at my words taking us back into the fantasy realm, he hid it quickly.

Instead, he grasped my jaw with his hand and told me, "Clench on my cock, little girl, and show me how badly you want this grade."

The show of dominance did make me cream all over him that much more. "Yes, sir," I gasped, and strained with all my inner muscles to hold onto him as he began to pump in and out of me. I didn't miss the way his eyes flared in satisfaction when I called him *sir*.

"Dig your heels in my ass and ride me back," he ordered.

I arched into him and did as he said. The robe beneath my back made a soft barrier between me and the dirt floor.

"I said to fucking ride me," he commanded, and I did, lifting my hips to meet his punishing ones as he really started getting into fucking me.

It was dirty and rough and sexy as hell.

"Fuck me harder, sir," I begged, loving the way his large, hard cock filled and commanded me in a way Jeff's never could. Reece was all natural confidence borne of his life of genuine hard work, not manipulation. And he fucked like he lived—genuine, hard, earnest.

And it felt so damn *good*.

I dug my nails into his back as he demanded, "Look at me. Fucking look me in the eye as you come."

I did. Dear God help me, I did.

I came, and I came hard as he pumped into me and then stilled. I spasmed around his cock as he pinned me to the barn floor, eyes locked with mine.

Chapter Twelve

The next week, all I could think about was the filthy, thrilling things I'd felt on the barn floor that night with Reece.

I remembered all of it, in delicious detail. Every time I stopped the ATV, I'd feel some twinge in my body that would remind me of where his hands had been. Or his mouth.

Dear Lord, I'd had no idea my body could *feel* those things.

Just like he'd promised, we were still ourselves during the day. Everything was normal between us at the dinner table. Okay, so maybe occasionally there was a lingering look between us... I didn't know about him, but now that I'd opened Pandora's box...all I could think about was continuing to explore.

So when I happened to pull the ATV into the barn after tagging several more newborns and caught Reece washing his hands at the sink, my heart started hammering.

I should head into the house and start getting lunch together. That was absolutely what I *should* do.

But instead, the same recklessness that had driven me to the stables the other night had my feet taking me towards Reece.

He turned, watching me as I came towards him. Was I just imagining it or did his eyes widen and his nostrils flare as I approached? Maybe it was all just in my head, but it gave me the confidence to go up on tiptoes and whisper, "You want to play pretend again tonight?"

His pupils definitely darkened at this and I was gratified that there was no hesitation before he nodded, a definitive up and down motion.

A rush of adrenaline hit and I felt more awake, more alive than I had all

week, since I'd last been in his arms. I took a step back, looking around to double check no one else was nearby. But still, the barn was the center of life on the farm and anyone could come in at any moment.

"Eleven o'clock." I bit my lip, a scenario popping in my head. After another quick peek around to make sure no one else was coming, I leaned up and whispered in his ear the idea I had in mind.

"Fuck," he spit out. "That's hot." He reached for me but I danced back.

I arched an eyebrow. "Don't be late."

He shook his head. "I won't be."

I smiled at him, shoved my hands in my back pockets, then turned and headed in to make lunch.

"What are you grinning like a fool about?" Ruth asked as soon as I stepped inside. She'd come downstairs to help me make sandwiches.

"What? Me?" I shrugged, trying to rearrange my features and stop the admittedly stupid grin I could feel fighting to reemerge on my face. "It's just nice weather out."

"Uh huh," Ruth said, obviously still suspicious.

"Coffee?" I asked, eager to change the subject, reaching for the carafe. She rolled her eyes but then gave in. "Is that even a serious question? Always."

* * *

It was ridiculous to get so excited about my "appointment" that night. I mean, I was exhausted as always after the strenuous day of work, and part of me wondered if Reece would even show. He'd looked tired during the evening meal, and there was no chance to get him alone again all day to double check that we were still on.

And slipping out of the house at ten to eleven wearing what I was wearing—well, I'd feel like a giant idiot if he didn't show.

I hesitated at the doorway, wondering if I should just go back upstairs and forget the entire thing.

I mean, yes, I had belabored over what I would wear for hours until figuring out that if I folded in the top of one of my skimpy camisoles and shimmied it down over my hips it made for a fabulous little miniskirt.

And yes, I was wearing the siren-red lipstick that Ruth had given me a

few weeks ago— saying it was a shame for a woman to not have even an ounce of makeup. Considering the scenario we were playing out, I hadn't been shy when applying it. I'd even rubbed some on my cheeks for rouge, an old trick my grandma had shown me.

Granted, I still had just my boots instead of pumps, but I thought I was pulling off the whole *prostitute* vibe pretty well. Especially with just my lacy black bra up top, though while still in sight of the house, I was all covered up with my thick terrycloth robe.

I bit the inside of my cheek, then opened the door and rushed out. No more overthinking. I wanted to feel how I'd felt the other night.

And to be honest, I wanted Reece's body against mine. I wanted to be someone else tonight and the freedom that came with that.

So I shut the door *ever so carefully* behind myself so that it barely made a sound, then rushed down the stairs into the cool, crisp spring air. I hurried past the vehicles in the yard to the road and continued down it for about a quarter of a mile, over the first little hill so that any headlights wouldn't be visible to the house.

Then I threw off the robe and I waited.

And immediately felt ten kinds of foolish. And cold. I crossed my arms over my chest. Was I really standing here alone in the dark, when only weeks ago I'd hitchhiked and been in *real* danger—

What the fuck was wrong with me anyway? Choosing these situations that were a little too close to my real life for comfort?

But just then, headlights split the darkness. For a moment I panicked, but I fought back with logic and reason. The headlights had come from the direction of the ranch. It wasn't a scary trucker come to hunt me down. Maybe that was part of why my subconscious had been drawn to this in the first place.

I was going to put down my demons one by one, dammit.

So I stood up straighter, juted out my hip, and leaned my breasts out as the truck slowed down.

And when the driver's side window rolled down and Reece leaned out, his hair disheveled as if he'd been running his hand through it, I felt a zing of exhilaration like nothing I could describe.

"Well, hello there," I said, walking up to the car and leaning on the door with my elbows, bending over and enjoying the way my breasts swung between us in my lacy bra. "You looking for a date, honey?"

Reece swallowed hard, his eyes briefly dropping to my chest before he dragged them up to my face. He cleared his throat. “Yes. Yes, I am.”

“What are you lookin’ for tonight? Hand job? Blow job? Full deal’s gonna cost ya.” I arched an eyebrow at him. “But I promise I’m worth it. I can take you places you never been.”

He sucked in a deep breath and nodded. “I have no doubt about that. What’s your most expensive package?”

I told him. He didn’t bat an eye. “That.”

I grinned. “Well, I guess we’ll have some fun tonight, then.” I held out my hand. “Payment first.”

He pulled out his wallet and handed over actual cash. I was surprised. I’d give it back at the end, but I appreciated the realistic props. I took the money and stuffed it in my bra.

“All right, cowboy. Get ready to get rode hard and put away wet.” I winked, getting a laugh out of him while I walked around the front of the cab and climbed in.

“Where to?” he asked once I was inside. It was warm, even a little stifling after the cold of the outside.

I leaned in and slid a hand up his thigh. “Hotels don’t usually like my kind,” I whispered, “So why don’t we just drive a little further up the road? I’ve had a lot of johns but I’ve never done it in the back of a truck before.”

I ghosted my hand over his crotch and felt his enthusiasm for my idea.

He immediately threw the truck in gear and then we were spitting gravel as we drove a few more minutes down the road while I continued massaging his thigh, teasing higher and higher.

“Fuck, this is gonna have to be good enough,” he said, slowing down and throwing the truck in park again. “Cause I can’t wait any longer.”

He turned to me and pulled me to him, so quick and so strong that he all but pulled me up into his lap.

Yes. God, it felt good to be in his arms again. His mouth was powerful and commanding on mine and it made me go so lightheaded, for a moment I almost forgot myself. It felt just like Reece and me stealing away in the night to make out in his truck.

A dangerous part of me wanted to throw my arms around his neck, straddle him, and let him fuck me right here like this—anything to get him inside me and cement our connection. At the same time, a panic alarm went off at the thought of that. So I pulled back.

“Ah ah ah,” I said. “You ordered the full package and the full package is what you’ll get, sir.”

I climbed back off him and before he could utter a single word, I’d hopped out of the truck and was walking around to the back of the truck. Where I found a couple of sleeping bags laid out.

I raised an eyebrow at Reece when he joined me, coming around the other side of the truck. I smirked at him. “Why do I have the feeling that this is *not* your first rodeo bringing a woman out in the dark to seduce in the back of your truck?”

It was too dark to see if he was blushing, but by the way he ducked his head, I had the feeling I was right. That was good. Somehow it made me feel more in control if he was a little embarrassed. And it reminded me that this was a night out of time.

Control. Yes. That was what I wanted. What I needed, even.

“Sit with your back against the cab,” I said. “You paid to be pleased, and that is my job and my only desire, sir.” I walked up close to him, running a hand down his chest. “I want to make you come harder than you’ve ever come before. All the things that are too dirty to ask the little woman to do, you can do with me.”

I reached down and grasped his cock roughly, making his breath hitch. I squeezed his balls as I leaned in and kissed him, biting at his bottom lip and sucking it hard. When I let go with a lingering *pop*, he swore.

“Actually, I have a better idea,” I said. “Something I’ve always wanted to try with a client but I never dared.” I blinked my eyelashes up at Reece. “Are you daring enough to try it with me?”

He sucked in a breath but nodded. “I paid for the full package. I can handle it if you can.”

I grinned. “Good. That’s what I like to hear. Do exactly what I say,” I crooned, “and I promise, I’ll make you feel good.”

He opened the back of the truck and I climbed up, making sure to swing my barely covered ass in his face. I laid down and then wiggled a finger at him to join me. “Jeans off,” I said. “Then climb over my face.”

He adjusted his stiff cock, then nodded. The moon wasn’t full anymore, but three-quarters was still enough to see how wide his eyes were and to be able to follow his motion as he shoved his jeans down, and toed off his boots. He climbed up into the truck bed, his heavy cock swinging between his legs.

I reached out for it, shocked by my hunger to get my hands on it. It

jumped with eagerness the second my palm closed around it.

“That’s right,” I said as he climbed up on top of me. I urged him up higher until he was straddling my shoulders, his cock hanging right in front of me.

I brought it to my mouth, ghosting it across my lips like I was applying lipstick. Then I peeked my tongue out to lick just the tip, where his slit peeked out. His entire body reacted at the contact. I grinned and began to toy with his tip while I jacked him up and down with my hand.

Damn, but he was long and well-built. He was the girth of my entire hand. “Big boy,” I whispered, then dipped him into my mouth, sucked hard, bobbing him in and out past my lips.

I did that for several minutes until I finally pulled him out again, lazily licking at the head, stroking him the whole time.

“Now, I’m going to touch you and you’re going to let me because you trust me to bring you pleasure. You paid for it and I’m going to give you everything,” I said as I started massaging his balls with my free hand.

“Okay,” he said, his voice tight, no doubt from everything I was doing to him.

“Hold off on coming for as long as you can. Don’t give in, no matter how much you want to.”

“Not a problem, darlin,” he said, and I could hear the humor in his voice.

I smiled. Oh, just you wait, cowboy. I tugged him forward so that his cock was in my mouth again, and then with my other hand I opened the little quarter-sized container of petroleum jelly I’d bought at the store this week. It wasn’t ideal but would work in a pinch for what I needed.

I dug my finger in, lubed it up, then reached around Reece and slipped my finger towards his ass.

He’d been mostly passively accepting everything I’d done until this point, but he straight up jolted the second I began to probe his ass.

I gave him the space to pull away, but when he didn’t, I went for it. I made the plunge, doing what I’d only dreamed about in my naughtiest fantasies long before I’d ever met Jeff. I used to have kinky fantasies and right now, I wanted to make Reece feel like no other woman had ever made him feel. I wanted to blow his head off with pleasure.

So I slipped my finger up his ass and felt around for his prostate. I’d researched this long ago and knew it wasn’t very far in. I curved my finger and could tell when I’d found it because of how Reece responded.

His cock which already felt huge suddenly grew to bursting in my mouth. And whereas before he'd simply been on his knees allowing me to guide the blow job—now he was moving his hips, actively thrusting into my mouth.

“Yes,” I cried around him, wanting that. I wanted him to lose control with me. I wanted him out of his fucking mind.

And as soon as I gave the signal it was okay he seemed to give into it, fucking my mouth as I stimulated his prostate.

Words started spilling out of his mouth into the night air. “Jesus fuckin’ Christ. Never felt so good. Fuck, your mouth feels like fuckin’ heaven. So fucking hard. Gonna come. Jesus, I’m gonna blow. Fuck, oh fuck, oh fuckin’ *fuuuuuuck—*”

I added a second finger to the first in his ass, really massaging hard against his prostate and then he lost it, fucking my face until all I could do was hold his hip with one hand, keep pressure on his prostate, and accept his cock in my mouth, down my throat while he lost his goddamn mind.

When he came, he blew like a goddamn freight train, so much cum exploding down my throat. I swallowed and then swallowed more, but still his creamy cum spilled out the sides of my mouth.

Still I didn’t let up, continuing pressure against his prostate until he was crying out incoherently and fucking my mouth.

When it seemed like he had nothing else and his voice was a mere whine against the night, I finally released him. He collapsed to the side of me.

I continued holding his cock, licking and lathing at the spilled cum until every single droplet was licked clean.

Chapter Thirteen

Two nights later, I collapsed onto Reece's chest, having just finished playing a round of seduce-the-ranch-hand.

We were back in the stables, lying on a sleeping bag Reece had thoughtfully prepared ahead of time. My entire body felt liquid and melty from the multiple orgasms Reece had just pulled from me. I curled my arm around his wide torso as I laid my head on his chest, both of us still breathing hard from our exertions.

Neither of us spoke. We usually didn't in the aftermath. What was there to say when you'd just had your brains fucked out in the best sex of your life? Well, it was certainly the best sex of *my* life; I couldn't speak for him. But if the way he kept coming back for more said anything, he was enjoying himself plenty.

I liked hugging the warmth of him and hearing his heart pound away through his chest underneath my ear. I liked being connected to another human being like this. It was completely novel to me. Touching someone like this and feeling... *safe*.

My eyes dropped shut as I cozied up closer to him. Just a few minutes. I'd allow myself just a few more minutes of this heaven and then we'd pull ourselves together and go back inside...

* * *

"What the fuck?"

I frowned and snuggled instinctively against the warmth. But then

everything was shifting, jerking, and—

“Jer. It’s not what you think.”

My eyes popped all the way open as Reece shifted out from underneath me and I realized. The stable. We’d fallen asleep in the stable.

Shit.

I scrambled to sit up and pull the thick robe around myself that Reece had draped across us like a blanket at some point last night.

Only to look up and see Reece’s face mirrored on his twin’s—except unlike Reece’s, Jeremiah’s face was twisted in a way I’d never seen. Disappointment. Disgust, maybe even. Anger, definitely.

I pulled my knees up against my chest and Reece moved in front of me as a shield. Oh shit, I was naked, and Jeremiah had just caught us—

“We can talk about this later. Just let me get Charlie inside.”

“Oh, so now you’re a gentleman?” Jeremiah scoffed, then looked at the floor, where a blunt had fallen out of Reece’s pocket in the night. He hadn’t even smoked it last night, but I knew he carried them with him sometimes.

Jeremiah reached down and picked it up, then shook his head, taking just a quick glance my way before glaring back at his brother. “I should have fucking known. If there’s a vulnerable woman within ten miles of you, you’re gonna find a way to get your dick involved. This is Peg all over again.”

Reece launched himself to his feet. At least he had his jeans on. “Shut your goddamn mouth before both of us regret it.”

“Or you’re gonna do what, little brother? Hit me? Screw up another opportunity for us and set us back to square one, for what, the hundredth time? Sexual harassment and drug possession—great, real great. Jesus, you just can’t help yourself. Except wait, you *can*, because you’re a grown man. Or at least supposed to be.”

“Stop it,” I yelled, yanking the robe around me for modesty’s sake. “Both of you, stop it.”

Last night felt like something out of a dream. Every night with Reece did. But here, with everything exposed in the daylight, I felt unsteady. Off-kilter. Everything that had seemed so clear last night suddenly evaporated with the dawn and this horrible argument.

I hated to see them argue. I hated to be the cause of the arguing.

The scent of burnt crème anglaise from my nightmares was filling the air. Landing hard on the ground beside shattered glass shards, my cheek on fire. *Why do you ruin EVERYTHING, you stupid bitch?*

I stood up and shoved my feet into my slippers. All these nights trying to be something else, to be *someone* else... God, it was all just self-delusion. I was still *her* and I always would be.

“And look,” I whisked the robe around my shoulders. “There’s no problem anymore, ’cause I quit, okay? I was never gonna stay around here long anyway. Just give me my pay for the work I’ve done till now and I’m gone.”

I stomped out of the stable, my nose burning and hot tears scalding my eyes.

“Wait, Charlie—”

Reece tried to follow me, but his brother stopped him. Good. A clean break would be the best.

I shook my head, feeling *stupid*. I knew it. I knew everything had been going too good. I knew it was all about to crash down around me.

Well, good. I swiped at a tear as soon as it fell. Now it had happened. Better now than later. I’d gotten it out of the way.

This whole place was just... None of it had ever been real. It was a waystation. Just a strange stop along the way to my real life.

And I’d learned lessons. Good lessons. Don’t let people in so quick. What the hell had I been thinking doing everything I had been with Reece lately? Letting down so many guards. If it was all just pretend, then why did I hold him so tightly all night long like that? How could I have let myself trust *any* man enough to fall asleep in their arms?

I covered my face with my hands remembering it, mortified.

Except it hadn’t been mortifying then. It had been... well, it had been wonderful, amazing, *beyond*. Every time.

Gah, I just needed to scrub it all out of my mind. None of it mattered. There were far bigger tragedies in my past to be recovering from to be wasting any tears over a few-nights stand.

So what if he’d held me so close to his body all night I’d fallen asleep to the sound of his heartbeat? So what if for the first time in I couldn’t remember when, I hadn’t had nightmares? It was so chilly out there, at least fifty degrees overnight, and yet I’d slept like a baby tucked against his big body.

I shook my head roughly to expel the memories.

It. Didn’t. Matter.

There were things that mattered, and things that didn’t matter, and guess

what? One night tucked up against a warm, gentle giant, was in the big ol' fat column of things that didn't matter.

So it was nice. I'm sure in my life ahead I'd find lots of things that were nice. I'd meet lots of nice people. Jesus, the last thing I needed to be doing right now was tangling with a man, anyway. Seriously, the absolute last thing.

It was sooooo much better that I was leaving now.

I stomped up the stairs, past where Ruth was brewing coffee and staring at me with wide eyes as I tromped right past her.

"Where've you been?" she asked after me.

"Can you drive me to Austin?" I asked, not really listening for her response because I didn't want to answer her questions. "I'm leaving today."

I kept going up the stairs.

But I should have known Ruth.

She was immediately on my heels. "Whoa, what happened? And were you out doing morning chores dressed like that in just your robe?"

I stubbornly kept looking ahead. Could I get to my room and shut the door before she lobbed any more questions at me?

"Oh my God, is this a walk of *shame*! You dirty bird! Which of them was it?!"

I felt my cheeks flame. How had we fallen asleep out there? I'd just meant to shut my eyes for a moment. I'd thought for sure I wouldn't fall asleep because, hello, we were outside. On the ground. It was cold. And we were in a *stable*.

I spun and faced her. "I don't want to talk about it. I just need to get out of here. You said you'd drive me to Austin. Is that offer still good?"

"Holy shit." Her eyes were wide. "You're serious."

Was she kidding? I clenched my fists together and bit the insides of my cheeks in an effort to hold back all the emotion I was feeling.

Staying as long as I had and getting close to any of them had been a mistake in the first place. I'd had a plan. Disappear in a big city. Don't make friends, don't make waves. Just disappear for a while. Cocoon myself away. Maybe forever if that was what I needed. I wasn't... *fit* to be around people.

Some people were meant to be like Ruth and her friend Olivia—the kind of people who just put themselves out there and lived out loud. But that wasn't me. That couldn't be me.

Every time I tried, I just made things worse, so much worse. I'd tried to

escape my mom's house and landed in Jeff's lap. Then in escaping Jeff, I'd come here and screwed things up between Reece and his brother.

Why do you ruin *everything*? It was Jeff's voice in my head, but just because the man was a narcissistic monster didn't mean he was always wrong.

I was the common denominator in my shitty life.

He'd been attracted to me in the first place for a reason. Broken called to broken, like two grotesque pieces of a puzzle. I couldn't even see what he was, I'd been so blinded. I just let him pull me right into his web, absolutely desperate for love and attention.

And hadn't I done the same thing here? Wanting Reece and then grasping for him, not caring about the consequences for anyone involved?

"Can I keep a couple of the jeans and shirts you've lent me?" I asked Ruth, both of us still facing each other in a stand-off in the hallway outside my room.

"Jesus, Charlie, the clothes are yours, but you can't leave!"

"I can and I will," I said. Better now before things got any worse.

Ruth crossed her arms over her chest. "What happened? Did one of those assholes do something to you? Tell me right now. I'll rip their balls off."

"What?" I was appalled. "Of course not!" I finally turned and headed for my room. I was officially over this conversation. I just needed to pack my things and get on the road. "It's just me. I screw shit up. It's time to go. I gotta get outta here."

I pushed into my bedroom but Ruth just followed right behind me.

"Is that what happened wherever you were last? Things got a little complicated and you just took off?"

My mouth dropped open as I spun back to her. "You have no idea what the hell you're talking about."

She threw her hands out. "That's because you don't talk to anyone! You haven't let any of us *in*. So maybe you did last night. Did you sleep with one of the guys? With Reece? Or... Buck?"

And in that moment, I realized the name she had conspicuously not mentioned. "Oh my God, you like Jeremiah, don't you?"

"What?" she laughed, but it was fake. "Don't be ridiculous." But then her facial features transformed from indifference to suddenly looking freaked out. "Why? Did you sleep with Jeremiah?"

Then, as if hearing herself, she shrugged. "Not like it would make any

difference to me if you did. I'm just curious. And so I can figure out which asshole I need to go straighten out so we can get you to stay."

But I was shaking my head. "Yeah right, I see right through you. You like Jeremiah. As in, *like* him." Even as I said it, I felt a little junior high-ish. But at the same time, I knew I was right.

Ruth's mouth dropped open and her eyes widened. She looked at the door to my bedroom. And then she hurriedly shut it. Then she went and sat down on my bed, looking a little freaked out.

"I mean," she blinked. "Maybe I... *do*? A little? He's a stubborn ass, but he is really cute, and he's a good guy, and sometimes I do want to rip all of his clothes off when we're arguing."

Then she shook her head. "But I'm just sex-starved and we'd be a disaster in real life. It's ridiculous. And I can't believe you even distracted me like that, witch. We're talking about *you*."

Well, she'd knocked the wind out of my sails with her honesty so I sat down on the bed beside her.

"I slept with Reece," I admitted quietly.

"I knew it!" she said, all but jumping up and down on the bed beside me. "Was last night the first time?"

I felt the blush rise on my cheeks before dropping my head and shaking my head no. "It's just casual sex," I continued hurriedly. "No strings or anything, we both agreed. But then last night we just sort of... fell asleep together and he held me all night."

Her hand went to her chest. "Oh my God, that's so sweet, shut *up*! Except don't. Tell me everything."

So I told her a little more, skipping over the most intimate details about our *play* but getting to the part where Jeremiah found us this morning. And the less than generous conclusions he'd come to, along with the things he'd said.

"I'm gonna stab his eyeballs out." Ruth jumped to her feet. "How dare he go in guns blazing, judging you or his brother like that?"

I reached out a hand and grabbed her arm before she could go storming out of the room. "He was just surprised. And I hate that I put either of them in that position. They usually get along so well. It's better if I just remove myself from the equation and let everything go back to the way it was."

"That's bullshit," Ruth exclaimed emphatically. "They're brothers. I'm sure they fight all the time."

“I’ve never seen them fight.”

She rolled her eyes. “We’ve known them for what? All of three weeks? And from what you described, whatever boiled over this morning has been something contentious between them that’s probably been under the surface for a while. And I’m sure it’s not the first time it’s bubbled over. You just had a front seat for it this time, and that was shitty of Jeremiah. But from what I’ve seen, I suspect that’s who these guys are. They don’t mask what they’re thinking or feeling. It’s just all right there, hanging out for better or worse.”

I sat with that for a second, absorbing what she’d said. I couldn’t imagine... Just *saying* and *showing* what you thought and felt instead of covering it over and hiding it to stay safe.

Because everybody on this ranch knew deep down it was safe to say whatever the hell they wanted. To show whatever emotion they were having.

As if... as if it was normal to just have a conflict without it turning into disaster. And that was something I could barely even comprehend.

I blinked harder, getting up and walking towards the window, and for the first time since Jeremiah had come in yelling, my heartbeat finally started to slow.

I was safe.

Everything was okay.

I’d just operated on a fight or flight instinct the second I felt those old feelings. I lifted a trembling hand to my forehead, wiping away the cold sweat.

I closed my eyes and leaned it against the cold glass. It felt nice against my flushed skin.

“I’m a complete mess,” I whispered.

“Oh, honey.” I felt Ruth’s hand at my back. “Welcome to the club.”

“I made a fool out of myself.”

“I doubt it. I would have been mortified if anyone had found me like that and said those things. Difference between us is, I would have gotten pissed and wanted to start throwing fists. But you’re a sweet girl who takes the whole world on your shoulders, it seems like.”

I laughed. “You’re fight, I’m flight.”

Then my smile faded. “I always thought it would be more heroic to stand and fight.”

Sometimes I felt like such a wimp for being Jeff’s *victim*. The whole

thought of it made me want to crawl out of my skin. But I knew if I ever tried fighting back, it would just go twice as bad. It was futile.

Ruth shook her head and made a face. “No way. It’s a terrible idea. As someone who got in my share of actual fights all growing up, I can tell you, it doesn’t solve much. It feels good for about three seconds to lash out. But then someone’s usually hitting you back. And that sucks.”

“You can say that again.”

Her eyebrow went up at that, and I wished I could take it back. Luckily, she went on talking. “Even the fights I managed to *win*, and there were a couple, it’s not like anything good happened. I was suspended for two weeks the last time, ostracized as the girl with the temper. Then boys were even more of jerks trying to get a rise out of me after I got back.”

I shook my head. “Kids are ruthless. It’s a miracle any of us survive to adulthood.”

“Right?” She knocked my shoulder with hers. “But look. Both of us made it.”

I scoffed. “I don’t know about you, but I’m not exactly the paradigm of mental health and stability. Until I get that paycheck, I still only *actually* have a single pair of clothes to my name. I’m twenty-nine years old and starting completely over again from scratch with nothing. And I have no idea what the hell I’m doing most of the time.”

Ruth’s left eyebrow rose. “Then it sounds to me that you shouldn’t be running away from the few friends you’ve managed to actually find. Maybe good friends and situations are a dime a dozen wherever it is you come from, but around here—”

“They aren’t,” I said quickly. “I promise you, they aren’t. I’ve never—” I shook my head. “I mean, I can’t even remember the last time I had a conversation like this with someone who was just, totally real and nonjudgmental. It feels amazing. And refreshing. And, yeah, amazing.”

Ruth nodded. “Exactly, besides Olivia, I haven’t had anyone else either till you and the boys came along.”

“You call what you and Jeremiah do having genuine conversations?”

She grinned. “Arguing is the best kind of genuine conversation. I can be my most ornery, crotchety, opinionated self and he’s not intimidated. He just gives back as good as I give. In a good argument, there’s a level of respect, else why bother?”

“And Jeremiah’s a good arguer?” I asked, not getting it as anything *I*

would ever want but trying to understand it for her sake.

She grinned. "He's the best I've come across. And he actually listens to what I have to say. That's a new one."

Then she wagged her finger at me. "I see you trying to get the conversation back on me. Back to the point. So you're staying, right? That's where this conversation has been circling round to. We're worth it, trust me."

"It's not that," I sighed. "It was never that. I know you're worth it."

"So why leave then?" she cut in, eyebrows raised like she knew she had me in a checkmate.

And the truth was, she had me stumped. Because if I started trying to go into how the problem was *me*, how I was broken and not fit to be around good people, how I was too selfish, a disease that seemed to infect every situation I was a part of...

Well, of course I knew what she would say. That I was being ridiculous. Of course I wasn't a disease. It was what *I* would say to any friend who told me those things.

...so why couldn't I say them to myself?

I'd left, hadn't I?

I believed I was worth more. I knew there was more. And I'd felt that more-ness almost every day since I'd been here.

I felt it when I stepped out the door on the crisp, cold mornings and looked at the rolling hills bathed in the morning sunlight, wide eternal sky overhead.

I felt it when I fed the newborn calves who sucked so eagerly at the bottles and then ran rambunctiously around the yard together, playing and rollicking from the simple joy of being *alive*.

I felt it when I looked around the kitchen table and Reece and Jeremiah made jokes at each other's expenses and laughter was easy and common.

I felt it when I rode the ATV and felt the wind biting against my face and my muscles burning by the end of the day from doing true, useful work out under the sun instead of being trapped, imprisoned inside all day.

I felt it last night when my body shuddered in orgasm and then I clutched to the warmth of another human being and listened to his heartbeat steady underneath my ear through the hours of the night.

I'd been so brave, and maybe I could be brave just a little longer.

Maybe I could... stay.

I breathed out, long and low. "Okay," I said, peace coming as soon as the

decision was made. “I’ll stay. A little longer, anyway.”

Ruth hugged me and let out a little, “Woo!” and then dragged me to my feet, saying she was starving and it was time for breakfast.

Chapter Fourteen

So I stayed. And a week later, I was still mostly glad about the decision. I'd started taking over the counter sleeping pills again. Okay, yeah, so I took twice the recommended dose. Sometimes with a glass of wine. But I just couldn't handle the nightmares. Maybe that made me a coward, but I didn't care. There was only so much I could deal with at once.

Especially since things between me and Reece were... well, awkward was putting it generously.

Reece wasn't anywhere to be seen when I'd come downstairs that morning after everything happened.

Jeremiah was there instead, and from his tone when he spoke to me, I took it that he'd talked his brother into leaving to do chores.

"I hope you'll stay. You're a good worker. But I don't want to in any way pressure you. If you want to go, I'm happy to give you your pay to date. Again, I apologize for my brother's reckless actions. He'll stay away from you if you decide to stay."

I frowned, wanting to defend Reece. He hadn't done anything wrong. He'd been kind and restrained the night before and I didn't like the way Jeremiah saw his brother, as some kind of screw up. From the way Reece thought about himself, it seemed like it was this very sort of talk from his own brother that had dug deep and made him see himself as lesser or bad in some way. It was wrong. But I didn't think Jeremiah could hear that in this moment. And certainly not from me.

Besides, did I really know either of them? No, no, I didn't. And my track record with men hadn't exactly been stellar. So maybe I was seeing things wrong.

Either way, staying away from Reece seemed like the best idea for everybody involved. I hated to cause strife between him and his brother. That was the last thing I wanted.

I said as much to Jeremiah that morning. “I’d like to stay. But I don’t mean to cause any problems.”

He waved a hand. “No, it’s not you. I’m sorry you got dragged into it. From here on out, things will be strictly professional. I’ll see to it.”

I frowned a little at that, not sure what he meant, but I was glad for the conflict of the moment to have been smoothed over.

And so life went on. I’d finally got my first paycheck since I’d been here a month, and as I thought, Jeremiah didn’t ask questions when I said I needed it in cash, beyond a lingering look. I’d gone with Ruth to a Walmart several towns over and bought some clothes, including new jeans all my own. And I was probably one of the few women who was delighted to find I was two full sizes larger than I used to be back when I lived with Jeff. That was what happened when you were no longer living on a starvation diet. I loved my new body. I loved every bit of transformation I could get that took away reminders of *her*.

So things were going well, except that whatever his brother had said to Reece definitely did something. He didn’t seek me out or even talk to me anymore. Which was awkward to say the least, since we all still ate meals together. Things were tense for a few days, the conversation across the dinner table a little stilted with Ruth doing most of the heavy lifting, but eventually it smoothed out to being back to normal. Well, *normalish*.

I felt a bright warmth in my chest the first time Reece made a joke that including me at dinner the other night—it was the first time he’d addressed me directly since I’d been so warm in his arms that night. Our eyes had caught and I lit up like a damn fire had flamed to life in my chest.

A week later and it was raining, dark clouds overhead bringing on a premature twilight, but I could still remember the warmth in my chest from how it had felt in that moment. Even though he’d been successfully avoiding me since.

I sighed, looking down at Nine and trying to get the bottle back in his mouth. I’d managed to lure him up to the steps of the porch where the roof covered me from the rain for his and Bessie’s dinner bottles. She’d finished hers but Nine was being finicky with his.

Ruth was lounging on a rocking chair by the kitchen door, watching me

feed and chatting at me about local town gossip. “So then Gracie told me that Mariah, you remember Mariah, the one who was in the garage that day when Trent was being a dick?”

I nodded distractedly. Nine kept turning his head sideways and losing the plot, yanking away from the nipple and staring up at the ceiling where the rain sounded like a barrage of marbles on the tin roof.

“So Missy is telling anyone who will listen that Janice’s husband is cheating on her with Brenna. She’s a local high school teacher.”

Nine pulled away from the nipple again.

“Come on, man,” I said to the ornery calf. “I know it’s loud, but if you don’t finish this bottle soon, my arm is going to fall off. See how good Bessie was?” I gestured with my head to where Bess had already raced off through the rain back to the shelter of the stable.

I shoved the nipple towards his mouth again. “Don’t you want to go join your buddy?”

He gave a few sucks again at the nipple but then thunder boomed overhead and he danced backwards, all the way down back into the yard.

Behind me, Ruth busted out laughing.

I turned to look over my shoulder, glared at her and stuck out my tongue.

She held up her hands. “No, no, you’re doing an excellent job. Please continue. I haven’t been this entertained in days.”

“Don’t you have something to do? Like look for a job?”

It was her turn to make a face at me. “I’m living rent free essentially, since I own the place and food’s cheap. I’m having a quarter-life crisis and taking a break from being a grown up, okay? So leave me be, woman.”

A flash lit up the sky and then thunder rumbled, only a few moments behind. That was apparently it for Nine, because he bolted for the stable.

Well, he’d drunk two-thirds of the bottle. Good enough for now since he’d eaten well all day. I wasn’t about to go chasing him down anyway.

The door behind us opened and I spun around right in time to come face to face with Reece.

“Oh. Hi,” I said, blinking rapidly.

“Hi,” he said, then his eyes lowered and he pushed past me. He was wearing a raincoat and I turned, following him with my eyes as he pulled the hood up over his head and jogged right into the pouring rain towards his truck.

Hi. That was it. One syllable. That was all I got from him these days.

Ruth was standing and running down the stairs, stopping just short of heading into the rain. “Where are you going? We’re going to the bar tonight, I told you at breakfast. Out at Landlubbers, by the lake. You have to come!”

“Sorry, gotta make a run to town,” was all he shouted back, barely heard through the rain.

“Meet us there then!” Ruth shouted, almost simultaneously as his truck door slammed shut.

I felt my shoulders slump. “That was weird, wasn’t it? It was weird.”

Ruth nodded. “Totally fucking weird.”

I smacked her on the arm. “You’re supposed to *disagree* with me.”

She shrugged.

I rolled my eyes at her, just as another car pulled in the driveway. Good timing, because Reece hadn’t pulled out yet, and I don’t know how he and Olivia’s sporty little Honda would have passed one another on the one-lane road into the ranch.

Ruth clapped. “Yes! Now the pre-party can begin!”

“I forgot about going out tonight,” I said, looking down at my mud-spattered clothing.

“Go shower and change. Olivia’s here to do our hair and makeup.”

I looked out at the rain, falling harder than ever. “Won’t it be hard to get to town in a storm like this?” Part of me was looking for an excuse to get out of it. More than part of me. I was so tired lately. I wanted to go upstairs with a glass of wine, take a pill, then *sleep*. Sleep and sleep and sleep with no dreams.

Ruth just waved a hand. “It’ll probably have stopped by the time you’re done with your shower. Besides, I haven’t been out dancing in ages and we’ve all been cooped up in the place for way too long.”

I nodded, knowing once Ruth got something in her head there was little chance of changing her mind. And she was right, we had been cooped up here. Maybe that was why I’d been feeling so... off lately.

It was just a little harder to get out of bed in the morning. All the fire and steam that had brought me this far, gotten me out of Jeff’s house finally, pushed me through the mad dash across the country, and seen me through the first month here... well, I was running out of steam.

Leaving was supposed to fix everything. It was supposed to be the end of all the bad stuff.

I was supposed to be able to start over as a new person.

I went upstairs and blasted hot water for several long moments, feeling the hot needles punching through the numb cold of my toes, my shoulders, my nose.

How did people do it? How did they keep putting one foot in front of another, day after day, year after year, for an entire lifetime? I slumped against the shower wall. Some days it felt impossible.

The water had started to run lukewarm by the time I finally washed and rinsed my hair and stepped out. That was selfish of me, in case any of the guys needed to shower. But I'd just sort of blanked out in the enveloping heat. That happened sometimes lately. I'd just kind of drift out...

I shook it off and got dressed, then ran back downstairs. Ruth was right about the storm. It wasn't raining anymore. It was so strange, completely different from California. There when it rained, it rained all day, for weeks at a time sometimes. And there was rarely, if ever, thunder or lightning.

Here it seemed like the storms were determined to live up to the state motto, Don't Mess with Texas. They had to be bigger and better. Louder, flashier. Storms came in with dramatic thunder, even more dramatic lightning.

They could roll in, dump gallons of rain that sometimes caused flash flooding, then be done thirty minutes later. It was completely nuts.

Ruth and Olivia had replaced the noise of thunder with loud music in the kitchen and the TV in the living room blaring some reality TV show. It was no less jarring after the silence and solitude of the shower.

Right as I stepped into the kitchen, the cacophony got even louder as Olivia hit the blender on what looked like a margarita mix.

"I thought we were going out," I said, gesturing at the blender.

"These are the pre-bar drinks. I like to have a buzz before I get there."

I shook my head but Olivia just grinned. "Why do you think I drive over? It's so I don't get stuck being the DD."

Ruth rolled her eyes. Then she looked at me and said quickly, "Not it."

"It's fine with me. I don't mind." And I didn't. After my last experience with the weed, I wasn't in a hurry to lower my inhibitions again anytime soon.

The door to the kitchen and Buck and Jeremiah came in.

"Ooo." Ruth grinned. "Jeremiah can be the designated driver. Then Charlotte can get smashed with us."

Jeremiah grimaced. "What am I getting volunteered for?"

Ruth looked appalled. “We’re going to the bar tonight! Don’t tell me you forgot.” Then she looked over at Buck. “You’re invited too, of course, Buck.”

Buck nodded, dipping his head as he took off his hat. A small river of water poured off the top of it onto the kitchen floor as he did. “Sounds like a good time.”

“Well, I’d be your DD,” Jeremiah said, “But I don’t think we’ll all fit in one vehicle. Gonna have to take two.”

“Seriously,” I put a hand on Ruth’s arm. “I don’t mind.”

“Okay well, still, take a sip.” She held out her margarita to me and obligingly, I took a sip. “Delicious.”

Their good moods were infectious and I was feeling a little more in the mood for whatever they had planned tonight. I hadn’t been out dancing in... well, *ever*. I mean, I’d been to exactly one party in college before being swallowed up by Jeff, and no one was exactly dancing at the sloppy kegger. Jeff himself hated dancing, so there’d been no opportunity after we were married, not even at our wedding.

Olivia beamed. “Okay, ladies, time to go put on our faces.”

Jeremiah rolled his eyes. “I’ll never understand women. You all look just fine right now.”

Ruth and Olivia exchanged glances and then, at the same time, said in exasperation, “*Men*.”

I laughed as the three of us headed upstairs.

* * *

An hour and a half later, we’d arrived at Landlubbers, a bar that was... eclectic to say the least. The largest décor items on the wall were a large, old wooden kayak and oars, not to be outdone by the multiple fully-stuffed deer heads with antlers, along with license plates from all over the country that covered the walls floor to ceiling.

But there was also a large dance floor that was filled with people on a Friday night, and a music system absolutely *blasting* music.

I could barely hear Ruth when she yelled, “All right, baby. Let’s get you on the dance floor.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said, standing by the bar. “I just ordered—”

But Ruth wasn’t having it. She took me by my wrists and pulled me, her

walking backwards while she dragged me forwards onto the dance floor, a giant grin on her face.

With her curly hair blown out and wild around her face and makeup on, including loud red lipstick, she looked like a completely different person to the one I usually saw over the kitchen table.

I'd declined Olivia's heavy-handed makeup and curling iron when she'd come my way, opting for just a light mascara and colored lip balm. I'd spent too much of my life buffed and shined to a perfect sheen to ever go back.

"BITCHES!" Olivia screeched, walking towards us with both arms raised up to the sky, a beer in one hand. She'd gone to the other end of the bar to order. We'd taken a divide and conquer approach. "Are you ready to partay?"

Ruth dropped my wrists only long enough to give Olivia a big hug, as if she hadn't seen her only ten minutes before. Then again, Ruth had downed two margaritas before we'd left home, so she'd been giggling the entire ride over and had hugged me multiple times as soon as we got inside. She dragged Olivia over towards me.

I was still amazed by how easy these women were with each other. I'd only seen people like this in movies but here they were, in real life, right in front of me.

"Come on, we gotta give Charlie a good night," Ruth said, snatching Olivia's beer and dipping her head back as she chugged it.

"Hey!" Olivia said, grabbing for her bottle as soon as Ruth's head righted.

Ruth handed it back over and then hooked an arm around my neck. "She's been knee-deep in it all calving season."

"Oh honey, then you're the one who really needs this." Olivia shoved the apparently communal beer bottle towards me but I laughed and waved her off. I knew I could have a beer and still be fine to drive, but I hated the taste of it. Jeff loved the stuff and the smell of it on his breath had turned me off it forever.

She shrugged and then repeated Ruth's action, throwing her head back and chugging the beer. I just watched in awe as the liquid in the bottle disappeared inch by inch until it was gone.

"Damn, Liv," Ruth laughed when she was done and let out a surprised little burp. "That kinda week, huh."

Olivia just gave her a *look* and then nodded. "Dear *God*, if I have to listen

to *one more* rich middle-aged white lady going on and on and *on* about how the gays are ruining the country—” She raised her finger as a gun to her head and then released her thumb, pulling the trigger. She looked at Ruth. “Didn’t we have more in mind than this when we were little kids dreaming about what we wanted to be when we grew up?”

“Oh honey,” Ruth laughed from deep in her chest. “I’d drink to that, but you finished off the beer and I want to dance and forget all that bullshit anyway.”

She grabbed one of Olivia’s hands and one of my hands and then started jumping frantically to the music, mostly on beat.

I laughed, caught up in her joyous, rebellious mood in spite of myself. She might not know what she was doing with her life or what her next move was, but she was enjoying the hell out of this moment, and so could I.

Why had I been so dour lately, anyway? Ruth was right, coming out tonight *had* been a good idea. Getting cooped up at the ranch wasn’t good for anybody.

So I leaned into the rhythm with my body and *moved*. My hips hit with the beat, roll and pop, roll and pop, back and sway, with each drum hit. It was a sexy, upbeat Lizzo song. My hands went up over my head as I gave into the energy of the crowd more and more.

In truth, I imagined I probably looked like a goddamned idiot. I only knew how to stand around like a pretty statue and do that fake passing back and forth of rote, petty phrases and conversation that passed for a “party.” Often also a fundraiser or work party to network, meant to squeeze or strengthen existing power relationships. Where every conversation was a chess game between the smart players and those on the other side of the power dynamic—prey who devoured.

Mouse. Jeff had certainly loved having me around as his personal prey, to spend his anger at whenever he wasn’t getting enough respect everywhere else he felt he deserved it. And when he went too far like he did about every other month or so, the other couples in our social circle had been eager to believe his rumors that my occasional disappearances from public life were because of my “mental health condition.” That we were “managing” it the best we could, but that sometimes my anxiety crippled me and I went back to old compulsions like my eating disorder.

I’d never had an eating disorder—which was shocking actually, considering my mother. But he convinced them I’d had one since I was a

teenager. He'd even convinced my own mother. Sometimes before a party he would limit my food intake, ensuring I was starving before we went. He was a sick, twisted fuck, and it was before I knew what the rumors were.

So of course I stuffed my face once I got there. I mean, I tried to be as surreptitious as I could—only because I knew Jeff would be watching. I'd eat a cucumber sandwich here, a muffin there, a mini-quiche, and then another mini-quiche, and then another. I had no idea he'd use my behavior at the party, which yes, was a bit odd, of course it was!—to then say I had disordered eating. He'd set me up. But that's how it always was with him. He'd back you into a corner so it felt like there was no way to win.

So it wasn't like I could call any of those women up to hang out because I just wanted to *be* with them. Certainly not because we liked each other and could dance and move our bodies and make damn fools of ourselves, and nobody would care because they were doing the same thing.

A country song came on, I had no idea who the singer was, but a cheer rose up in the crowd because they obviously did.

A man came up to Olivia and pulled her into his arms. She laughed and seemed willing enough as he swept her deeper into the center of the dance floor.

"Come on," Ruth said, "two-step with me!"

"I don't know how."

Her mouth dropped open. "You're in Texas now, honey. You gotta know how to two-step."

She proceeded to attempt to teach me how to two-step. I caught on near the end of the song, and either way, we were laughing and giggling enough to have enjoyed the hell out of the dance.

Who said you had to be *good* at dancing to enjoy it? What a liberating thought.

The next song came on was a throwback, the one from the 90's that had, "Jump, jump!" in the chorus. And everyone on the dance floor actually jumped.

It went on like that, a mix of new, old, country, and contemporary dance pop. At one point Ruth disappeared to pull Jeremiah and Buck onto the floor from where they'd been sitting by the bar.

To all of our delight, they had moves. Well, moves inasmuch as tall white dudes could have moves.

Buck was better than Jeremiah, who seemed more reserved. But he was

still trying, and he was far less stiff than I would have expected.

I wasn't the only one who noticed. Several local girls were suddenly dancing much closer in our vicinity.

The next time a two-step came around, Jeremiah was swept away by one of the circling locals and Olivia grabbed Buck's hand before anyone else could.

When a friendly-looking guy asked me if we could dance, I figured why the hell not.

It felt a little bizarre to have a stranger's hand on my waist, but it wasn't invasive. He was friendly as I continued stumbling along with the steps and we both clapped when the song was over. He asked if I wanted to dance the next one and I brushed him off with a smile and thanked him for the dance. He didn't make a big deal of it.

When I went back to find the girls, I saw Olivia's hand being taken by another man as a slow song got going, but I didn't see Ruth anywhere. She'd probably moved to another part of the floor during the last dance. It was packed and hard to see much of anything beyond a few feet.

It was as good a time as any to grab a break—and some water. I was parched.

I was heading back to the bar, eyes on the ground to make sure I didn't trip over anybody's feet, when all of the sudden there was a long-legged pair of wranglers in front of me and familiar boots.

I looked up in shock at Reece. "You came."

I'd all but walked right into him. We were only standing about a foot apart, the melee of the crowd moving and swaying all around us.

"Wanna dance?" He had to all but shout it, the music was so loud.

I wanted to ask a hundred things. How come you're here? What about your brother? Why the sudden change of heart?

Instead I just nodded, wide-eyed, and took another little half-step closer to him.

The next thing I knew, he was taking my right hand in his and then pulling me into his body by his other hand on my waist. Like it was the easiest thing in the world. Like that hand had always been meant to fit exactly there.

I blinked a few times as we started swaying to the song. It was still the slow song. He hadn't pulled me flat up against his body or anything, there were still a few inches of space between us.

But it was *nothing* like the dance I'd just had with the other man only minutes before. Everywhere Reece touched me felt alive and electric, that peculiar way his touch always affected me.

I tipped my head back and glanced into his face and whoa—mistake, mistake.

His face was just right there, along with his lips. I immediately looked back down and turned my head sideways, my ear brushing against his shoulder. And tried to regulate my suddenly rapid breathing and speeding heart rate.

It was a slow song for God's sake, and I'd been jumping around for the last half hour. It was ridiculous that this was the dance that had me feeling suddenly overheated and sweaty.

But Reece's body was just so—

It was like he was overloading all my senses at once. His shoulder was firm and warm and solid under my left hand. And his right arm was snaked around my waist so we were dancing so close, bodies together in a little cocoon of intimacy in the middle of the dance floor as a country singer crooned overhead about never wanting to have missed the dance.

Emotions. I was feeling a lot of emotions at once. I could recognize that even if I couldn't sort out one emotion from another. What the hell *was* this attraction between us?

Reece smelled good. I knew that. I leaned in as we moved, more and more as one. He felt good and he smelled good and when I leaned my head against his chest, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. Natural too that I could hear his heartbeat solid in my ear.

And then his arms curved around my back instead of just a light touch at my waist. I curled into him and closed my eyes. Losing myself in him, in the song, in the security of his strong arms around me, in the magic of this moment surrounded by couples dancing just like us, humans connected and moving and being *alive*.

The fog I'd been sort of existing in faded and everything became sharp clarity. Each moment something to savor, to memorize.

His muscles were so firm under my arms. The way he guided me so solid and sure. His warmth soaked into me.

When the song came to an end, a fast pop track came on afterwards and I clung to Reece for a long moment after it was probably appropriate. I finally let go and pulled back from him, feeling my face heat.

Every time I was near him I felt this irresistible draw, but it was... it didn't change anything. Did it?

So I did the only thing I could—the thing that felt safe but also dangerous at the same time. I reached up, took hold of his shoulders and went up on tiptoe to whisper in his ear, “You wanna play pretend?”

His hand immediately came to my waist. Where he squeezed me possessively as he leaned down. “Where?” he growled in my ear.

I turned my face in towards his, intimate in the crowded bar as my face grazed the five o'clock shadow on his cheek. “The bathroom. We're strangers and you drag me in for a quickie.”

I'd barely finished speaking before he'd grabbed my hand and was pulling me towards the back of the club.

The bathrooms were down a long hallway, dark but for a single bulb. My breath hitched in anticipation as Reece walked with purpose. There were a couple women waiting outside the women's bathroom but there wasn't any line for the men's. Reece didn't stop or try to be stealthy. He pulled open the door and tugged me inside with him, shutting the door behind us and flipping the lock.

There was a single toilet and a urinal, no stalls, but I barely had a chance to take in the grungy bathroom before Reece had me pressed up against the door with his body.

“I been watchin' you all night,” he whispered low and growly. “You've been drivin' me damn near crazy with this body of yours. Seeing you in this dress...”

He skimmed his hands up my thighs, underneath said dress and my entire body quivered.

“So what are you gonna do about it?” I asked, my breath hitching. “We don't have much time before someone's banging down this door.”

He sucked in a breath, his huge chest moving up and down. God, he looked like he was barely keeping himself in control.

“I'm gonna give you what you've been begging for and have you crying out my name in a minute flat is what I'm gonna do. So grab onto something, honey.”

And with that, he grabbed my waist and spun me around so I was facing the door. I gasped at the quick motion and my hands flew up to palm the door.

Reece was as good as his word, obviously the one in control tonight. He

flipped up my skirt and then, just like that, he had a thick finger inside me. And I was wet and ready for him.

“Good girl,” his voice came rough at my ear. “You been wanting this too, huh? You been dreaming about having a big cock inside you? You want it rough and tumble, honey?”

“Yes,” I begged, my voice barely above a gasped whisper. I barely knew myself in this moment, but I wanted everything he was about to give me. I arched my back so that my ass stuck out towards him.

“That’s right, honey,” he said. “That’s so fuckin’ right. Look at this plump ass of yours.”

He gave my ass a quick smack and then he sank inside me, grabbing my hips to hold me in place as he started pumping his huge cock in and out of me.

Oh fuck, but it was dirty and so, so *hot*. I squeezed around him, and when he sank in, he hit a delicious spot. I’d never had sex like this, standing up, but also, I looked to the right and there was the mirror over the sink—

My breath caught at the sight of us. Him in his wranglers shoved down just enough to get the job done, me with the skirt of my dress up, my ass exposed as he thrust into me, over and over—

And the look on his face of absolute raw, rapturous *need*—

Then he reached around and grabbed my pussy from the front, his middle finger finding my clit— I climaxed so hard.

“My name,” he demanded. “Say my fuckin’ name.”

“Reece!” I gasped in a high-pitched whine as I bucked back against him. He fucked me harder and I pressed against the door, wanting more of everything he had to give me. “Reece, oh God, *Reece*.”

He thrust one final, rough, exquisite time and then stilled, his forehead falling against my back in between my shoulder blades.

His middle finger kept swirling against my clit and I spasmed several more times. I might have kept going but a hard knocking against the other side of the door had me jerking backwards.

“Give me a second,” Reece hollered. He kissed the back of my neck, then behind my ear, then lower, making me shiver as he slowly pulled out of me.

I fell limp against the door as he disposed of the condom in the trash can.

He came back to me and reached back up under my skirt, rearranging my underwear and then zipping his pants back up.

“You ready to go back, honey? Or you need another minute?” His voice

was so gentle, different from minutes earlier when he'd been rough and demanding, but both were just different parts of the same, sensual man.

I had the feeling that we hadn't just been playing pretend. That I'd just been with the real Reece. I'd called out his name as I'd climaxed for God's sake. All of this, every time with him felt more real than the last.

The banging at the door came again and I pulled away and nodded, not quite ready for words.

Reece took my hand. "Stay behind me," he said as he unlocked the door and then tugged me along after him as we stepped into the hallway. I kept my eyes down but didn't miss the comments and the one low whistle as we passed by.

But then we were back in the heady mix of the dance floor and, apart from the delicious soreness between my legs, it was as if the last ten minutes hadn't happened.

Except they had. And all I could think about was the feel of Reece pressing against my back, his arm wrapped around me as he brought me to pleasure while fucking me with complete abandon.

My legs felt like jelly and I was glad when Reece led us to the bar. He ordered a beer and I got some water, which I downed, and an apple cider, which I sipped since I was still the designated driver. Feeling completely intoxicated from amazing quickie bathroom sex didn't count, did it?

It was too loud to actually talk, which I was glad for. I sat, sipped my cider, and Reece stood next to me so close our thighs touched, and we watched people dance. It was probably another half hour before Ruth showed back up, Olivia in tow.

They must have been dancing on the other side of the room because she looked plenty flushed by the time she got to us. Good timing too, because the seats beside us just opened up and Olivia and Ruth fell into them, both of them giggling. Reece gave my hand a squeeze and said he was going to look for his brother.

"Oh, don't bother," Ruth said, tapping the bar for a shot. "He said he had to leave when I saw him earlier. I'm supposed to tell you he said he was taking your truck and that you can catch a ride home with us."

Reece's eyebrows went up but he nodded and ordered another beer. After the bartender handed it over, Reece came back to standing by me. Again he stood so close that our thighs brushed even as he followed along with the conversation Ruth and Olivia were having about the merits of whisky shots

verses tequila.

I shifted slightly, rubbing my leg experimentally against his. He looked down and gave me a smile that sent shivers down my spine—a smile and a look that told me he was exactly as aware of our contact as I was, and he liked it too.

Holy Jesus. I took another long swig of the cold water. And smiled back at him.

We stayed for another hour and then Ruth wasn't looking so steady on her feet. I said *I* was tired and we called it a night.

Ruth frowned but Olivia and I helped her out to the car.

"I don't feel so good," Ruth said, her facial features souring almost as soon as we hit the parking lot.

"Oh shit, she's gonna blow," Olivia said. "I *told* you you should've had tequila instead of whisky! We had margaritas at home and you don't mix liquors!"

"Don't argue with a dying woman," Ruth wailed as she stumbled to the grass at the edge of the parking lot, dropped to her knees, and vomited in the ditch.

"Oh, honey!" Olivia crooned.

Both she and I leaned over, helping to hold Ruth's hair back and rubbing her back.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Ruth said, sitting back on her haunches and taking the tissue Olivia produced from her purse to wipe her mouth.

Then she looked over at Olivia, her mascara smeared but smiling weakly in the lights from the bar and parking lot anyway. "Hey look, we got to relive the glory days after all."

Olivia rolled her eyes, then looked at me. "Help me get her up."

We both took a hand and helped Ruth back to her feet.

"The difference is that now I can hold my liquor. And you never could, not then or now."

Ruth collapsed against Olivia with an arm thrown around her. "I'm a lightweight, but you still love me."

Olivia planted a kiss on the top of Ruth's now frizzy-haired head. "Always, boo."

"Keys." I held out my hands.

Ruth fumbled in her jeans and then handed them over.

When we got back to the Jeep, Olivia and Reece helped Ruth climb up

and into the back, then Olivia climbed in after her.

Thankfully, the GPS on Reece's phone worked to get us first to Olivia's house to drop her off after much giggling and off-key singing from the backseat, and then I started back home to the ranch.

Ruth fell asleep in the back and then it was just me and Reece up front in the quiet of the back roads at night.

"I really had a good time tonight," he said.

"Me too."

I was glad I was driving and had an excuse not to take my eyes off the road to look at his face.

After dancing so closely all night, it was silly for there to be awkwardness between us now. But I couldn't deny it. And I hated it. I'd hated how awkward it was between us at the ranch lately, too.

So before I could think better of it, I blurted, "Why'd you come tonight? I thought you weren't gonna."

He shrugged. "I—" Then he sighed, eyes still ahead on the road when I took a quick glance his way. "I don't like how it's been lately." His eyes came briefly to look at me. I jerked mine back to the road as he clarified, "Between us."

"Oh." What did that mean? Did...did tonight mean we were going to start up our clandestine night meetings again? Did I want it to mean that? Even when every time we were together, it seemed to be pushing towards something more? I swallowed, not sure if I knew the answer to that question. Everything in my head was such a mess still.

I knew I'd liked being in his arms. I didn't like it when he avoided me around the ranch. That much I knew, but I wasn't sure it clarified anything.

"I know my brother's been an ass. I'll talk to him. Because I really like you, Charlie. Regardless of what's happened in the past, I really want us to be able to be... friends."

Friends.

My shoulders slumped a little in spite of myself. Did friends do the things we had tonight? Did friends feel the way I did about him when I remembered what it had been like to have him slide between my legs? Or think about him when they were supposed to be working, and when they showered, and when they—

I swallowed hard, my fingers tightening on the steering wheel. "Friends," I said tightly, my jaw flexing. "Yes, I'd like that."

And I loosened my grip on the wheel, because the truth was, I *would* like it. Reece as a friend was better than the no-Reece at all of this past week.

I looked at him, flashing what I hoped was an easy, breezy smile. “Sounds good, *friend*.”

I couldn't read the expression on his face. It was almost as if he was frowning. But then he nodded, right as I looked back at the road.

“Friends it is,” he said.

Chapter Fifteen

Things were busy on the ranch the next week with calving season hitting its peak, so even though my mind stayed on Reece, I was genuinely too worn out at the end of every day to do much about it. Or maybe that was just the excuse I told myself to put off making a decision. But no, he'd said we were friends, and friends it was. Friends didn't think about how tight each other's ass was. Friends didn't obsess about wanting to grab each other to whisper about getting together to play kinky sex games in the middle of the night.

I drove the four-wheeler back out for the mid-morning check. I couldn't believe I'd been here for almost the entire duration of calving season. We'd had 87 calves born, with eleven cows and heifers still pregnant. Some days it had just been one or two, but then it had sped up and there'd been one long, exhaustive day right in the middle of it with *nine* born in one day.

I'd been out in rain and cold and sun and mud, so much mud, spending my days more outside than in. Each night I dropped into bed too exhausted to think. I'd even eased up on the pills the past week ever since the dance, taking just the prescribed dose instead of doubling it, and I'd only woken up once drenched in sweat from a nightmare. I was counting that as a win.

And in between the work was the people. Ruth, and Reece, and Jeremiah. And well, Buck was there too, sometimes, though he tended to take his meals in the bunkhouse more often than not. He'd usually grab breakfast at the big house, though.

I thought back to this morning as I rode the four-wheeler over the familiar path out to the far pasture where there'd been a cow in labor this morning that I needed to check on.

Some morning it had been, sheesh. It had started out normal enough. Breakfast had been Ruth doing her usual morning crossword.

“What’s a four-letter word for a tall tale? Ends with N?” Ruth had asked this morning from the table where she was bent over the paper.

“Story?” Buck offered before shoving his last bite of his eggs in his mouth and reaching for his mug of coffee, downing it in one gulp.

Ruth rolled her eyes and shot me a what-am-I-gonna-do-with-this-guy? look. He’d been giving similarly useless guesses every time Ruth tossed out a clue for help.

“Maybe a *yarn*?” I offered.

Her eyes lit up. “Yes! You’re a genius.” She started scribbling in the little squares.

Jeremiah was finishing up his food too. He stood up and grabbed his hat off the hook by the door. “We should start talking about what you wanna do now that calving season’s almost over, Charlotte.”

I’d looked up, surprised to be singled out by him, and just as surprised at his words. Lately to chase away the doldrums, I’d just been burying myself in my work, taking on extra chores, doing anything I could to keep busy, busy, busy. I helped repaint the bunkhouse, inside and out. I was an extra pair of eyes driving the fence line three times a week to double-check no more of it was downed. I tried to absolutely wear my body out every day to leave no room for maudlin thoughts or dreams.

Especially since I was still trying to respect Jeremiah’s wishes and stay away from Reece for the most part. Even though memories of dancing together that night... well, I’d had to fight the impulse more than once to seek him out in the night and have a repeat of the first evening I’d shown up on his bunkhouse door.

But we’d established firm boundaries. Friends. We were just *friends* now.

It didn’t stop me from being glad that Buck slept in the bunkhouse now, too. It helped keep the temptation at bay... But it wasn’t like I couldn’t invite Reece into *my* room. I mean he did sleep there that one night... And maybe if we were suuuuuuuuper careful and exxxxtra quiet we could—

God, even the fact that I was *thinking* about it as if it was something I was actually considering just showed how I needed to keep busy and stay away from the sexy, gentle, kind, understanding—

Jesus, I was fucked up enough as it was. Adding a man to the mix was a horrible idea. Absolutely horrible.

Friends. We were just *friends*.

All these thoughts went racing through my head, the ones that had been on a circular hamster wheel for weeks, when Jeremiah made that statement this morning.

What genius response came out of my mouth in return to Jeremiah's startling suggestion that I should be thinking about leaving soon? "Oh. Right."

"I just mean, we'd only initially talked about you staying on through calving season, and then you'd said you wanted to be moving on."

I don't know why his words felt like a blow to the gut. Except, of course they did.

There was an audible noise as Ruth slapped the newspaper down on the table. "I don't see how that has anything to do with anything. Situations change. People change. She just didn't know us yet. But of course she wants to stay on and keep working here. Don't you?"

I looked to Reece, wanting to hear his opinion, but his gaze was fixed to the floor.

And it struck me—shit, maybe I *was* wearing out my welcome.

They probably did want some burly man as their permanent ranch hand. Not a woman who was new to the life and had to be taught every little thing. They had the resources to hire a seasoned hand. It had been charity to take me in in the first place, and only at Ruth's insistence.

Then I frowned, for the first time pausing and being like...*wait*. Were those my real thoughts? Or just an echo of the way Jeff would always tell me what a burden I was? Or how my mother would talk to me, calling me useless even though I did most of the housework in addition to keeping up my grades at school?

I frowned, considering the possibility, right as Reece finally spoke up.

"Jer, what the hell?" Reece asked, obviously aggravated. "Of course she can stay. She's a fast learner and this is a good, safe environment for her."

Jeremiah glared at his brother. "What matters is what she wants, not what you want." He directed his attention back to me. "Forgive my brother. It's up to you. You can stay and train as a ranch hand and get some first hand experience. Or I can pay you out here in a week or so, and I'm sure Ruth would help you get set up in Austin if that's still where you're wanting to go. Think on it and let me know."

And with those ominous words he'd just stepped out the door like he

hadn't just turned my little world on its head.

"Well, obviously you can't leave," Ruth said as soon as the door closed behind Jeremiah. She scoffed as if it was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard. Then she looked at my face closer. I don't know what she saw there, but she jumped up from the table, ran over and threw her arms around my neck. "Oh God, are you going to leave us?"

Over her shoulder, I saw Reece watching me, his forkful of eggs halfway to his mouth, like he was waiting for my answer.

"I- I don't know," I answered honestly.

And that was how I'd left it. I'd gone out to feed Bessie and Nine and looked down at their little faces and eagerly suckling maws and the thought of leaving and not getting to see them grow up...

Which was silly. They'd grow up and just become cattle. Eventually Nine would be sold off as beef. Bessie would be used to breed little calves of her own soon enough.

My sentimentality was silly. Useless.

This had always just been a waystation. A place to do some healing. To reconnect with myself. I'd even called it cocooning. The whole point of a cocoon was so that you could eventually emerge from it, and fly away.

I neared the herd where I'd seen the heifer laboring earlier this morning, before I'd gotten back in and realized the four-wheeler was out of gas, which meant I'd had to take an unplanned trip into town for more—it really had been one of *those* kinds of mornings.

I climbed off the four-wheeler, the back of my hair brushing my neck in a way that tickled in the breeze and I looked out at the land. The huge sky overhead was dotted with puffy white clouds, the now familiar hills of the land sloping into one another, all of it like something out of a movie.

I couldn't imagine not seeing this sight every day.

Just more sentimentality. Of course I felt close to this land, this place. It was the first place I'd felt good feelings and experienced even the slightest bit of happiness after ten years in hell. The first place I'd felt any touches of human kindness. Where I'd learned to reconnect with my body, to trust that I could do difficult things and have *other* people trust me instead of criticize and tear me down all the time.

It had only been six weeks, but it felt like a year, or longer even. After being stagnant and stuck so long, terrified I'd never be free... everything from the last six weeks... I didn't think any of that could ever be *possible* for

a woman like me.

And yet here I was. Mud-spattered, wild-haired. No makeup, no masks. No one had kept tabs on me all day and I'd roamed.

Free.

Some days it even felt possible that this could be my life now. That maybe I could keep forging ahead with these new connections I was making, both with these people and this land and with trying to build a new life for myself.

And other days... well, there were mornings it was hard to get out of bed. I couldn't say there wasn't a part of me that thought about how if I left, I could retreat back into myself. Maybe I wasn't ready for all this. Maybe I'd take a break from making close friends like Ruth, someone whose very nature demanded vulnerability and realness.

If I left, I could re-cocoon. Because maybe, in reality... I was terrified of all it meant to fly. Maybe crawling was a perfectly fine mode of travel for people like me...

I frowned, all of it spinning around and around in my head, only confusing me more. I yanked the keys out of the four-wheeler. My eyes searched out the heifer. Her water bag had been expelled at last check two hours ago.

I hopped off the ATV, my boots squelching in the mud. I grabbed the tagging gun and walked closer, expecting to find a baby calf on the ground by the heifer whenever I located her. This would be calf #88. I wouldn't say I was a pro at tagging the little buggers, but I was far more comfortable with the entire process.

But when I got closer, I found the big, pregnant heifer on the ground, small calf hooves sticking out the back end of her.

My stomach sank. Oh no, she'd been in labor too long. The calf should have been born by now.

I blinked, feeling out of my depth all of a sudden, where moments before I'd been all confidence.

I'd been so sure the calf would be born already... because, well, all the births had been going so well lately. But that was stupid. I never should have gotten complacent. I should have been by an hour earlier, but I'd had to go to town for gas.

I had chains on the ATV, but remembering the first night I'd arrived, I didn't dare try to pull the calf myself.

I turned around and ran back to the ATV.

This pasture wasn't too far out, the house was only a ten-minute ride in, but I felt frantic thinking of the mother and calf I'd left behind.

The ride in seemed to take an hour, not ten minutes, and I was terrified of getting stuck in the mud again. Yesterday, Jeremiah'd had to tow me out of an especially slushy pit I'd gotten the four-wheeler stuck in. But finally, finally I made it.

Jeremiah was working on the stables today so I drove the four-wheeler that direction, but on the way there, I saw Reece stepping out of the barn.

"Reece!" I stopped the ATV and jumped off. "One of the heifers is having trouble. I need your help to come and pull the calf."

He immediately stood up straighter. "Do you have chains?"

I nodded, twisting my hands together frantically. "But not the big calf-puller."

He nodded and turned, jogging back into the barn and returning moments later with the big T pole. Without a word we both hurried back to the ATV. He slid the pole through some straps on the back and then climbed on behind me.

I immediately took off, my stomach in knots thinking about the calf stuck in its mother's birth canal. Those little *hooves*.

The ten-minute ride back out to where I'd left them felt so much longer than the ride in, but finally, *finally* we were there. I all but leapt off the ATV, yanking the chains out of the bag before Reece had even climbed off.

I showed him where the heifer was, praying by some miracle she would have delivered the calf by the time we'd returned.

But no, she was exactly as I'd left her, on the ground, occasionally letting out distressed noises and kicking at her stomach with her own hooves.

I looked to Reece and his brows were drawn in concern.

"I'm so sorry. I should have realized we were low on gas earlier. If only I'd looked closer at the gauge last night, I could have gone to town then and I would have been by earlier and we might have caught it when there was still time to—"

"Don't do that." His eyes came to me for a quick second before he took the chains from me and he knelt down behind the heifer. "Don't blame yourself. We were bound to run into a problematic birth sooner or later."

He deftly hooked the chains around the calf's ankles, then the hook to the chains, and he started pulling.

And pulling.

And pulling.

Unlike the first calf I'd watched him pull, this one didn't seem to be budging an inch. Reece shook his head. "It's a big one. Probably too big for the canal. It can happen when we get late in the season like this, especially if it's a bull. Can you get the big calf-puller?"

I nodded and scurried back to the ATV to get the puller with the pole and crank.

Okay, I tried to calm myself. We could still do this. I'd seen it happen before. We were still here in time. There was still time.

It was more awkward with the cow on the ground, but she didn't look like she was moving or getting on her feet any time soon, so we braced the T of the puller against her hind-quarters as best we could and attached the chain.

And then Reece started turning the crank.

It didn't go as smoothly as it had the first time. The puller kept slipping and eventually I had to hold it in place while Reece cranked.

Slowly, slowly, the calf started slipping free of its mother.

"You're getting it!" I cried, laughing.

Except that when the calf finally was pulled all the way out of the heifer and collapsed on the ground...

It was lifeless.

I dropped the pole of the puller and stepped back, stunned.

Reece reached for the calf and did what he'd done the first night. He worked to try to open up its air passages and such, and I had a brief spurt of hope.

But only moments later he pulled back, laying the calf gently back to the ground, where it lay unmoving.

I shook my head. No.

He looked up at me. "It happens this way sometimes."

I shook my head more vigorously.

He wiped his hands on the grass and then shifted to get to his feet.

I could only stare at the calf. Dead. Perfectly formed, but absolutely lifeless.

Reece looked confused and I turned away.

I walked a few feet and gulped air, trying to get ahold of myself. *It's a cow. Just a cow. Get a goddamned grip!* But my entire body was shaking, and then I was bent over, on my knees, hands in the mud, throwing up.

“Charlie!” Reece called and he came close but I held out a hand to keep him back. No, no, I didn’t want him close.

The past and present were crushing in against each other again. Collapsing together on me.

I needed to get away from here. From the tragic death and senseless loss. From the mud and the wind and the open sky.

I stood up shakily. Reece tried to offer me an arm but I flinched away from him.

“Can you take me back in?” I asked weakly. “I’m not feeling so well.”

He nodded, eyebrows furrowed in concern I saw in the quick glance I cast his way before dropping my eyes back to the ground. I gripped my arms around my stomach as we walked back to the four-wheeler. Anything to turn my back on the sight behind me.

“You drive,” I said. I could hear how dull my voice was, but I didn’t care. Couldn’t care. I wanted to climb in bed and not get out. I squeezed my eyes shut when I thought about how I had a job and responsibilities.

All of a sudden, I felt so *done* with it all. Squeezed dry. Used up like a sponge that had scrubbed too many pots and pans. My edges were worn and nubby, and could I just sleep? Could I just pull a Rip Van Winkle and sleep for a hundred years? Please, dear God, please?

Reece didn’t say another word, but his body in front of mine on the four-wheeler seemed tense as he drove us back into the ranch house.

I climbed off and my body felt like it weighed a thousand pounds as I dragged myself up the porch stairs, and then all the way up to the second-story bathroom.

Reece asked me if I was okay before I disappeared into the house and I offered him a lackluster, “I’m sure I just need to sleep it off. I hope it’s okay with Jeremiah if I take the rest of the day off.”

“Of course!” Reece was quick to assure. “I’ll let him know you aren’t feeling well.”

I’d nodded and continued my arduous climb up the stairs.

I peeled off my mud-soaked clothes and climbed in the shower. Usually I enjoyed my showers at the end of the day, especially lately since it had been raining so much, and I was usually dealing with some level of mud and muck.

But today I just felt... numb.

I went through the motions of washing myself mechanically, and then I

climbed into bed and I slept.

* * *

Except that all I'd hoped to escape in my waking life followed me into my dreams. And ten times worse, because it meant reliving it as if I was back there.

I was on the floor.

The smell of burnt *crème anglaise*. The fucking *crème anglaise*. If only I hadn't—

The slap across my face hadn't been that bad. But when he got good and angry, it usually didn't stop with a slap. I'd cradled my arms across my stomach.

I didn't care about the pain radiating across my cheek, my split lip. I didn't care. He could break my face and mangle me, just not—

I panicked and did the exact wrong thing.

Like always. If only I'd played it different. Kept the secret instead of blurting it out. Done anything other than what I did. I knew what Jeff was like. He couldn't even stand us having a dog because it drew attention away from him.

He'd taken the dog to the shelter in the middle of the night. He knew how much I loved the dog. He accused me of loving it more than him.

So why the hell did I think it would be different when, lying there on the kitchen floor, burnt *crème anglaise* in the air, rage in his eyes, I thought it would make things better to hold up a hand and beg, "Wait, please. I'm pregnant! Jeff, please. We're going to have a baby."

I'd smiled through my tears. "A little baby who will look just like you. A son to carry on your name!" I didn't know it was a boy, it wasn't like I'd been able to go to the doctor about it, but I figured he'd tolerate a son much better than a daughter.

Jeff hated children. He kept me on strict birth control.

"You bitch," he said, his voice ice. "Did you skip your pills to try to trap me with a kid?"

"What?" I shook my head vigorously. "It was after you— After I had to go see the doctor last year." When Jeff had thrown me down the stairs of the back deck so hard I'd needed stitches on multiple lacerations. He'd been a

hair trigger all last year because it was right after he'd hauled me back from Oregon. I'd just been healing up from the initial broken arm and collarbone when he threw me down the stairs and back to the hospital I went.

"They put me on antibiotics," I tried to explain, "and it must have interfered with the birth control. I didn't know they could do that but I looked it up on the internet—"

"You looked it up on the internet," he said, voice mocking. He reached down and yanked me to my feet by my forearm, his hand a crushing, bruising grip. I yelped but scrambled up to release the pressure.

"I know we didn't expect it," I rushed out, still trying to salvage the situation, "but it's a miracle really, if you think about it—"

"How long have you fucking known and been keeping this a secret from me?" he asked, his voice low and cold.

My mouth went dry and I opened my mouth but no noise came out.

He shook me by his crushing grip on my arm. "HOW LONG?" he bellowed.

"Four months," I cried. Five, it was really five, but four sounded better. "I suspected when I didn't get my period two months in a row. But I didn't know for sure—"

He hit me then, another hard blow across the face.

And I was *glad*. I was glad he'd hit my face and not my stomach. I thought maybe he'd gotten it out of his system. Maybe he'd need to hit me a few more times, but if I could just protect my stomach—

Just that week I'd felt the baby move. A swimmy sensation in the pit of my belly. I had to protect them. I had to—

I woke screaming, my hands scratching at my stomach.

Empty.

Devoid of life.

The image of the dead calf flashed through my head.

I yanked my pillow up, barely getting it to my mouth before letting out a wailing *scream*.

My hand scrambled outwards, reaching for the bottle of pills. Ugh, I was sticky with sweat, my hair matted to my forehead. It was dark out and I had no idea what time it was. I'd slept all day and if I could, I'd sleep all night and then another one and another. I didn't give a damn. I just needed it to stop. All of it, just stop. Stop, *stop*. Dear God, make it stop!

I clicked on the nightstand light to find the pill bottle, then popped two of

the sleeping pills into my mouth. I chewed them into a chalky paste and swallowed them down with the tiny bit of water still left in the cup on my nightstand. And then, before I could think better of it, I shook another little blue pill into my hand and tossed it into my mouth too.

There was no water left, though.

I chewed up the pill and tried to swallow anyway, but grimaced. It left a terrible taste in my mouth, sticking to my tongue. It wasn't going to do me any good unless it hit my blood stream. I needed more water.

Groaning, I pulled my robe around me and grabbed my cup. Going to the bathroom on this floor meant walking past Ruth's bedroom though, and the wood was creaky. Safer to head downstairs.

Ruth had stuck her head in my room several times today. I'd pretended to be sleeping even though the sound of the door had woken me at least two of the times, and who knew if she'd checked in more than that.

So I snuck down the stairs. My foot creaked on one step near the bottom and I froze, eyes squeezing shut. I listened, but didn't hear any movement from behind me, breathed out, and continued down to the kitchen.

I filled up the cup and drank a gulp, swishing the water around in my mouth to get rid of the awful pill taste before swallowing.

I was about to turn around when I paused, glancing at the top shelf of the cabinet across from the fridge. The kitchen had been remodeled not long ago, with pretty glass door cabinets. So I could see several bottles of Ruth's favorite cabernet sauvignon winking at me from the top shelf. Ruth wasn't one to bother with the fancy stuff, so it was a generic brand. I'd reimburse her next time I went to town.

I pulled down a bottle and winced at the noise the drawer made when I opened it to find a corkscrew. I finally found it and was just aiming to stab the pointy end into the cork when the outside door off to the porch suddenly opened.

I screeched and jumped backwards, brandishing the corkscrew outwards.

Only to see Reece standing in dim outline in the inside of the door. He flipped the kitchen light on and I jumped again.

"What are doing down here in the dark?" He looked at the clock on the wall. "At two in the morning?" He gestured at the wine. "Popping a bottle of wine?"

"I, uh." I waved my hands. "I just—" I shrugged and my shoulders sagged. "—needed a drink."

Then I crossed my arms over my chest and glared back at him. I was embarrassed at being caught and angry he was stopping me from just going back upstairs. “What are *you* always doing up in the middle of the night anyway. Don’t you ever *sleep*?”

He just shrugged and averted eye contact to the fridge. Hmm. Who was being cagey now?

“Then don’t make me drink alone?” I said, tilting the wine glass towards him. I wasn’t sure if it was generosity on my part or because now that I really thought about it, spending time with him sounded a million times better than climbing back into that bed.

He narrowed his brows at me but still nodded. I grabbed two wine glasses, finally popped the cork, and poured. I filled mine a tad more generously than his, but set the wine glass in between both of us, figuring he could pour more for himself if he wanted more. I wasn’t going to pretend I wanted an appropriate amount simply for propriety’s sake.

Reece’s eyebrows went up when I tilted my glass back and chugged it like Ruth had the beer at the bar.

“Is that something I should be worried about?” he said, gesturing with his glass at mine.

I looked at him surprised. “Of course not. I mean, yes, it’s likely concerning, but not something *you* should be worried about.”

He let out a startled laugh. “I’m not sure that distinction matters.”

I shrugged, then reached for the bottle I’d set between us to refill my glass. Reece put a hand on the long neck to stop me. “Charlie. What’s going on? Ruth said you were in bed all day. You didn’t seem sick at all before— Before what happened with the heifer. What’s wrong?”

I glared at him. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m *fine*.” I jerked the wine bottle out of his hand and, just to spite him, upended it and chugged from the mouth of the bottle. The wine was a bit bitter, but sweet enough, and I downed what was left in the bottle fairly quickly.

Reece had crossed his arms over his chest. “You done?”

I leaned my hands back on the counter behind me and let my head dip backwards, the world around me growing a little fuzzy. “Yesssssss.”

“Okay, Captain. You say you’re fine, you’re fine. It’s just, I got a history of saying I’m fine when that’s the last thing I was. Jer and I, we just bottle shit up. We never talk about it or deal with it.”

He let out a heavy rush of breath, then looked at me. “You wanna take a

walk or sit outside or something? I could use a cigarette.”

When I raised an eyebrow at him, he hurriedly added, “Not a blunt. I got rid of my stash after Jer busted my ass last time.”

I shook my head. “Too bad. That was—” I felt my cheeks grow warm. Easy to blame on the wine, but the memories of being held in his arms that night were too fresh to deny. “—fun,” I finished off in a choked voice.

He grinned at me before ducking his head. “Yeah, well. Jer doesn’t have much sense of fun these days.”

We walked to the door and he grabbed my coat, holding it out for me. I was a little sluggish on my feet, but not bad. Now I wish I hadn’t taken so many of the sleeping pills. Three wasn’t enough to be concerned about—Jeff’d had me on so many damn tranquilizers, sleeping pills, you name it, I’d been on it. But in the bright lights of the kitchen, even through my foggy brain I knew it was... not good behavior.

Reece and I stepped out onto the porch. It was chilly, but not like in San Francisco at night. It had been in the 80’s lately during the day even though it was only March, and was likely in the 60’s now. I hardly needed the coat, but I still clutched it around myself nonetheless. I felt fragile, and even though I hated feeling that way... well, it was what it was.

I stumbled as soon as we stepped foot on the porch and Reece steadied me. I looked up into his eyes. “Do you want to play pre—” I started, my voice a little slurred.

He shook his head. “Charlie, you’re drunk. Look, I’m not judging, but how about we just sit out here? Cause frankly, I don’t think you could make it much past the porch steps.”

I yanked away from him but swayed on my feet, not giving much of an argument to my case when he had to grab me to help hold me steady.

“Fine,” I said, because all right, my feet did feel clumsy. I collapsed in the chair by the little table on the porch and pulled my legs up to my chest, circling them with my arms as I looked out at the night sky.

He lit the citronella candle in the center of the table with a lighter, then pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. “You mind?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“I’m trying to quit,” he said. “It’s an old habit, and a bad one. But sometimes, when I get stressed out...” He shrugged, his face boyish with a little bit of embarrassment that disappeared the second he took a draw on the cigarette.

I certainly wasn't one to look down on vices after my demonstration with the wine bottle inside.

"Look, Orion," I said, pointing up at the sky beyond the porch.

"Always my favorite," Reece said. "It was the only one you could sometimes see in the city. I grew up in the Bay Area, so you could rarely see the stars. That was the only constellation that was bright enough to see."

"No way." I sat up straighter, surprised. "You grew up in the Bay?"

"Lived there my whole life except for the last seven years when we moved east, why?"

I bit my lip, then decided there was no real harm in sharing. "That's where I'm from too."

His eyebrows went up. "Oh, yeah?"

I went quiet, afraid he'd start asking questions now that I'd shared the small tidbit. But he didn't. He just puffed on the cigarette, smoke curling into the air, looking out at the night sky.

Since he wasn't asking questions, I decided to venture one. "Why can't you sleep?" Maybe it wasn't fair to ask since I certainly didn't want him putting the same question to me in reverse, but I was curious. Forever curious about the enigma of a man sitting in front of me.

He shrugged, looking my way and finally stubbing out the cigarette on the bottom of his boot, half-smoked.

"Told you Jer and I have that bad habit of bottling shit up instead of talking about it, right? Well, at night... it all kind of leaks out of the bottle. I try to sleep but my mind just replays shit, over and over and—" He shrugged again. "It makes sleeping hard."

He said it all so casually, and I felt my chest constrict in pain for whatever kept him awake at night. He'd once mentioned he and his brother had been homeless. Living in the Bay Area, I'd seen enough of the homeless kids to know that had to be a terribly tough life.

"Well, maybe..." I ventured slowly. "Maybe you should try another way. If, you know, bottling it up and shoving it down hasn't worked in all this time."

He looked over at me, blinking a few times like he was startled by my words. "Well, okay." He paused for a long moment, then went on. "Like there was this one time I'd gotten really sick. January in San Francisco sucks, especially when you're on the streets."

Oh. Shit, I hadn't meant for him to unbottle it and tell it to *me*, like, right

now. I'd meant more that he should try talking to his brother about it. Or a therapist. But I nodded encouragingly anyway. I could be a good listener.

"You know how it is. It doesn't snow, but the winters still get so brutal. The rain goes on for months and months some years, it just won't stop. And always with that bone-chilling cold."

I shivered just thinking about it. He was right. Winters in San Francisco could get cold in a way that wore down beneath the skin and stuck there. I'd liked to take long baths in winter, one of my few reprieves.

But Reece and his brother hadn't even had a roof over their heads, much less hot water. Jesus, I couldn't even imagine.

Reece looked outwards, eyes still to the night sky as he went on. "It was weeks, then months, of being so cold, and never getting all the way dry. I got real, real sick, and Jer and I were in line for a homeless shelter. We'd stand in line for those places all day long but they were always full up. So one day we're standing in line even though it's pouring rain. And when we get to the front door, they only have *one* spot left.

I watched Reece's brow contract in pain as he retold the events. "I was shaking so bad with fever I barely knew what was going on. I was vaguely aware of Jeremiah arguing with the lady that we could share a cot, since we were obviously brothers."

He gave a little shake of his head. "But the lady didn't care and was sick of arguing, and about to give the spot to the man in line behind us when Jeremiah shoved me forwards. Then he took off, yelling that he'd find me in a few days. It was getting dark and he just disappeared and I was getting shuffled inside where it was nice and warm."

Reece shut his eyes, his jaw flexing with the pain the memory obviously still caused him.

"I shoulda gone after him. We had a code. Never separate. No matter what." He shook his head again. "I shoulda gone after him."

"But you were sick," I said, frowning. "You just said you had a fever and barely knew what was going on."

Reece shrugged. "I was young and strong. I would have been fine anyway, most likely."

I frowned harder. "If it had been him who was sick, what would you have done? Would you have wanted him to come after you?"

"Of course not," he said quickly, a deep furrow appearing between his brows as he looked my way.

I raised an eyebrow, and he sank back, eyes going to the sky again. “I guess the what ifs don’t really matter. It’s not like I can go back and change it.”

“What... happened? Obviously, Jeremiah turned out okay.”

But by the look on Reece’s face, he seemed like he wasn’t so sure even though he shrugged and gave a half-nod.

“They got me showered and deloused and then gave me a warm cot with blankets. God, those warm, clean blankets. It felt like heaven after how we’d been living. I slept for two days straight, and on the third day, woke up feeling human again. I ate as much as I could, and stuffed the rest in my pockets for Jer. Then I went out looking for him.”

I held my breath.

“And I couldn’t find him.”

I wanted to reach out to touch him, but I didn’t dare. If he’d kept this inside for this long, maybe he just finally needed to let it out.

“The rain had finally let up, but I couldn’t find him anywhere. I was so scared he was—” Reece swallowed. “I was sure he was dead. I even checked with hospitals and obituaries and stuff. Every day I hung around the homeless shelter since that was the last place I’d seen him, but I also checked all the other places we’d usually go. He wasn’t anywhere and no one had seen him. I couldn’t think of *any* reason he wouldn’t come for me. We always had each other’s back. After awhile I thought, maybe... Maybe he was just finally tired of looking out for me and he’d split just like our mom.”

“God. Reece.”

I reached for him then, unable not to. I leaned across the table and took his hand. He let me but didn’t really grasp back. His hand was limp in mine.

“He didn’t show up for another three weeks. And when he finally did, he wouldn’t say one goddamn word about where he’d been.”

His brow furrowed, still pained. “But he was different after that. He was still the brother I’d always known. He tried, anyway. He couldn’t fool me, though. There was this... this seriousness to him. A shadow that separated him from me after that. He had less patience for what he called my *childishness*. As if we weren’t both eighteen years old.

“And he had money for the ticket east. He said it was time to stop fucking around. That if we stayed on the streets, we’d end up like all the other street kids, or dead.

“The other street kids... well, a lot of them... They did whatever they

could to earn money. They sold drugs. They sold... whatever they could. And it was my fucking fault. I should never have let him go without me, I shouldn't have—”

“Reece, no, you had no idea—”

He looked over at me, alarmed, and pulled his hand away from mine. “Shit, I shouldn't have told you this. Jer would kill me if he knew I ever told —”

“I'll never say a word. I swear. I *swear*. And I'm so sorry both of you went through that.” I shook my head. “And I can't believe you were in San Francisco too,” I said. “We might have crossed paths and not even known it.”

That had him looking my way. “Charlie, what happened to you there? What made you run?”

My first instinct was to shut him down like I did everyone when they started poking too close. But as I sat there in that chair, my mind a little cottony from the pills and the wine, I just wanted to laugh at myself. What good was keeping this precious secret to myself doing?

Bottling his secrets up kept Reece awake at night and mine were slowly eating me up from the inside out.

So I just blurted it out. “I was going to Stanford. I'd grown up in San Jose. My parents weren't really rich or poor. They were kind of the last of the middle class but my mom was never happy with that. God, nothing could make her happy, and certainly not me. Nothing I did was ever good enough.” Then I realized complaining about my mom to a man whose mother had abandoned him when he was just a kid was a dick move. At least I'd *had* a mom.

I waved a hand, embarrassed. “Anyway, so I got to Stanford on scholarship, hoping for better things. That was where...” I swallowed and then pushed through. “That was where I met m-my husband.”

Reece straightened in his seat, his shoulders turning more towards me. I definitely had all of his attention now, though I had a feeling I always had.

I swallowed, my mouth suddenly tasting sour and dry. I ignored it and continued anyway. This story wouldn't get any easier to tell even if I was well-hydrated. He'd shared and maybe I could too. I wasn't likely to get therapy anytime soon and he was the only ear I could see myself trusting anyway.

I took a deep breath and then jumped in. “I was a freshman and he was everything out of the romance novels I'd read all my life. Confident, smart,

handsome. Everybody loved him. When he started paying attention to *me*, little ol' me, I was flabbergasted. And at the beginning, it was something out of a movie. Gifts, constant messages, I felt so adored."

I closed my eyes. "He loved how sweet and innocent I was, he said. All the other college girls were just there to party and sleep around, but I was a serious girl."

I huffed out a bitter laugh. "I thought that meant he really *saw* me. I thought that meant he understood how hard I worked to keep my scholarship, how I didn't take school for granted, that I'd worked hard for everything I'd earned."

I shook my head, so angry for buying up everything he was selling. "They say cults go after people like me too. Vulnerable, love-starved, searching for meaning. Smart, but *stupid* in the ways that count. We're like narcissist catnip. They come in and fill up every hole that's been empty for so long. But it's all a lie. It's just to draw us in. And then, after we're hooked and caught in their web, everything changes."

Reece's hand reached out and his fingers closed back around mine, squeezing. "It's him you're running from, isn't it? He's why you were hitchhiking with nothing but the clothes on your back?"

I nodded, tears squeezing out of my eyes and rolling down my cheek. I swiped them away angrily with the hand Reece wasn't holding.

I could tell in Reece's eyes that the reverse of earlier was happening now. His features knotted in pain. For me.

He leaned down and pressed the gentlest kiss to our hands clasped between us. When his eyes came back to mine, I could still see the pain in them. "I'm so sorry, Charlie." And then, quieter. "Did he hurt you? Hit you?"

I didn't ask how he knew. I just nodded, more tears flooding out. Some into my mouth, salt on my lips. Stupid, useless tears.

His eyes shut, and his grip on my hand became even firmer. He bowed his head into our linked hands. "I'm so sorry that happened to you, Charlie."

"M-my given name is Penelope," I whispered. "But I do feel like Charlie, sometimes anyway. I'm trying to become this new person. But I'm still haunted by my old life. It's the ghost I can't rid of. Right when I think I've got a handle on living again, when I think I could actually make a life..."

I shook my head. "Her memories hit and take me back and then it's like I can barely even *breathe* or stand to be in this skin another second longer."

I yanked my hand back from his and dragged my hands down my face.

This was a bad idea. I didn't feel better talking about this. Saying it all out loud made me feel raw and ragged and—

“Because you aren't two different people, Charlie. She *is* you. You can't pretend you didn't go through what you went through and just ignore it.”

I dropped my hands and looked at him in shock. “Why not? Isn't that what you just said you try to do?”

“Exactly.” He waved a hand. “And look how well it's working out for me. I sleep maybe four hours a night, if I'm lucky!”

I slumped back in my chair, shaking my head. “You don't understand.”

“What? What don't I understand? Talk to me, Charlie. From everything you're saying, you got caught by a manipulative abuser who kept you trapped for...how long? How long were you with him?”

“Almost ten years,” I said, my voice thick with shame.

“Charlotte. Oh my God.” He sounded stunned.

I stood up and turned away from him, unable to look at his face. “See? Not so heroic now. A stronger woman would have found a way to get out so much earlier.”

“What? Jesus, no. The fact that you got out at all, especially after so long, is a fucking miracle. It tells me you're an amazingly resilient woman and frankly I'm shocked you've been keeping it together as well as you have. Ten *years*. Jesus Christ.”

I turned back around, feeling irrationally angry at him and his readiness to overlook my sins. “You don't understand!” I said furiously. “I burned the crème. I got my baby killed!”

He sat, mouth dropped open, a horrible moment of life stretching out between us.

And then he said, “I'm gonna need a little more than that.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, the words coming out in a babble. “I *knew*. I knew what would happen if I stayed. So why the *hell* didn't I leave? I should've left! I don't care that he was having me followed. If it wasn't the stupid fucking crème anglaise it would have been something else. I could have made it to a women's shelter maybe. I could have done anything else but what I did. Staying in that house a second after I found out was a death sentence for my baby. He couldn't even stand me loving the *dog*. Why did I think a baby—”

His arms suddenly closed around me. He hugged me so tight. So tight I could barely breath and I didn't want to. My grief was choking me.

“It’s not your fault. God, I know that’s cliché—” His arms squeezed even tighter. “I don’t know if you’ll ever believe me. But it’s only *his* fault, whatever happened to your baby.”

“He never got a chance to be born. He never even had a *chance*—”

Reece pulled back, hands still gripping my shoulders as he looked into my eyes. “You are *not* responsible for whatever that evil bastard did.”

He just didn’t understand. “But I could have—”

“You did the best you could with what you knew at the time. Plus from what you just said, you’d *tried* to get away before.”

I immediately shook my head. “But if I’d only—”

“Only what? Had the hindsight of 20/20 somehow magically when there was no way you could have? You did the best you could with the information you had at the time. Let go of everything else.”

I scoffed, tears burning. “Tell that to yourself. You just told me you can’t forgive yourself for not running after your brother even though you were about to drop from fever and couldn’t have had any clue what was going to happen to him.”

He opened his mouth, and then closed it, and then opened it before closing it one last time. Then he pulled me back into an embrace, looser this time, but no less warm.

His chin notched on the top of my head. His chest rumbled when he spoke. “Look at the pair of us. We both just need to take our own advice. How come we can see the answer so clearly for the other person, but not for ourselves? When I look at your situation, I’m just like, duh, it’s nuts not to see how obviously it’s not your fault and you need to let go any guilt or shame. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

I smiled a little wanly, a little off-kilter, both from the wine and because what he was saying...seemed reasonable. “Yeah. Shit. I must be drunk because you’re making sense.”

He pulled away again, a grin on his face. “I’ll remind you that you said that tomorrow, in case you forget. Or try to pretend you didn’t just say I’m the king of the world who’s always right.”

I choked out a laugh, swiping at tears. “That is so not what I said.”

“Uh, pretty sure that’s what I heard.”

“You fit through the door with that big head?”

He winked at me. “I got my ways, Captain.” Then he looked down at his phone he’d pulled out of his pocket. “Shit, I better be getting you back to bed.”

It's almost three in the morning."

I nodded. I did feel exhausted. The wine, the pills, plus the emotional unloading we'd just done.

I hesitated, though, still afraid of the nightmares that might await me.

"I suppose it's too much to ask for you to stay the night with me?"

His eyes immediately went round.

"Just like in the barn. Not...doing anything. I know we're just friends now." Then I felt my face flame. I waved a hand. "Forget it. It's stupid. Good night. *Friend.*" I gave an awkward wave and tried to turn away but his hand caught mine, his fingers interlacing and locking.

"I'd like that," he said quietly, the levity from moments ago dissolved.

We were quiet, not saying another word as we went back inside, took off our coats, and he trailed me upstairs.

I felt embarrassed for the request I'd made as soon as we both stepped inside my room. But Reece had this way about him that made everything natural, so that within minutes, I wasn't feeling awkward anymore.

I climbed underneath the covers and he kicked off his boots, then laid on top of them beside me. Still, he curled his strong arm around me and spooned me from behind, knees and thighs notching so naturally behind me.

I immediately felt warm, cozy, and safe. I started drowsing almost instantly.

"Charlotte?" Reece whispered.

"Mmm?"

"I'm so glad the wind blew you this direction and you ended up on this ranch that night."

I smiled and snuggled back against his warm, solid body. "Me too," I sighed. "Me too."

Chapter Sixteen

I managed to pull myself out of bed the next day by noon. I was startled when I looked at the clock and saw it was so late. Reece wasn't there, long gone, I imagined. No doubt he'd taken off for morning chores and, if he was smart, been out of my room long before his brother found him in here to avoid a repeat of the stable incident. I hadn't even thought of it in my wine-addled state last night, but he likely had.

I was embarrassed to be so late getting downstairs, but figured that as far as Ruth and Jeremiah knew, I'd been actually sick yesterday. And well, I had genuinely needed a mental health day, even if I hadn't used the healthiest coping mechanisms.

I held a hand to my head, still feeling the effects. I went straight for the coffeemaker. The house was so... quiet. It was strange. Usually when I came down, the place was bustling with noise.

One of the things I loved about Ruth was that she was *not* a quiet person. After a decade of enforced quiet, I loved that she kept the house filled with noise. She always had some story or town gossip to tell, or she was loudly seeking help with her crosswords, or she had music on, or the TV, or she was picking a fight with Jeremiah. I admired her ability to take up *space* in her own world.

I switched on the radio as I poured myself a cup of black coffee and drank down half of it, then refilled my cup. Out the window, I could see the sky was getting dark, those rolling thunderclouds that were still so strange to a California girl like me. It hadn't started raining yet, but occasionally I heard thunder in the distance.

Footsteps on the stairs behind me surprised me. I turned to see Ruth

herself tromping down them. Instead of her usual jeans, t-shirt, and ponytail, she wore a skirt, heels, and had her hair blown out.

“I didn’t even know you were home. Where you headed off to?” I asked as I sipped the lukewarm coffee. “Hot date?”

“Well hey, sleepyhead. You’re looking good. You feeling better today?”

I nodded, looking down into my coffee cup. “Yup. Must’ve been a 24-hour bug.”

“Well, I’m glad to see you up and at ‘em. And ha, I wish it was a hot date. I’m just getting lunch with Olivia. Oh my gosh, you should come! I can wait while you get ready—”

I waved her off. “No, no. I feel bad enough about taking yesterday off.”

She rolled her eyes. “You work too hard. Believe me, as someone who busted her ass her whole life with nothing to show for it, it won’t hurt any dead things to take a day off now and then. Especially if you were sick yesterday, even more reason to take it easy.” She lifted her eyebrows several times. “I suggest taking it easy with mimosas at Alejandro’s.”

I giggled but still shook my head. “You go. Tell Olivia I said hi. I’m gonna get out there and feed Bessie and Nine before that rain hits.”

Ruth rolled her eyes. “Fine, fine.” She came forward and hugged me, a quick squeeze and release. “Glad you’re feeling better, babe.”

“Thanks.”

Then she was off out the door. I shoved my feet in my boots and followed behind her, heading for the barn.

Fat raindrops hit me on the forehead right as I came close to the open entryway to the barn. I was about to charge right in like always when raised voices stopped me in my tracks.

“Jesus, Reece, I told you to stay away from her.”

“Who are you to tell me what to do? I’m trying to be straight with you here.”

Oh shit. Jeremiah and Reece were arguing. About me.

I froze, knowing I should back away. Behind me, I heard Olivia’s car drive off.

“She’s different, Jer. She’s a woman I could actually *have* something with.”

I blinked, a little stunned. Reece thought... He really thought we could be something... for real? What about being just friends? But didn’t I want to be more than just friends?

Jeremiah made a dismissive noise. Good Lord, they had to be standing not far inside the barn at all if I could hear them so well. I should back away now. Carefully, quietly. They never had to know I'd been here.

"What do you even know about this woman?" Jeremiah asked. "Sure she's nice, but she showed up here hitchhiking for Christ's sake."

"What the fuck's that supposed to mean? After the way we grew up, you're really going to give someone shit for—"

"No, no," Jeremiah cut him off. "I'm just saying, what do you even really know about her? Where did she come from? Is she running from some sort of trouble?"

"Not that it's any of your goddamned business, but yeah, she is, okay? She got away from an abusive husband."

My hand went to my mouth. I didn't know why I felt horrified and a wave of shame at Reece sharing my darkest secret so carelessly. But my stomach suddenly churned.

This is what you get for eavesdropping.

I stumbled a step back, about to turn and flee back into the house.

The rain started coming down heavier and their voices became a little more muffled.

But I still heard Jeremiah, maybe because he'd raised his voice when he said, "Christ, so this *is* about Peg?"

Peg? It was the second time that name had come up when things were contentious between Reece and his brother.

Again, I was frozen in my tracks.

"This has nothing to do with Peg," Reece said, sounding angry for the first time during the whole conversation.

"Yeah, right. You have a savior complex, little brother, but guess what? It only ends up landing us in shit when you try to be a knight in shining armor. Most people see a woman in need and they want to get them help, sure. But you? No, you start fucking them and think it's love until it all blows up in your face."

My gasp was swallowed by the rain that was now pelting the ground in hard, angry drops that felt like needle stabs all along the skin of my exposed forearms and face.

"You son of a—"

A strong wind blew, catching the barn door and making it bang against the outside of the barn. The storm was coming in fast today.

I couldn't hear the guys arguing anymore, but when I heard a stuttered curse heaved out—I couldn't tell which one of them it was, their voices were so similar—I realized they were fighting.

Stupid slut. You think anyone but me could love you?

His voice in my head. My fists went against my temple.

Look how useless you are. A vase flung against the wall. You're such a dumb bitch you can't even dust the nice shit I buy you. There. Now you don't have to dust it, since you seem to be incapable of keeping a nice house.

I pounded at my head. The rain poured down, drenching me. Get out, get out, damn memories.

Him standing over me, heaving for breath while I curled into a ball in the corner. *Look what you made me do again. Why can't you just be a normal woman? All I wanted was a good, easy life but then I got stuck with you. What a fucking disappointment.*

It was so visceral, the memory of him walking off. Me bawling, useless, clutching my stomach that was completely void. Void of life because I'd failed my little baby.

And now this was my curse, to be stuck with *him* forever. Punishing me forever.

“Stop!” I screamed, charging into the barn. “Stop it!”

I found the two brothers on the floor grappling with each other, but they both froze and looked up at me with twin looks of surprise.

Reece let go of his brother and struggled to get up, one hand raised. “Charlie. Wait. I don't know what you heard, but—”

“Who's Peg?” I asked him.

Jeremiah got to his feet, dusting the dirt and hay off himself, and watching us warily.

“That's not important,” Reece said, waving a hand distractedly. “Look, my brother's an asshole—”

“No, why don't you tell her about Peg?” Jeremiah said, and Reece shot him a murderous glare.

“Fine!” Reece finished glaring at his brother and then his face softened with... remorse?... as he looked back to me.

“Peg was the first woman I ever really...”

“Had an affair with,” Jeremiah supplied.

My mouth dropped open and Reece swung his head to glare at Jeremiah. “Isn't there somewhere you need to be, *brother?*”

Jeremiah crossed his arms over his chest and didn't look like he was going anywhere, but just then, the barn door slammed again and Buck ran in, startling all of us.

"Whoa, what'd I miss?"

"Not now, Buck," Jeremiah said. "You can wait out the storm in the bunkhouse or take a long lunch if you want."

"It's not that, boss. Just got a call from the sheriff, who said the cows are out on the 284 again."

Jeremiah swore and swung down to grab his hat off the ground, which I assumed he'd lost while fighting Reece. "That's the last goddamn thing we need, especially with the storm, who the hell knows how disoriented they'll get if they start running. Come on, Buck. Let's go see if we can round 'em up."

"In *this*?" Buck said, eyebrows up as he threw a thumb over his shoulder. "Can't we wait it out, then go?"

"Jesus fucking Christ, do I have to do everything myself? You," he pointed a finger at Reece. "Clear this up before I get back." Then he stormed past Buck right out into what was now a deluge.

"Jeez, what crawled up his ass and took a shit?"

"Not now, Buck," Reece said, sounding exactly like his brother as he turned his glare on Buck. "I need to have a private conversation with Charlie."

"Damn." Buck held up his hands. "Don't get your panties in a twist."

When Reece just kept staring at him, Buck shook his head, muttered something under his breath, and then turned and headed back out into the rain.

Leaving just me and Reece in the barn, a dull roar on the tin roof as the rain blew sideways in a torrent.

Reece took a step toward me but I held up a hand. "Don't."

"Charlie—"

"Have I just been some substitute all along? For Peg, whoever she is?"

"God, I'm gonna kill my brother. No. No." Again he tried to take a step forward and I took a step back, a warning look on my face that had him stopping in his tracks.

"Peg was a woman I knew when I was barely grown myself. Jer and I were nineteen, we'd just left California. It was the first time we'd worked a ranch. Wayne took us on because we'd accept almost no pay, just eager to

learn a trade of any kind and frankly glad to have a roof over our heads. For a while it was great.”

He let out a heavy sigh. “Then I’d hear Wayne and his wife fighting. No, I’d just hear Wayne *yelling* at his wife though the windows of the ranch house. I didn’t know he beat her, not at first.”

I swallowed, but too many emotions were bubbling up so I swallowed again.

“And you fell in love with her?” I managed to get out.

For a moment, Reece looked lost. “I just—” his voice trailed off. “One day after her husband was yelling at her, I heard a crash. Wayne stormed out of the house and drove off. Jer told me not to get involved, that it wasn’t my business. But after all the ranch hands went off to our duties for the day, I doubled back to check on her. Which was when I found her on the floor in the kitchen. There were a couple of shattered plates on the floor beside her and her face—”

Reece sucked in a breath and shut his eyes hard, like he was either reliving it or trying to get himself under control.

“I told her she should leave him, but she just said I was a sweet kid. She was fifteen years older than me, and said I didn’t understand how the world worked. But we started up a... a friendship, I guess. I was the only person she could talk to who was safe.”

I swallowed again, hugging my arms around myself. “And it turned into more?”

Reece hesitated, then nodded. “She liked to have a companion when she rode her horse, so sometimes I’d go with her. We got closer and closer...”

Reece’s brow bunched as he looked to the floor. “I loved her and yes, I thought I could save her. She never said she loved me back, but she said her time with me made the rest of her life possible. That she’d thought about slitting her wrists plenty of times until I showed up.”

Uneasily, I rubbed my left wrist. I’d kept them perpetually covered here with long sleeved flannels. When it got warmer, I used a thick-banded waterproof watch on my left wrist and a scrunchie on my right, no matter that I had short hair and no use of one. I’d found both in Ruth’s bathroom drawers.

I took a step towards Reece, feeling my nose sting with emotion both for him and for the woman. Peg. To have dared to grab at what joy she could in the midst of her own suffering... I couldn’t imagine.

But I could totally see how Reece, kind, gentle Reece showing up, an even more earnest and boyish version than the man in front of me, just having survived the streets of San Francisco... I could see how he would have seemed like a miracle. Enough to make a woman reckless.

And I could also see how he could have fallen into the situation, wanting to help her, then developing a close bond with the woman. The intimacy of a secret shared. How that could turn into long afternoons that felt like an escape and also salvation, to both of them after all they'd been through. And how natural feelings would follow, and desperate bodies would meet—

“So what happened?” I asked, almost afraid to know the answer.

“Her husband caught us.”

I gasped and took another small step forward.

“It was fucking awful.” Reece turned away from me. “Jeremiah’s right. I should have tried to get her help earlier. Not—” He shook his head vehemently. “Not... do what I did.

“You were barely just more than a kid yourself. You said you were just what, nineteen? God knows how stupid I was at nineteen. I didn’t do anything right.” As soon as I said it, I realized just how true it was. And yet it was so much easier to cut Reece the slack I could never seem to give to myself.

But Reece was still just shaking his head. “No, I should have done anything else. Tried to protect her better. Wayne came in and he just started whaling on her. I fought him and told her to run, but I only slowed him down. Like you said, I was nineteen, skinny as a bean pole, barely fed enough after years on the street. He was a full-grown man and more than a match for the both of us.”

My heart was in my throat even just hearing about it. “Oh my God, so what happened?”

Reece bowed his head. “My brother. I’ll never be able to repay him for all he’s done for me, and that day was just another example. He came in and gave Wayne the beating I couldn’t. We’d both been in scrapes before, growing up like we did, but it was nothing to Jeremiah that day. Once Wayne was down, the three of us stole his truck and drove to the bus station.”

“Holy shit,” I said. And here I’d thought Jeremiah was such a straight-laced guy... I could barely imagine him doing the things Reece was describing. And yet, I supposed, for family, one might do anything.

I winced, thinking of my own mother and how she wouldn’t listen to me

the two times I tried to tell her about what was really going on with Jeff. The second time, when I asked for her help, she called Jeff to tell him she was worried about me, that my mental health was getting worse—he had everyone so snowed. But still, how could she believe *him* over her own daughter? I got the shit beat out of me and learned that what family might be to other people, it wasn't for me.

But Reece and Jeremiah, they had the real thing.

“Did she make it?” I asked, feeling anxious for a woman I didn't even know. “Did her husband find her again and take her back?”

Reece shook his head. “We got on a bus and headed north. I was definitely naïve. I thought I could protect her, that we could settle down somewhere and I'd work construction or something.” He smiled, a little sadly. “But we'd played our parts in each other's lives and she was old enough to know it even if I was heartbroken for a while. At the next bus stop, we bought her a bus ticket to her sister's back east. The sister had always hated Wayne and Peg knew she could help her.”

I frowned, still feeling worried for the woman. “And she got there and was able to do it? Get free and start over?”

“Honestly,” Reece said, “I don't know. That was the last time I ever saw her. But once Jer and I got settled in Wyoming at Mel's Ranch, I did some digging online and found that Wayne was arrested for a couple DUI's and a drunk and disorderly. I don't think he was in any shape to go after Peg, even if he knew where to start.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief as thunder rumbled right overhead, so loud it seemed to shake the barn. The wind outside was really picking up too, blowing the rain sideways into the barn.

“Come on,” Reece said, frowning at the worsening conditions outside. “Let's get in the house.”

I shook my head, gesturing toward the back of the barn and the sink. “I need to feed Bessie and Nine.” Though looking around, I wasn't sure where they were. Probably huddled on the other side of the barn wall where it opened to the pasture. I hoped so, at least, so they could stay warm and safe from the weather.

“Not in this you don't,” Reece said. Thunder *cracked* overhead, so loud it had both of us jumping. “Come on,” he said, holding his arm over my shoulder and blocking my head as much as he could as we headed toward the open barn door.

“Dammit,” Reece yelled. It was so dark it was like the day had sped forward to twilight, and the rain hit my back. Except ow, that was more than rain. It was hailing.

Gum-ball size chunks of ice spattered the ground all around, and pelted us, too. White ice balls fell from the sky and bounced up from the ground as we ran for the porch.

As soon as we got up the porch stairs and inside the house, Reece took my shoulders, looking me up and down. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, shaken but all right. “I’m fine.”

A jarring, insistent alarm came from Reece’s pocket. We were both drenched, and rainwater dripped from his hair onto his forehead as he frowned and pulled out his phone.

His eyes immediately went wide at whatever he saw on the screen. “Shit.” He stabbed at the phone again and raised it to his ear.

“What?” I asked. “What is it?”

But Reece just waved a hand for me to wait.

Which was when we both heard the tinny noise of a ringtone sounding from the counter, beside the coffee pot.

“Son of a bitch.” Reece shoved his phone back in his pocket, his eyes coming to me. “That’s Jer’s phone. There’s a tornado warning and that asshole is out wrestling cows.” He dragged a hand through his wet hair and I could tell he was freaking out.

“Well, that’s not such a big deal, right?” I tried to reason. “That just means it’s a bad storm. TORNADOS DON’T ACTUALLY, I MEAN, THEY’RE NOT REALLY A *thing* that happens.”

Reece just looked at me like I was nuts. “Tornado watch means conditions are ripe for a tornado, but a *warning* means some have actually been sighted in the area.”

That had me gulping. And it had Reece heading back for the door, even as the wind started to howl louder outside. The hail hadn’t stopped either. Oh my gosh, Ruth was out in this, too. Town was a good fifteen minutes away. It had maybe been ten since she’d left.

I jumped forward and grabbed Reece’s arm. “How is you going out in this gonna help anything? Surely your brother will come back in with the weather this bad?”

Reece hesitated, and I could tell he was considering what I’d said. But then his eyes went back to the window and both of us watched as the barn

door, which we hadn't shut in our quick escape, was battered by the wind. So hard that it came free and flew across the yard.

That apparently decided it for Reece. He pulled free of my hold and crossed the last few feet to the kitchen door. He yanked on a coat and grabbed the keys from the hook by the door.

"Reece!"

He turned, face down, but then he looked at me, features tense. "I've told you how many times my brother's had my back. He doesn't know how bad it could be out there. I have to go. Go to the bathroom closet and close yourself inside. You should be safe in the center of the house."

My mouth dropped open. "Isn't there a storm shelter or something?"

"Not in Texas, they're too hard to dig. Look, I'm sure this will all die down and be nothing, just like you said. I've seen plenty of bad storms. I just wanna be safe, okay? Okay?" he demanded again when I didn't answer quick enough.

I nodded. "Okay."

"Good." And then he opened the door, the howling wind and battering rain ten times louder when he did.

I wanted to cover my ears. I wanted to go grab him and jerk him back inside. I wanted to scream at the sky for it to stop, to shut up, to *stop*.

But the next moment, Reece was gone, and I was left alone in the house, the sky and wind and rain roaring around me on all sides.

I knew I needed to do what Reece said, but I couldn't help running to the kitchen window. The rain was falling in such thick sheets I could only just make out Reece's figure as he ran to his truck, got inside, and took off down the dirt road.

It was moments like this I really wished I believed God was anything more than a fairy tale.

"Please, please protect him," I whispered anyway. I turned around, then back to the window, then, when I knew I positively couldn't see any speck of the truck's back lights, I finally took a deep breath and started to head towards the inner bathroom closet.

Except that halfway there, the doorbell rang.

The doorbell! In a storm like this! Who on earth?

I hurried through the part of the house I rarely spent much time in, just to occasionally watch a movie with Ruth.

Maybe Buck was stranded out there on the wrong side of the house and

had gotten locked out. I hurried faster. I needed to get him inside. He wasn't my favorite person in the world, but frankly I wouldn't mind some company to ride out this storm. Yeah, we had earthquakes in California, but a few minutes, tops, of shaking and it was over. Nothing like this roaring, thundering terror. How had I thought this was majestic? It was official, I hated Texas storms.

I yanked the front door open, ready to usher Buck in the house.

Except it wasn't Buck.

It was my husband.

And he took advantage of my surprise, shoving the door open into me, and knocking me backwards off my feet before I could even scream.

He slammed the door behind him and looked down at me where I lay on the rug, shocked, astonished and about to piss myself I was so terrified. Lightning flashed up the windows behind him so that he looked like a demon straight from hell.

"Finally they've all left and I can get some alone time with my own fucking *wife*."

Chapter Seventeen

I shook my head, refusing to believe he was here even though the pain in my backside told me of course he was, of course he'd found me.

Still, I stupidly asked, "How are you here?" even as I scrambled backwards.

I had to get to my feet. I knew from so many past encounters with him that if he cornered me on the ground, it was all over for the night. And this wasn't just any night.

He advanced on me and the second I tried to get up he kicked me in the ribs, knocking me back down.

"How did I find you? That's all you have to say to me?"

Another kick and God—

I doubled over with the familiar explosion of pain. Except a part of me had forgotten. Had actually *believed* that this part of my life was behind me. Stupid, stupid.

In the past, this is where I'd start apologizing, groveling, playing the insipid wife begging for scraps, trying to soothe his ego, anything to get him to let up sooner.

But I couldn't muster her up. I just couldn't. All that had been an act while the fury burned inside, with every blow I'd planned escape. That was how I'd borne it. But now— But now—

I'd never go back. I'd sworn it. I couldn't.

I *wouldn't*.

He stood over me, waiting for it, waiting for the simpering. Instead, I looked up at him and snarled, "I'd rather fucking die than go back with you, you crazy, evil fucking bastard."

I saw his haze of rage and I tried to get up and run. I tried to grab for a chair to throw at him, but I'd barely gotten my hand around the bottom rung of the back of it before his next blow was landing.

It was a serious one, his fury unleashed. I'd known it was coming. I'd known there was no real escape even as, for once, it felt good to give into the fight response, to not just lay there and *take it*.

I looked up at him and laughed, tasting blood between my teeth. Thunder shook the house and as I looked up at my murderer, I laughed, feeling liberated for the first time in my entire goddamned life. "When you get to hell, I hope the devils roast you over an open spit."

His next blow made the world go black.

Chapter Eighteen

I woke up to pain. My shoulders were wrenched above my head. Rain hit my face so hard I coughed and sputtered against it.

Only to realize Jeff was dragging me across the front yard on my back, a dead weight, by my wrists.

Ow, fuck, ow. It *hurt*. And my face. Pain, God, fucking ow— Everywhere, it was blinding. My back scraped across rocks as he dragged me through the yard.

Did he know I was conscious? Would he have cared?

He yanked harder at my wrists, heaving me step by step even as the storm raged overhead. It made the yard slick and muddy, but with each wrenching step it was like he was trying to pull my shoulders out of their sockets. Maybe he was.

I'd hoped he'd finish it off in the house. That he'd go into such a rage...

God, I just wanted the pain to end.

But if he was trying to take me *back*...

An entirely new horror hit me. Oh God, if he got me back in that house...

I blinked up at the sky, through the rain. Or tried. The storm wasn't quieting, only getting worse. It felt like the world around me was churning, growling, roaring to echo my own fury and grief.

The wind howled around us and bits of tree branches and other debris flew around the yard. I tipped my head back and saw Jeff was having to bend his body into the wind, his hair flattened against his head.

But he didn't stop, his face was still mottled with that anger I knew so well, and there was his car, parked behind a stack of hay bales to the right of the property.

I could try to pull away, a stupid instinct for self-preservation fighting its way to the forefront in spite of what I knew was reality. Jeff, mad as a bull, would never let me go. Come hell or high water. Or roaring storm.

I went lightheaded, my eyes shut against the rain, bright spots dancing.

Pain.

Bright lights.

Drift away.

Reece's face, smiling at me as dawn light filtered through the window. A gentle caress of his finger tracing down my cheek.

Pain splintering my shoulders.

Blackness.

Wet.

Rain.

Mud squelching in my hair.

Shackles around my wrists. The devil had hold of me. He'd never let me go.

Hands on my body.

I was being lifted.

My head hit something hard. A car roof? A shouted curse, Jeff's voice, screamed into a screaming sky.

No one heard. No one cared.

My body tumbled onto something softer than ground. Leather in my nose.

I blinked against the muddle, trying to swim back to the surface. Swollen eyes, couldn't open them.

Everything was spinning. Pain. It all hurt. I needed to throw up.

Drifting back down while hands on my legs shoved more of me wherever I was being shoved.

Back seat.

It was a back seat.

Wake up. Danger. I needed to wake—

The roaring howl outside was loud, louder, so loud.

I rolled against the back of the seat as the car started forward.

Car. I was in a car.

Jeff's car.

He was driving away.

Away from the ranch. Away from Reece and Ruth, and—

I blinked again, against the pain of my swelling right eye, against all the

pain. It was so loud, so loud I wanted to cover my ears.

Jeff was shouting curses.

Close my eyes, drift away, let him take me. Find a way to die later.

That would be easiest.

I couldn't fight anymore. Nothing was left. I was too broken. I'd tried, I'd tried and look, *look*, here I was again.

Give in. Go to sleep. Fly away from the pain, from all of it. Give up, give in. You always do, you always will. There never really was any escape, you knew it all along.

But the sunsets.

The wind in my face and my hair as I rode the four-wheeler, day after day. Free.

Laughing at Bessie and Nine, at their joy and curiosity at simply being *alive*.

I'd been alive, too. Shining moments of life, flowing through me, the sky in my soul, expanding me.

The roar of a train thundered by outside the car.

A train?

I blinked in confusion. There weren't any trains or tracks near the ranch.

How far had we gone? Had I blacked out?

I struggled to hold onto consciousness. I fought my way to the surface and blinked my eyes open, holding them even though my right eye was just a slit against the swelling.

A car, I was in a car.

Jeff was in the front seat. He swerved the wheel and my body jostled, almost falling off the seat. My hand shot out to brace myself and I came more into awareness. My head pounded and my shoulders and ribs hurt, they hurt bad, but I sat up, and looked through the window, and—

My eyes widened in spite of the pain.

It wasn't a train.

Not a train, no, not a train.

The ground beside the tiny dirt road Jeff was speeding down was being ripped apart by a funnel that reached from the dark sky above to the ground, so wide I couldn't see the other side of it.

And Jeff was still just *driving*, even though the twister was barely half a field away and swerving back and forth.

"Jeff, get off the road!" I screamed.

He looked back at me, swerving the car again dangerously as he did. “Shut the fuck up!” he screamed. “I know what I’m doing.”

No, no he didn’t. He had no clue. I didn’t know much about tornados but I knew that thing was huge and could cross the road in front of us at any moment.

Terror suddenly pumped fresh adrenaline that had me more awake than I would have thought possible.

Jeff wouldn’t stop. He’d never listen to me. He wouldn’t stop.

I reached for the back door of the car to push it open, but it was locked. The bastard had put on the child safety locks. Of course he had.

I turned to look in horror at the huge tornado. Only Jeff thought he could fight a tornado and win.

And I wasn’t laughing, even though I was again looking at my death.

It was ridiculous, and stupid, and useless, and still I wanted to live. I wanted to fucking live, goddammit, and see a thousand more sunsets.

So I didn’t think. For once, I didn’t think, I didn’t plan.

I reached forward with my right hand, ignoring the wrenching pain in my shoulder, and found the release lever to let the front seat lean back. I got hold of it, pulled, then yanked on the top of the chair.

Jeff screamed at me, he reached for me, of course he did.

But I was single minded.

Get the fuck OUT of the car.

No hesitation or he’d have me again. So I scrambled over the seat, reached for the side passenger seat door, opened it, and threw myself out.

The ground hit me hard. Or I hit it. And rolled, my body tumbling end over end.

The train was louder than ever and I looked up, the funnel twisting towards the road. I dragged myself to standing even as the car came to a stop fifty feet ahead.

I screamed as I stood, my right arm lancing with a pain that I knew meant it was broken. Wind lashed all around me.

Debris flew in the radius of the funnel cloud and I fought against the wind, clutching my broken arm to my side with the other as I stumbled toward the open pasture on the opposite side of the twister. Futile, probably, to try to outrun an act of God. But I was done giving in. I’d fight till my last breath.

I fought the wind, leaning my head and then my whole body against the

furious gusts pulling me backwards.

I lost my footing and rolled backwards, pulled by the wind, until I was crawling against it. I scabbled on the ground like an animal, clutching at roots with my good hand, grass, anything.

And losing the battle.

I was being dragged backwards. I dug my feet in and kept trying, finally managing to make it to a slight divot in the ground, a ditch beside the road that was full of water. I didn't care. I thought I'd heard someone talk once about ditches being a last resort if you found yourself caught in a tornado, so I laid my body out and tried to dig my good hand into the mud and muck as deeply as I could to hold on.

The train howl continued and I closed my eyes and prayed to a God I wasn't sure I believed in and thought—if this was my last moment on this earth, at least I'd gone my way. It wouldn't be at *his* hands.

God take my soul and let me be as free in death as I found in these brief last months of my life.

I squeezed my eyes shut and I prayed. I prayed for myself and I prayed Reece and Jeremiah and Ruth were safe.

I screamed my prayers into the wind and spit out water and clutched onto mud for life.

And the train roared on as God reached down from the sky and spent his rage upon the earth.

Chapter Nineteen

Reece sped back down the dirt road towards the ranch house faster than was wise. The roads were mud, but Christ, the funnel cloud had been huge, and it had torn straight down the middle of the ranch.

He and Jer had watched in horror from the cab of his truck after he'd pulled his brother off the road and inside to tell him about the tornado warning right as the funnel cloud had touched down about a mile off.

Right on the ranch.

There wasn't much to do at that point except drive in the opposite direction and then stop the truck and watch on in horror from a safe distance a few more miles off.

When everything in him had wanted to drive straight back.

Charlotte.

He'd left her there. He'd just *left* her there. What the fuck had he been thinking?

The house should be safe. That was what he'd been thinking. From most storms, yeah.

But that thing... dear God. He'd chosen wrong, again. Thinking to save his brother, he'd just left her there...

He pushed the gas pedal harder.

"Slow down!" Jeremiah yelled from beside him. "You ending up in the ditch isn't going to do anybody any damn good."

Reece did slow down, but only because ahead he saw the road itself was torn up.

"Jesus Christ," he swore.

"It came across the road," Jeremiah said, stating the obvious.

Reece slowed down, navigating around debris of all kinds that was covering the torn-up road. A kid's bike, tree branches, fence posts, a car tire, all sorts of shit.

The path seemed to be almost 500 yards wide, the earth completely flattened and decimated. Before it had crossed into the road, it had run beside it, and the path headed back towards the house.

Reece navigated past the debris and once the road cleared again, he slammed his foot on the gas.

It wasn't much further to the house, maybe half a mile.

Except when he pulled up over the last hill when he should have been able to see the gable of the two-story structure... there was nothing there.

"No," he said. No, no, no. His brain refused to process even as the truck pulled up to the pile of bricks and wood and roof that had, just thirty minutes before, been a standing house.

With Charlotte inside.

He slammed the truck into park and was out in a flash, running up to the absolutely *demolished* house.

He just kept shaking his head, his brain refusing to process. No, no this wasn't— The house was safe. He'd gone to get Jeremiah who was out where it *wasn't* safe. This was the safe place. He'd left Charlotte in the *safe place*—

"Charlotte!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, running forward towards the ruin. "Charlie!"

His brother was in front of him, grabbing his chest and stopping him. "What are you doing? You can't! It's not stable."

Not stable, was he kidding?

"Charlie's in there!" Reece screamed at him, yanking to pull away from him.

"If she was then she's dead," his brother shouted back at him. "And there's nothing you can do."

Reece threw him off, knocking him backwards to the ground. Reece didn't care. Jer would be fine.

"Charlie!" Reece screamed again, running up to the rubble. It was unrecognizable as a house. He climbed up some boards that he thought might have once belonged to the porch. They shifted underneath his feet and he almost fell, but he righted himself at the last moment, trying to climb further into the rubble.

"I don't think she's in there, man."

“What?” Reece swerved to look behind him to see Buck, standing beside his brother and helping him up off the ground. “What do you mean?”

“I was watching out my window and I saw a car drive off right before the storm hit.”

Reece scrambled back off the unsteady wreckage to solid ground. “What do you mean? What car?”

Buck shrugged. “Don’t know. Never seen it before. Just saw the taillights booking it down the road. Then the sky got green and that noise started up like the sky was screamin’ and I hunkered down in the bathtub.”

Reece looked past him to see the bunkhouse, still fully intact. “And you saw Charlotte get in the car?”

Buck shrugged again. “Just saw the taillights, like I said.”

“It had to be her,” Jeremiah said. “Who else?”

Reece looked back at the wreckage. Who the hell would have shown up on the ranch during a storm like that? And would Charlotte really have gotten in a car with them? Had they seen the funnel touch down and realized they needed to get the hell out of there, whoever *they* were?

“Call the sheriff,” Reece said.

“Already on it,” Jer said, and when Reece looked over, he saw that yeah, Jer already had his phone at his ear.

Reece paced back and forth, dragging his hands through his hair, still feeling like he should be digging through the rubble. That he should be doing *something*. What if Charlotte *was* still in there, trapped? *Suffocating*? And he was just standing here like a dumb bastard, doing nothing while she choked to death? Or slowly bled out?

He imagined her dying a hundred different ways in the time it took a deputy to arrive. Twice more he’d tried to go searching for her in the collapsed house and twice, Jer had held him back and talked him down.

When he heard the sirens, he jumped up from the ground where he was crouched with his hands on his head.

The deputy let out a low whistle when he stepped out of his cruiser, and immediately pulled the radio from his shoulder and started speaking into it.

Reece ran over to him and started explaining there might be a woman inside. His words were spilling over themselves when the deputy frowned and held up a hand.

“Wait, wait, wait, you don’t happen to mean a small woman, about yay tall with short, dark hair?” He held up his hand about the height of Reece’s

shoulder.

“Yes. Yes!” Reece grasped the deputy’s shirt and dragged him closer. “That’s her. What do you know?”

The deputy looked alarmed, but answered. “She’s back up the road.” He hitched a thumb over his shoulder. “Maybe half a mile where the road’s all tore up. She was crawling out of a ditch when me and the ambulance were coming and flagged us down.”

“The ditch!” Reece yanked the deputy into a hug, then let him go, looking at Jeremiah. “The ditch!”

Holy shit, did that mean they’d driven right past her earlier? And how the hell had she ended up in the ditch? But thank God. Thank God she wasn’t in the house.

“Where?” Reece asked, already heading for his truck. “Half a mile back you said? Was she okay? Jesus, you said she flagged you down?” But Reece barely waited for an answer, he was already almost to his truck.

“Yes,” the deputy said. “The ambulance stopped to treat her.”

Reece shouted his thanks and then he was peeling out down the road.

The half mile felt like it took half an hour even though it was only minutes. He came upon the ambulance which, thank Jesus, was still there. He got out of the car and threw the door shut, sprinting towards the back end of the ambulance.

And there she was, looking dazed as the paramedic helped put her arm in a sling, but intact. Intact! Alive!

“Charlie!” he shouted, and her head jerked his direction, right before a grin lit her face. And it was like a rainbow scattering all the clouds of the world.

Charlotte was safe and she was smiling at him.

He didn’t care about any other goddamned thing in the whole goddamned world.

He rushed toward her, ignoring the paramedic and shoving him out of the way with the sheer force of his size and will.

And he wrapped himself around as much of Charlotte as he could. She winced and he yanked back.

“Sorry. Shit, sorry! How’d you know to run? Thank God, thank God. The house is demolished. I was so afraid. I was so scared—”

He grabbed her cheeks in his hands and kissed her hard, just to make sure she was there, she was solid and not an apparition. And then he kissed her

gentle and slow and indeed, she didn't disappear again like so much ethereal dust.

She was safe even though he hadn't been there to save her. Maybe the whole world wasn't on his shoulders after all, but he was damn glad she was the kind of woman strong enough to catch herself and pick herself back up when she fell down.

Or, ya know, when a damn *twister* was tearing shit up nearby. That was the kind of person he wanted on his team.

Chapter Twenty

Ruth and I rented a place in Austin since the ranch house was torn to shreds. It was ironic in one of those messed up Alanis Morissette ways that I finally got to Austin, just not exactly like I ever imagined. And Ruth had certainly never intended on being there with me, though at the end of the day, she, like Reece, was just glad I was in one piece.

And as we moved in, both of us with just the clothes on our backs this time, she was waxing philosophical. “Well, nothing was going to get me off that land except an act of God and—” She threw her hands up in the air, “There we have it!”

“So you’re actually doing it? Selling the rest to Reece and Jeremiah’s boss?”

Ruth nodded and collapsed on a couch that had seen better days. We’d rented an already furnished apartment since it wasn’t like either of us had furniture. The furniture here was...well-loved was a good term for it.

I liked it because it was so different from where I’d lived for most of my adult life. It was eclectic and fit the hippie vibe I’d dreamed of.

Ruth hated it.

She looked over at me as I sat down beside her. “Promise me we’re just here for six months? Then we’ll get some place better and decorate it to be cute and modern, okay?”

I shrugged. “Sure, as long as we both get jobs where we can magically afford that. We were lucky to get this.”

“Ugh, I know! And I want to go back to school, so I’ll be a poor student!”

I laughed and threw a throw pillow with a faded sunshine cross-stitched on it at her.

She grabbed it mid-air and stared at it, obvious distaste on her face. “What even *is* this? How did anyone think this was good décor?” She made an appalled noise and threw it to the floor.

I giggled. “You just crushed the eternal spirit of someone who spent *hours* on that labor of love.”

Ruth snorted. “Well, thank fuck for women’s lib so we don’t have to sit around cross-stitching.” She perked up, sitting up straight. “That reminds me. I went shopping.” She got to her feet and picked up a grocery bag. All I could hear was clinking as soon as she lifted it. As she started to unpack it, I could see why.

First one wine bottle, then another, then a big bottle of Tito’s vodka, the kind that was so big it had a *handle*.

“Jesus, Ruth, do we need to have an intervention?”

She waved a hand. “I invited the guys over. A house-warming party. I told them I’d provide the booze if they brought food. I didn’t want to deal with snacks.”

I shot to my feet. “Holy shit, you invited Reece? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m telling you now,” she grinned. “Plus, I’m enjoying this reaction.”

“Witch.” I ran my hands through my hair and looked down at myself. It was better than when I lived on the ranch and was perpetually covered in mud, but still. “When are they coming over?”

The doorbell rang. I felt my eyes widen. “I’m going to murder you,” I hissed at Ruth.

I’d only seen Reece once since everything happened last week. They hadn’t let him ride in the ambulance with me since he wasn’t family, but he’d visited in the hospital where they’d taken me for observation. I’d been with Ruth pretty much solidly since then, but every time I had seen him he’d immediately grabbed my hand and held it the whole time. I wasn’t sure what to make of it and was trying not to make *too much* of anything. He was just concerned for me. Anybody would be, considering I’d all but knocked elbows with an F3 tornado.

Ruth answered the door while I slipped a tinged lip gloss out of my pocket and ran it over my lips.

Which was when I heard a voice that was decidedly *not* Reece or Jeremiah.

“Where is she? Penelope? Penelope, I know you’re in there. Get out here

right now before I call the cops!”

My blood went cold in my veins at Buchanan’s demanding, entitled voice shouting for me.

Apparently Ruth didn’t like it either. “Hey, fuckface, I don’t know who the hell you think you are, but you need to step back off my doorstep—

“I’m not leaving till you show your face, Penelope. I know you killed him and I can prove it—”

I wondered if Buchanan had identified Jeff’s body. I’d certainly been reading local coverage of the tornado. When I came across the story of a Tesla that had been found over two miles away, and about the mangled dead body inside, I’d curiously felt... very little other than powerful relief.

I came out from around the corner, hands on my hips. “Oh, so now you can prove that I have the power to call a tornado down from the sky? Please, Bruce, tell me how I managed to do that one.”

Ruth just looked over her shoulder at me, blocking Buchanan from me with her body.

“You killed him first.” He pushed easily past Ruth since he was twice her size and came towards me, finger pointed in my face. “Then parked the car in the path of the twister so it picked him up.”

I just stood there, for once not cowed by the big oaf. “Wow. Do you even hear yourself? Did the cops buy that ridiculous theory? Is that why they’re right behind you?” I pointed to the empty hallway.

“I’m certainly calling them,” Ruth said, phone at her ear. “Yes, I’d like to report an intruder.”

Buchanan grabbed me by my shoulders. “He was coming out here to get you and then he ends up dead? I know you killed him, you little slut. And I’ll prove it.”

“How did he even find me?” I asked. It was the one part of the puzzle that never fit. “Did you help him?”

“It’s called facial recognition software, you dumb bitch. It can scrape public social media feeds and he saw you. He saw you.” He shook me so hard my head rattled. “Out dancing with another man and breaking your marital vows.”

“Hey, let go of her, you bastard!” Ruth cried. “Now he’s assaulting my roommate,” she said into the phone, turning it around and taking video.

Buchanan was getting more and more pissed, but he was also an attorney. He let go of me and turned towards Ruth. “I’m a private citizen. You have no

right to take video of me. Turn that off. This business is between me and my best friend's wife."

"Oh," Ruth said. "Your best friend who used to beat his wife regularly? Is that the best friend you're defending right now?"

Buchanan reached for the phone but Ruth danced back away from him. "I'm livestreaming buddy," she said. "So this is already going straight to the cloud. But please, assault me as well. That'll do great things for your case, friend of a man who liked to assault women."

Buchanan looked murderous, and I knew well from hearing him and Jeff talk in the past that there was nothing they hated more than...well, *women*. But especially a woman like Ruth who wasn't going to take any shit.

I officially loved her in this moment.

Buchanan backed out the door, but that finger of his still wasn't done pointing at me. "You better watch out. I can make things very difficult for you."

"And how's that?"

That voice came from behind Buchanan. At first I thought it was Reece, but no, as they got closer I realized it was Jeremiah. "That sounded like a threat to me. Did that sound like a threat, Reece?"

"Sure did, brother," Reece said, dark eyes glaring at Buchanan.

"Don't know who you are, sir," Jeremiah said, clapping a firm hand on Buchanan from behind and dragging him back from the threshold of our doorstep several steps. "But you better rethink going around and threatening folks I consider family. It's unwise and frankly, ungentlemanly. Good day to you. Let's never see each other again."

"Aww," Ruth called out, holding out her phone. "You're trending. Where does he work again, Charlie? I bet they'd *love* to see one of their employees treating a woman with such disrespect."

Buchanan looked briefly panicked and I stepped up to the door. "Get the hell out of here and I never want to see your face again." I straightened my shoulders. "Jeff died of a *tornado* that he did not treat with enough respect. And I'm no longer the meek, unprotected woman the two of you could push around. So leave me the *hell* alone. Or I'll ruin you and take pleasure doing it."

Buchanan stormed off without another word. I imagined that him letting me have the last word was preferable only to actually having to agree with me.

I felt like a thousand bucks as his back disappeared. Not only had I told him off, but for the first time in my life, I had people behind me. Friends who would support me. Jeremiah of all people had called me family.

“Shit, Charlie, are you okay? That asshole had no right—” Ruth started.

But I just pulled her into a hug.

“Group hug!” Ruth called, reaching out for Jer and Reece. And as their arms closed around me, I felt truly loved for the first time in my life. I had people in my corner who would actually back me up and take my side.

I laughed and cried, and when we pulled apart, I finally told them all the whole story. Of Jeff and me. Of how I’d escaped two months ago and then how he’d come for me. I told them how I ended up in the ditch and how Jeff... how Jeff was finally gone forever.

I didn’t know if God had finally heard my prayer or if Reece was right, and it was just karma finally catching up with Jeff, but either way, I was going to live the hell out of the life that was now mine, free and clear.

And afterwards, while Ruth and Jeremiah were in the kitchen getting drinks, Reece sidled up beside me. “So, I know everything’s been nuts, but I was wondering... Would you want to go on a date sometime?”

I grinned up at him. “I’d like that a lot.”

Epilogue

Buck stared out at the ruined ranch house that had finally driven that bitch off the land, chewing on his tobacco and then spitting into the grass.

It wasn't as satisfying as if *he'd* been the one to drive Ruth off, but at least the slut was finally gone.

But she wasn't ruined. To hear Jeremiah tell it, she was getting insurance money for the house, plus money for finally selling the last plot of land to the brothers' boss.

Buck shook his head in disgust.

Wasn't right.

That money should be *his*.

He spit again, feeling the hate rise up like bile in his gut.

This whole fucking ranch should be *his* by rights. It was stolen from him, pure and simple.

Pulling up fence posts now and again and letting out the cows—that had always been thinking small. It had taken a damn tornado to get her off the land, but Buck shook his head and spit out another long stream of tobacco juice.

Ruth hadn't even been *in* the house.

She hadn't suffered.

Now Buck, he'd suffered. His whole damn life had been suffering, and all because of *her*. And what, she just got to ride off into the sunset with all *his* money? With everything that shoulda been *his*?

That wasn't right. That wasn't fair.

And Buck was fucking tired of shit that wasn't fair.

If he couldn't get back what was due him in this life, then by God he could make sure that he'd make them that made his life this way *pay*.

Starting with that uppity bitch Ruth Harshbarger. She mighta quit this land finally, but she wasn't nearly done payin' her debts.

And Buck, well, Buck was here to fuckin' *collect*.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah
Roughneck #4

STASIA BLACK

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Chapter One

JEREMIAH

Sometimes I think if I just lived alone, life could be so simple. Yeah, yeah, when I needed to, I'd go find myself a hot, consenting woman to bury myself in...

I dropped a hand down and massaged myself through my jeans. Speaking of, it had been too fucking long. I paused right inside the barn door and stared out past the bunkhouse. The sun had just set, and the huge Texas sky was fucking on fire with pinks and neon oranges.

I shook my head, going back to my daydreams. Yep, alone, just me and the land. Me and the cows. They're dumb animals but usually kind-hearted enough once you get to know 'em.

At the end of the night, it'd be me and whatever I could rustle up for dinner while I listened to a podcast or two. Then maybe a book for the half hour afterwards I might manage to keep my eyes open before crashing into my mattress.

Then just enjoying the blessed dark of sleep till it was time to do it all over the next day.

God, it sounded like a good life.

I sighed, shook my head, and headed away from the ranch house, still only half rebuilt, and strode the twenty feet toward the bunkhouse with a brisk step.

The door opened from the other side before I could even put my hand on it.

“Where you been?” asked my twin brother, Reece, whose face was a perfect reflection of my own. “We been holding dinner.” He dragged me in by an arm around my shoulder. “And listen, there’s only about a thousand details of the wedding to go over. Charlie’s been up my ass because Ruth’s been up *her* ass wanting to know how many people are coming and need to be seated on our side of the aisle. And I had to tell her I didn’t know ’cause you hadn’t gotten back to me yet. You’re my best man, bro. You gotta be on top of this shit.”

I shook his arm off and nodded as I reached up into a cabinet for a glass so I could take a drink of water. My water bottle had gone dry an hour ago.

’Cause no. The universe did not give me silence, not from the very first moment I came into this world.

Well, they say I was born two minutes ahead of him.

So for two blessed minutes, there mighta been quiet. Or at least just the sound of my own voice howlin’.

But then—

“So, how many?” Reece asked. “Surely you’ve thought of a ballpark. You’re *you*. You’ve probably already got it calculated ten ways from Sunday. I thought you said yesterday you were going to call Ruth and take care of it ___”

“Can’t a man get a goddamned drink?” I barked.

Reece held up his hands and looked toward Mike and Buck who were sitting around the kitchen table. “Touchy. Touchy. Who shit in your cornflakes today?”

I breathed out and spun away from him, turning on the sink water.

I will not punch my newly engaged brother, I chanted internally as I shoved the cup under the spout. I will not punch my newly engaged brother. He’s happy and I’m happy that he’s happy.

I yanked the water back and chugged it, gulp by gulp until the glass was empty.

“Look, the girls are up at the house,” Reece kept at it. “They ate on the way over so they’re doing some painting. I told them we’d be up there after dinner to help.”

I was bone tired. I’d been up since five a.m. and hearing him talk only reminded me that the day was far from over.

But it wasn't the thought of having to take on this second shift—going to work on the big house after all the ranch work, since the contractors we'd hired were shit and about a month behind schedule. That meant we had to do a lot of the finishing touches ourselves on the downstairs, the only part of the house that *was* finished, and just section off the upstairs which didn't even have drywall up yet in some rooms.

No, my brain was stuck on the word *girls*.

“What do you mean—who's up at the house with Charlie?”

But I knew what he was gonna say even as he frowned at me. “Ruth.”

I massaged my temple. I felt a headache coming on.

“What's your problem with her?” Reece asked. “We all lived in the same house for months and now it's like the two of you can't barely stand to be in the same room together.”

I glared at my brother for stating the obvious. “I've had a long day. And that woman's mouth never turns off.”

“Well, if Charlie's parents are coming in on Thursday, then we need all the help we can getting the place ready.”

As if I needed another reminder of the circus about to come to town. I sat down at the table and spooned some of the taco meat piled in a bowl at the center of the table into a flour tortilla. There was only the meat, salsa, and a squeeze bottle of sour cream on the table in addition to the tortillas. Plus beer. Dinner of fuckin' champions.

“I thought Charlie hated her parents,” I said, shoving a huge bite of taco into my mouth and chewing. “So why are we busting our asses to make 'em feel cozy?”

“They're paying for the wedding,” Reece said, sounding exasperated. “I've told you a hundred times. This is a big deal for Charlie. She's sees it as a way to reconcile with them after everything that went down with her fucker of an ex.”

I waved with my overstuffed taco. “Exactly. They took the side of that abusive fuck. So good riddance to 'em.”

“It's not so easy to write family off,” Mike piped up from across the table. “Even when they suck.” I looked over at him where he was sopping up the bits that had fallen out of his taco with the last of his tortilla. Beside him, Buck was playing an obnoxiously loud game on his phone, ignoring all of us.

I shook my head. “Seems pretty cut and dried to me. They abandoned her when she needed them.” I sliced the hand not holding my taco through the

air. “They made their choice.”

But Reece just shook his head. “You know Charlie’s not like that. She’s got a big heart and she feels like if they’re willing to come halfway, she wants to meet them there.”

I rolled my eyes. Whatever. From what I’d seen, and I’d seen a fucking lot, people never changed.

We finished up dinner and then headed over to the big house. The insurance money from the tornado had all gone to Ruth since she’d still owned the quarter acre the damn house was on, in a nasty little bit of fine print she’d squirreled past our boss Xavier’s lawyer. But at least she’d finally sold it to him, so now he owned the entire ranch outright. But it meant he’d also had to shell out the cash on an already huge investment for the house rebuild.

So we tried to keep costs down where we could, including going with the lowest bidding contractors—a mistake, and one that had been my decision.

Xavier had given me this project and I’d yet to prove much of anything in the way of leadership skills. Selling the first calves two weeks ago had helped even out the ledger books, but we were still operating in the red.

So Reece and I were finishing up what work on the house we couldn’t contract out.

As we walked up, Charlie stepped out the front door. Her short hair had grown out from being nearly bald like when she first arrived, but she still kept it shortish and dyed pitch black, like a little goth pixie.

“Babe!” Her face lit up at seeing Reece and she threw her arms around him. “Ruth got the caterer we wanted. They had a last-minute cancellation and we got them!”

Reece grinned big. He lifted her up off her feet and I had to give it to the bastard. He really did look happier than I’d ever seen him. He and Charlie had taken forever to actually start dating and admit that they liked each other for real. But once they did, it was a damn whirlwind. Of course, it was with my impatient brother. He was proposing by their three-month anniversary.

I told him it was too fast, that she’d just gotten out of a shit marriage and the last thing she probably wanted was to be saddled with another man’s ring on her finger, but what the fuck did I know?

Reece proposed anyway and she said yes and the two of them have never looked fucking happier.

And frankly, I don’t know why the whole thing’s put me in such a bad

damn mood.

When Reece finally set her down on her feet, she was pulling her phone out of her jeans pocket.

“But Ruth says we need to decide like, tonight, between the type of meat dish we want to serve.” She started flipping through options on her phone and Reece zeroed in like he was studying for a math exam.

I just shook my head and pushed past the both of them. “I’ll be inside.”

I only realized my mistake once I opened the door and heard the sounds of Britney Spears’ tinny voice and saw Ruth Harshbarger shimmying her backside while she rolled a roller of grey paint sloppily up and down the wall.

The door shut behind me with a loud enough bang, but the music was so loud she didn’t notice and kept dancing back and forth while visible paint flecks flew off the roller in all directions.

And I took in several things at once:

One, the way she was dancing was pulling up the plastic that she’d only haphazardly laid over the newly installed carpet.

Two, she was painting the walls but the ceiling was still naked drywall.

And three and most annoying of all, her ass looked fan-fucking-tastic in those paint-smearred leggings that did absolutely nothing to hide the shapely contours of each of her plump globes and Jesus fuck, it had been way too long since I’d been laid.

“What the hell are you doing?” I barked.

Ruth shrieked and turned around, finally noticing me. As she did, her foot banged into a can of paint, knocking it over.

It spilled onto the plastic—and over the edge onto the carpet.

“Son of a bitch,” I yelled, leaping forward to try to rescue the situation. At the same time Ruth gasped and dropped to her knees.

She was trying to shove the paint back into the can with her hand, a completely fucking useless gesture at this point.

“Get out of the way,” I said, shouldering in as I dropped to my knees, trying to grasp the edges of the plastic to lift it, but it was too late. The paint had overflowed onto the carpet in a gush of gray goo.

Ruth’s eyes flashed at me, and at the same time, we both yelled, “Look at what you did!”

“What *I* did?” I scoffed. “You’re the one painting with an open can of paint right at your feet.”

Her mouth dropped open. “I was doing just fine until you came in and

scared the shit out of me.”

“Doing just fine?” I laughed. “You were painting the goddamned *walls* without painting the ceiling first.”

“What?” she spat. “You don’t paint ceilings.” Then she looked up. And blinked.

“Yeah, you do, genius. What the hell else do you think you do to them?”

“I don’t know.” She looked flustered. “I’ve never painted ceilings before.”

I looked at the splotchy wall. “Because you’ve done so much painting in your life.”

She stood up and backed away, finally. I scooped up the plastic, containing as much of the paint spill disaster as I could.

“Oh, pardon, I was just trying to help *your* ass out,” she said. “This isn’t even my house anymore.”

I glared up at her, arms full of plastic, paint oozing out onto my shirt as I strode toward the front door. “And thank fucking Christ the tornado took care of that at least.”

“You better run,” she called after me, sounding furious, “otherwise I’d kick you in the balls for saying that!”

I slammed out the front door, startling Reece and Charlie who were still in a cozy *tete-a-tete* over her phone.

Reece’s eyebrows hit his hairline. “You were only in there like three minutes. How the hell did you two piss each other off that fast?”

Chapter Two

RUTH

“**W**hy does the man you fell in love with have to be related to that oaf?” I asked as I jammed my truck into drive, spitting gravel as I sped away from the ranch I’d grown up on. Every time I came back here my heart ached because I knew there’d be this moment when I’d have to drive away again.

Because it wasn’t mine anymore. Dad had made sure of that with his gambling and terrible management, driving us into debt so that when he’d died, I’d had no choice but to sell.

Even with the insurance money from the tornado, I’d only finally been able to pay off some more creditors who’d come out of the woodwork at the news of my so-called “big payday.”

Charlie sighed and I felt bad. I knew she was stressed to the max and she didn’t need my petty bullshit with her fiancé’s twin added to it.

“Sorry,” I hurried to say. “Don’t worry, we’ll play nice.”

“I didn’t realize about the ceilings anyway. He shouldn’t have gotten mad at you. I’ll tell Reece to talk to him.”

I waved a hand, eyes on the narrow gravel road leading out of the ranch to the main road. It was dark and deer roamed all about these parts after nightfall. “No, seriously. You’ve got enough on your plate.”

“So do you. I know it was a big ask for you to take on all the wedding

planning.”

I shook my head. “Come on. We both know you did me a favor throwing this gig my way.”

“Well, if Mom wants to buy my love by spending sixty thousand dollars on a wedding, it only makes sense to send some of that my best friend’s way.”

I rolled my eyes, glad for the dark. From everything Charlie had told me about her mother, the woman sounded like a piece of work, but it was true enough about the money. And I’d lived in the area long enough to know a lot of vendors, so I was *mostly* confident I could do the job. Since I’d paid off all Dad’s debt, I was back in good standing with the community at least. People accepted that Dad was a fuck-up, but they’d finally stopped taking it out on me.

And with the money from this and the little bit I’d been able to squirrel aside from the house insurance money, hopefully I’d be able to put a down-payment on a place of my own and really start over.

First, we all just had to survive this wedding.

“So is the carpet for sure ruined?” I asked as we finally pulled onto the backroads that would take us back to Austin and the little apartment we shared there. Charlie didn’t know it yet, but I’d be leaving just a few weeks from now too. I hadn’t renewed the lease after all.

I’d had a job offer in Fort Worth; a job actually related to my degree that actually paid real money. But I hadn’t had the heart to tell Charlie yet. Not before her wedding. I’d tell her when she got back from her honeymoon, I told myself.

Charlie hesitated then answered. “Yeah, the guys were pulling the carpet up right as I was leaving. It was ruined.”

Dammit!

“But it was probably gonna get screwed up one way or the other. It was really those dumb contractors’ fault for putting down carpet before painting, anyway. Everyone knows that you work from the top down.”

“Starting with the ceiling, apparently,” I said sourly.

Charlie threw her hands up. “Well, what are we supposed to know about finishing up house construction! I knew painting needed to happen so I offered and said we could help. No one told me to start with the ceilings.”

My fingers tightened on the wheel as she continued, “Reece said he thinks they can put down some planking that looks like hardwood instead of

carpet anyway. So it will turn out better in the long run.”

“And how long will that take? It’s Sunday and your parents get in on Thursday. We need to get it decorated and make it comfortable for them. There still isn’t even a toilet installed in the ensuite. From what you’ve told me, they aren’t going to be comfortable running out to the bunkhouse to take a shit.”

Charlie busted out laughing and then clapped a hand over her mouth. “Jesus, it’s not funny. But the thought of my mom running into Buck in the middle of the night—” She started laughing again. “Reece said he lives up to his name and the dude sleeps buck naked.”

We both cringed in unison. Then I looked over at her and grinned. “Well, it would definitely make her appreciate that Reece was the cowboy you chose to fall in love with. At least he’s cute.”

But that only had her eyebrow lifting. “Oh yeah? So that means you still think Jeremiah’s cute too?”

I made a gagging noise. “Ugh, no, God. I regret ever telling you that I ever—” I shook my head, then shook my whole body. “No. Absolutely not. *Never.*”

When Charlie was silent, I looked over at her again. She just had one eyebrow lifted.

“Don’t look at me like that. Yes, when we all lived together, I might have *briefly* had a proximity-to-male-hormone-induced madness that made me briefly consider—and I do mean only briefly *consider*—taking him as a lover. But it was only ever to get the itch out of my system. And I assure you, continued exposure to him has cured me of it.”

She was still quiet until I glared at her and she lifted her hands. “Okay, okay. If you say so.”

“Good. Because I do.”

“Hey, that’s my line.”

“Ha ha.” I rolled my eyes at her. “You are so cheesy. Reece is rubbing off on you.”

“I know,” she said, sighing happily. If she didn’t sound so genuinely damn happy, I would’ve gagged. She’d dealt with her load of terrible, so I wouldn’t begrudge her finding herself an actual good guy.

Even if he did happen to have an evil twin.

“I don’t have time for a man right now, anyway,” I said. “I’ve got this wedding to pull off and...” I trailed off momentarily before finishing strong,

“a house that’s just my own to find.”

“That’s right, cause my girl’s gonna take over the *world!*”

“Hell yeah, I am. We both are!”

And then I turned on the radio and cranked it up as we sang along at the top of our lungs.

Chapter Three

RUTH

I was feeling less enthusiastic and optimistic the next day as I stood on the side of the road glaring down at my phone and sweating out every single particle of water in my body under the scorching Texas sun.

It was just my luck that I ran out of gas on *today* of all days. And that lever on the gas indicator had just bottomed out outta freaking nowhere. I'd swear I just glanced at it and it had been at a fourth of a tank!

Granted, that glance might have been yesterday... before I'd driven Charlie and me over to the ranch and back, but *still*. Back in the day Betty woulda been able to get me twice that distance on a fourth of a tank.

I held a hand over my eyes and glared down the road, then grabbed the door to the truck and climbed back inside if only to get out of the sun. It was hotter than an oven in the fires of hell inside, though, even with all the windows down. It was supposed to rain later today—a big storm, but it hadn't swept in yet.

Why the hell hadn't I gotten on a bus and ridden out of this town the moment that tornado swept my family's house away, I'd never know.

I was in the hill country and cars passed, some even slowed, but I waved them by. I'd called Charlie and she was coming by with gas.

But when the familiar truck slowed down to a stop behind me and a lanky figure climbed out, it definitely wasn't Charlie. By his rigid posture and the

permanent stick up his ass, I knew it wasn't Reece either.

I got back out of my car, hands on my hips. "Why'd they send you?" I glared at Jeremiah as he pulled out a gas can from the box in the back of his truck bed.

His eyes narrowed. "Oh, believe me, I have better things to be doing than rescuing you."

"Rescu—" The gall of this guy. "Well, give me the gas and your chivalrous act for the decade can be over and done with." I reached forward and tried to grab the gas can out of his hand, but he wouldn't budge.

"Why don't you just sit back and let me take care of it. Considering what happened with the paint can last night, I'd hate for this gas to accidentally end up all over the ground instead of in your tank."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Did you have to go to jackass school or does all this charm just come natural?"

He shook his head as if I was the one being childish. God, I wanted to grab him and just shake all his superiority out of him. But I guessed the quicker he got the gas in my engine, the sooner I'd be done with him. So I stepped back and let him open my gas cap, align the nozzle, and upend the can.

"This isn't much, but there's a station a couple miles down the road. You'll need to stop there and fill up all the way."

"I know," I said. God, did he think I was an idiot?

"And you should keep a better watch on your tank. It's best to always refill when you hit a fourth of a tank, otherwise sediment from the gas can start to build up at the bottom of the—"

"Thanks, Mansplainer, I got it," I said as the noise of the gas *glug glugging* finished and I could finally yank the gas can out of his hands and roll my gas cap back on. "You can go now."

But he just stood there. "Let's just make sure she starts up."

I rolled my eyes but shoved the gas can back toward his chest. He took it and I climbed up into the truck's cab and shoved the keys inside.

I turned the keys and the engine sputtered. But didn't catch. What the—

I pressed the gas a little and then turned the keys again. Another sputter. And still nothing.

"Goddammit!" I slammed the wheel, glancing at the clock on the dash. I was already late for dropping off the deposits I'd promised would be in by four o'clock today. Shit.

“Pop the hood,” Jeremiah said, sounding annoyingly calm.

It showed my level of desperation that I actually did what he said. Through my front windshield I saw him walk around the car and lift the hood, propping it open. I pushed out of the car and walked around to join him under the sweltering sun as he looked down at my engine.

It looked like... well, an engine. Nothing was smoking or giving away what was wrong. I looked at Jeremiah and he had a frown on his face. “Well?” I asked.

He shrugged. “No clue.”

I huffed out a laugh at that. So Mr. Great and Mighty didn’t know everything. But my mirth was quickly covered by panic.

“Shit. I have to get these deposits put down today. It’s the last day to drop off Benny’s check or else no booze.”

Beside me, Jeremiah huffed out a noise of frustration. “Fine. I’ll take you.”

I looked up at him in surprise. “You will?”

Jeremiah pulled out the rod keeping the hood up and let it slam closed. “This piece of junk isn’t taking you anywhere. And I have a feeling this wedding is gonna need all the social lubrication it can get.”

Did he really just say *lubrication*? *Shit, get your brain out of the gutter, Ruth.* I shook it off and nodded. “Okay, sure. If it’s not too far out of your way.”

He just waved a hand, as gracious about it as I suppose he was able, because he still looked as disgruntled as a goat. “You should call for a tow. Don’t expect me chauffeuring you around town to become a regular occurrence. Only reason I’m out here instead of Charlie or Reece is cause I need some materials in town and they thought I could hit two birds with one stone.”

“What are they doin’?”

Jeremiah grimaced as I locked up my truck and followed him back to his. I realized as he came around to my side to unlock my door. “They were eating lunch and planning some sort of wedding crap. Vows or some shit. I was about to head out anyway when Charlie got your text.”

That made sense. God knew he’d never volunteer to come out and help me all on his own.

“All right, where to first?” he asked once I’d climbed up inside his truck. I looked over at him and would swear this truck cab had looked way bigger

from the outside than inside. He was peering out the front windshield. “Clouds are comin’ in so we better hurry.”

I nodded absentmindedly. But now that I was closed up in here with him, breathing the same co-mingled air—I immediately turned away from him and glared out the window, shifting in my seat.

“So...” I said to the window, trying to calm my suddenly unsteady breathing. “To Benny’s?”

“Right. The liquor.” I could feel him nod even though I wasn’t looking at him. In fact, I could feel every movement of his big body on the long seat we shared as he shifted the truck into gear—it was a manual, naturally.

The truck engine was loud as we got going, but it was still too quiet in the cab of the truck. I could hear Jeremiah breathing. I turned and reached toward the radio only for my hand to run into Jeremiah’s, who’d apparently been reaching for the radio at the same time.

I yanked back and he glanced over at me, surprised.

“Oh,” I said, then felt stupid. Especially when he didn’t pause for a second in turning on the radio to some old country station. And by old, I mean *old*. Hank Williams Sr. old.

“You have *got* to be kidding me.”

“What?” Jeremiah glanced my way.

I just shook my head and reached for the dial. His big hand blocked me, though. “No way. My ride, my tunes.”

“Oh my God, you really are an old man in a young body.”

“You checking out my body?”

My mouth dropped open and furiously, I felt my cheeks heat. “You wish. I’m not *that* hard up.” I crossed my arms over my chest. But then, frustrated, I reached over and snapped the dial of the radio off. Better silence than having my ears assaulted like that.

Wisely, he didn’t say anything else. But minutes later I was second-guessing turning off the music. Maybe ancient old white man hollering about his dogs was better than being painfully aware of every movement and twitch of the man on the seat beside me. Especially since on these backwoods roads, he was constantly reaching for the long shifter between us, nearly grazing my thigh each time. My bare thigh.

Jesus, maybe I’d been lying. Maybe I *was* hard up. It was true I hadn’t had sex for a good long while. It was almost a year now. But considering the train wreck that some of my past relationships had been, I wasn’t exactly

racing to find the next Mr. Right Now.

Thankfully, we pulled into Benny's and I all but exploded out of the car as soon as it came to a stop. I expected Jeremiah to stay in the car, but a tall shadow was blocking the last of the sunlight as the clouds rolled in as I reached for the door. A raindrop splashed my cheek.

I spun on him and glared. "I'm just dropping off a check. I don't need babysitting."

His face was a placid mask. "I'm hungry. They have good burgers."

"I don't have time to stop and eat! We still have to go by the dress shop and then to get over to Wimberly to put in the check for the caterers."

His features didn't change. "Then I guess you shoulda checked your gas gauge before you left this morning."

Ugh, he was impossible. I shook my head at him and then stormed inside. He was right on my heels.

By the time I'd gone to the back and dropped off the check with Maria, Benny's partner, Jeremiah had installed himself on a barstool and his eyes were glued to the game playing on the TV up in the corner. I crossed my arms and tapped my foot impatiently. Eventually, his eyes came my way. "You tappin' away like that isn't gonna make George cook any faster."

I smiled at him hard. "I don't know, I think it just might." I started tapping louder and more obnoxiously. The rain outside began to *ping ping ping* on the tin awning of the entryway as the gentle shower became a downpour outside.

For a few minutes, he ignored me. The bar was pretty empty except for us. So I knew he could hear me. Confirmed when he finally turned to me, eyes flashing. "If I'm an old man, then you've been possessed by the demon of a goddamned *child* who doesn't know how to sit still."

I grinned even wider, delighted to have gotten under his skin. I had no clue why it felt like such a victory. "Aww, is someone having a grouchy day? You know, if you frown too much, your face will get stuck that way."

"Fine by me. I never give a shit what people say about me."

I think he even meant it. Which was infuriating. Everyone in a small town was conditioned to care what other folks thought about you. Gossip was our bread and butter, occasionally even our currency.

When Maria brought out Jeremiah's burger a few minutes later, it wasn't in a to-go box. When I made an exasperated noise, he just looked my direction and picked up his burger. "It'll take me five minutes to eat it. Five

minutes ain't gonna kill any dead things."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, fine," I said and reached over to snatch a hot, salty fry. And then another.

"Get your own," Jeremiah said with his mouth full, yanking his plate away.

"I've barely eaten today and you've got a plateful."

"Kitchen's open." He gestured toward the menu plastered on the wall. "No one's stopping you."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "No, I'm fine. I'll just wait and eat after we're done with our errands like I'd planned."

"Suit yourself." He shoved another huge bite of burger in his mouth. He'd already downed almost half of it in two bites. He really would be done in five minutes. Still, any gentleman would've shared his fries.

Ha. Who was I kidding. Jeremiah Walker? A gentleman?

"Oh, fine," he sighed. "If you're gonna make eyes about it." He shoved his plate back toward me.

I grinned and grabbed two fries, dipping them in the little bowl of ketchup at the edge of his plate.

We finished off the food and then headed out, covering our heads and dashing to the truck through the rain. We stopped off at the dress shop and then got to the caterers *right* before they closed—but at least I'd made it and the last check was delivered.

I climbed back up into the cab, slightly damp, and breathed out in relief. "All done."

"Good," Jeremiah said, "Cause I told Raul I'd be by his ranch before sunset to pick up the horse trailer I just bought off him."

"Why do you need a—"

"It's my boss's wedding present for Reece. He's driving a gelding down with him when he and his family come. And I'm buying a roan off him. Always meant to have horses around the place."

I nodded. I guess I'd known they were fixing up the stables. There just hadn't been horses on the HB Ranch for over a decade. Not since I was a kid. I had a horse named Winnie till I was eleven and we had to sell her cause we couldn't afford her upkeep. It was stupid that it made me swallow down a lump in my throat even thinking about it after all this time.

"Cool," I said, looking out the passenger seat window.

It started raining as we drove out of the small town of Wimberly, into the

hills. The views were spectacular as we crested hill after hill and the vista of the entire valley was spread out before us. I tried to enjoy the view since for once I wasn't driving.

The rain got harder though, really driving, and soon there wasn't much to see. There were a couple rainy seasons in Texas—the usual one, spring, and then again in fall sometimes during hurricane season, when any came through the Gulf Coast. I thought I remembered them talking about a tropical depression or something on the news this morning. I hadn't paid much attention because it'd been downgraded from a hurricane and it wasn't landing during the actual wedding.

I religiously stalked the ten-day forecast and while there were supposed to be showers late today, the furthest of the ten day was still clear with sunny skies, thank God.

When the road dipped down to cross one of the many streams that was usually a trickle, if not bone dry by this time of year, there was water rushing underneath the bridge.

Jeremiah grimaced as he slowed the truck down. "I don't like the look of that."

"How much farther is it?"

"Another twenty minutes."

I pushed up so I could look over my shoulder at the stream. It was still about two feet below the road but I'd lived in the area long enough to know how quick flash-flooding could hit with rain like this. At the same time, we were on a tight schedule. It wasn't like Jeremiah had another half day to waste coming all the way back out here.

I looked back at Jeremiah. "If we're quick it should be fine."

He nodded and we kept on going forward.

When we came to another low water crossing—I wasn't sure if it was the same stream curving back around again or a different one—I looked to Jeremiah, expecting him to second-guess the decision to keep going forward. But he didn't even slow down this time. He barreled on ahead; if anything, stepping on the gas even more.

Okay. Well, apparently, we were doing this.

I held onto the door as the truck bounced along the uneven road and we climbed back up another hill out of the valley.

Raul's place was at the top of a twisty hill, the dirt road turned to mud. A vehicle without four-wheel drive wouldn't have been able to even make it to

the top. Jeremiah's jaw was locked as he maneuvered the truck the last bit to the top, slipping and sliding as the wheels fought the mud for traction, but finally getting us there.

I was tempted to stay in the car while Jeremiah did his business, but my Texan blood wouldn't let me. Plus the fact that considering the conditions out there, I was damn well gonna make sure he attached the trailer correctly.

So as soon as I saw Jeremiah and another man—Raul, I assumed—line up the trailer, I jumped out to go watch as they hitched it. I was drenched in two seconds from the pouring rain, but that was nothing new.

They were just attaching the chains, two, which was regulation, and they'd gotten the ball and lynch pin on right.

Jeremiah waved me away and I went back to the car after a quick look at the trailer. It wasn't new by any stretch of the imagination. I hoped Jeremiah hadn't paid much for it. That it was "functional" was the best that could be said for it.

Rain dripped from my hair onto my face and I cranked up the heat, but only for a second, because that quickly made it feel too humid and stuffy.

Minutes later I felt a tug on the truck like they were testing the chains, then Jeremiah was yanking open the door and jumping back in the driver's seat.

"All right, let's get the hell outta here."

I nodded. Fine by me.

It took some maneuvering to turn around in the tight space of the parking area by Raul's ranch house, especially in the mud, but we finally made it and then we were trundling back down the hillside.

I could tell Jeremiah was trying to take it slow and careful, but with the added weight of the trailer behind us, it was occasionally just a controlled slide. I think we were both breathing easier once we made it back to the pavement of the main county road. My knuckles were white from clutching my door and the oh shit bar, anyway.

It was still about an hour till we got back home, but at least we were off that damn hill.

I was feeling better, till we got to the first low-water crossing, anyway. And saw that the water had somehow gained the two feet in the forty-five minutes it had taken us driving and hitching the trailer.

"Jesus," Jeremiah swore, driving over the barely dry road. I plastered my face to the window, watching as the water started sloshing at the sides of the

bridge, threatening to come over. It would, any moment. We were only just making it in time.

I didn't say anything, tense until we'd made it across the other side. I only glanced Jeremiah's way once we were across. His jaw was tense again and I wondered if he was thinking the same thing I was.

We still had another crossing to go.

And the rain wasn't letting up, not one bit.

It was getting dark out, even though theoretically it was still an hour from sunset. The clouds overhead just made it so dark.

And then we came up to the second crossing. At first, I thought it was fine. But once the headlights of the truck flashed over the road in full, I saw that what I'd at first mistaken for the dark of the asphalt on the bridge was actually a mirage—because there was at least three inches of dark brown water flowing right over top of it.

“Dammit!” Jeremiah slammed the brakes and then smacked the wheel with the palm of his hand.

I was tempted to say we should try and drive over it anyway, but I'd lived here long enough to know better. It only took a couple inches to make you hydroplane and I'd seen cars washed over bridges in less water than this.

“If we turn back, we could still get over the other bridge and find another way around,” I said, looking over my shoulder.

“Turn around, how exactly?” Jeremiah turned to me, clearly pissed. “There's no shoulder and we've got a trailer.”

“I don't know!” I threw my hands up. “A three-point turn? Or a thirty-point turn, whatever it takes.”

He shook his head. “There's no point. By the time we get back to the other crossing, it'll be flooded too.”

I made an exasperated noise. “We have to try. We can't just stay here.”

He gave me a side-long look. “Oh yes, we can.”

My mouth dropped open. “And if the water keeps rising?”

“I'll back up some. It's higher ground here, and unless the river rises another ten, fifteen feet, we'll be fine.”

Was he joking?

Apparently not, because he put the truck in reverse, and actually managed to back up in a straight line even with the trailer attached. It might've impressed me if he wasn't suggesting we just—what? Stay here until when? Until the water went back down again? That could be—

I made another exasperated noise. “We can’t just stay here! We don’t have any food or water.”

Jeremiah just reached across my lap to the dash. I withdrew in distaste from his close proximity as he rustled around and pulled out two half-crushed granola bars. He tossed one in my lap. Then he reached behind his seat and pulled out two empty water bottles. I jumped as he shoved his door open, the driving rain assaulting my ears after the relative quiet inside the cab.

I watched through the back window as he set the two bottles in the back of the truck bed, wide-lipped tops off. He propped the bottles upright between some tools he pulled out of his truck box. I could see rainwater splashing inside the clear plastic bottles, filling a fourth of an inch at the bottom of them already.

God, he was annoying when he went all MacGyver like that. I ripped the bar on my lap open and shoved a huge bite in my mouth.

It was a little stale but still, food was food, and I really hadn’t eaten anything beside the fries Jeremiah had spared me during lunch. Was I wishing I’d taken the time to order a fat, juicy burger like he had? Yes, yes, I was.

I was also wishing I hadn’t gotten out back at Raul’s because now I was stuck in these wet clothes for God knew how long. I shifted and my butt squelched on the truck seat. I grimaced. Dear God, was I really stuck here? Cold, wet, hungry, and with—?

“There,” Jeremiah announced, freshly doused with rainwater as he got back up into the cab, all but shaking his hair like a dog does when it’s wet.

I held up a hand. “God, please. Some of us are trying to get dry.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Princess. Was me trying to get you some water to drink so you don’t get dehydrated making you uncomfortable? I guess her majesty will have to get out and get her own water from now on.”

“Don’t be a jackass. You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Do I?”

I rolled my eyes. He was determined to be impossible. I shoved another bite of the granola bar into my mouth, not taking the bait.

But the silence in the cab with only the rain continuing to pelt the front windshield quickly grew unnerving.

“So what now?” I asked as soon as I’d swallowed.

“Now we wait.” He turned off the truck and stretched his legs out—well, as much as he could considering he couldn’t exactly lean his seat back very

far before bumping into the back of the truck. And his legs were too dang long to stretch out straight. He grabbed his cowboy hat off the seat between us and settled it low over his head so it covered his eyes.

“You’re going to take a nap? Seriously?”

“Don’t see what else there is to do. Seems like a fine idea to me.”

I made an exasperated noise. “We’re both wet to the bone and stuck in the middle of nowhere and taking a *nap* is your answer?”

He gave a long-suffering sigh and tipped his hat back so he could look at me. “And what exactly do *you* think we should do.”

I lifted my cell phone. “Uh, how about we call for help?”

Jeremiah just nodded toward the low-water crossing. “And who exactly do you think is gonna be able to cross that and rescue us?”

“I don’t know. A firetruck?”

He scoffed. “We aren’t in danger and it’s hardly an emergency. You wanna waste taxpayers’ hard-earned money just cause you don’t want to spend an uncomfortable night in a truck?”

Spend the *night*? He thought we’d be here all night? But looking at the water that seemed several inches higher already rushing over the road... dammit, he was right.

“Plus, they might just tell us to stay put anyway—I’m not sure a rig could make it across that any better than we could.”

“And if it keeps rising? What if we *do* get in real danger and we could’ve been saved if we’d only called earlier?” I shook my head at him and started dialing for help... except I had no bars. A frequent problem out here in the nooks and crannies of the hill country. “Dammit! Give me your phone.”

He reached in the pocket of his jeans, which were cemented to his lean legs by the rain and pulled out his phone. But his was the same. No service. “Ugh,” I said in frustration, handing it back to him.

“Like I said,” he settled his hat back over his eyes. “We wait.”

How was he so damn calm about all this? I wasn’t good with sitting still. I felt like I wanted to crawl out of my skin being stuck in the small space. It wasn’t that I was claustrophobic exactly... I just preferred open space where I could move and see the big wide-open sky overhead—and not have a big male body beside me breathing so loud and suffocating all the available air.

I pulled my phone back out and tapped on Solitaire. Thank God I at least had a few games already downloaded that I could play offline.

But an hour later the phone had beat me more times than I’d beaten it,

and as far as I could tell, Jeremiah wasn't even sleeping as often as he was shifting like he couldn't get comfortable. And still, the rain hadn't let up.

"This is ridiculous," I said, slamming my phone down on the seat between us. "I'm going to go out of my mind with boredom. At least talk to me so I don't go freaking nuts."

At first, he didn't react, but finally, he tipped his hat back, exposing his long-suffering facial features as he looked my way. "Fine. What do you want to talk about?"

"I don't know—just talk. Like normal people do. You don't have to make it awkward."

"Wow, you make such an inviting proposition. No thanks, I think I'll keep napping."

I snatched the brim of his hat and yanked it away before he could resettle it over his face. "Oh cut the bullshit, you aren't even sleeping."

He glared my way. "Has any one ever told you that you are the most annoying human they've ever spent time with in their lives?"

"No. Most people find me delightful." I plopped his ten-gallon hat on my own head and smiled prettily at him. To which I got an eye roll, naturally.

"Sorry, I don't do fanclubs."

"Your loss," I sing-songed. "Or we could make this interesting and play five-card stud if you aren't in the mood for talking. I've got a deck of cards in my purse."

He squinted at me. "You just carry around a deck of cards with you everywhere you go?"

I just stared back. "Yeah. Sometimes it takes a long time for food to come at restaurants. And some of us know how to have fun in our lives."

"While the rest of us are busy working."

"Oh, please," I said, reaching down between my feet and pulling up my purse. "I have a job that's starting after the wedding stuff slows down. A good job. Where I'll go into an office and everything."

"An office? Where you have to get dressed up and shit?"

"Yeah, where I get dressed up and shit. Some of us are actual grownups. We can't all just roll around in the mud with the cows our whole lives."

He guffawed. "That's rich coming from you. Plus, I can't think of anything more grown up than having the well-being of other living creatures resting on your shoulders. There's no days off, no down time, you know that. This new job, you get to kick off at what? Five o'clock every day?"

I sighed. This conversation was depressing me and that was the opposite of why I'd brought up my new job. I was trying to be excited about it. "I know. And I know I'm gonna miss being out with the animals and the rhythms of the ranch."

He frowned, not used to me backing down. "You couldn't find any other ranch work?"

I scoffed. "What am I gonna do, go try to be a hand somewhere? I'm used to running the joint. You know the pay's shit and where are they even gonna put me? In a bunkhouse? I don't think so." I shook my head. "I gotta go forward, and this is where it's taking me. I met the regional manager of this start up, FarmGro, when I interviewed. Rick's a great guy. He thinks I'll be a good fit."

"I bet he does," Jeremiah said under his breath.

I smacked him on the arm. "Not like that. Jesus."

He shrugged. "So what exactly are you gonna do for this Rick guy?"

"Nothing. I don't even work for him. I'll be a Precision Technology Specialist."

"A what now?"

"I'll do a bunch of things. Install software for growers, train them how to use it, and provide tech support. Then we'll collect all the data and maps and analyze everything. I'll do it all, start to finish, even traveling out to the farms to talk to them about what we've discovered about their yield cycles."

I was getting excited again talking about it. I'd actually be able to put my ag degree to use. Not at all in the way I *thought* I would by running my own ranch—but still in a really practical way that would help farmers get better usage out of their land, water, and resources. Rick had an amazing vision with his startup. He was basically trying to save the planet—in his small way, anyway. It was inspiring, and I was excited to be a part of it. Well, I was trying to be excited.

"So, what? You'll live in Austin and just drive out to farms in the hill country?"

I bit my lip as I shuffled the cards. "Well, I'll do my training in Dripping Springs shadowing with a Tech Specialist there, but if everything goes well, then I'll be moving to Fort Worth at the end of the year." Shit, why did I just tell him that? I looked up. "Don't tell Charlie, though. I haven't told her yet, what with the wedding and everything she's got on her plate right now."

Jeremiah's face was blank.

“At least you’ll finally be rid of me, right?” I tried to joke.

“Don’t you think your best friend deserves the truth? Especially since she sent the wedding gig your way. I thought the whole reason was so you could put down money for a house around here.”

“I’m still gonna use the money for a down payment on a house. Just... not around here.”

Jeremiah blew out a breath. “That’s cold.”

I blinked, cut by his judgement. “That’s not fair. She’s got her whole life ahead of her here. And I’ve got—” I threw my hands up in the air. “Nothing! Just memories. Not a future. Charlie would want the best for me. Sorry if that’s too much for your pea brain to comprehend.” I crossed my arms over my chest, the cards forgotten on the bench between us.

“Oh, my pea brain gets it well enough. I understand loyalty and family.”

“Yeah, well,” I cut my eyes toward his judgmental face, “all my family’s dead.”

He wasn’t moved. “It’s not just the people you’re born to. Charlie’s your family.”

“It’s not like I’m cutting her off. Why do you always have to be such an asshole? I’ll come visit her every chance I get. People change and move apart. Just because you suffocate your brother and don’t know how to let him have a life of his own doesn’t mean that’s how everybody does it.”

I glared out my window, head turned away from him. If it wasn’t pouring cats and dogs outside, I would’ve shoved out of the truck. Anything to get away from this asshole and his judgmental, asinine—

I waved a hand to fan myself. God, it was getting stuffy in here. I turned back toward Jeremiah, but only so I could reach across him and turn the key to the ignition.

“What are you doing?” he asked, sounding aggravated.

I glared at him. “Turning on the truck, duh. It’s a thousand degrees in here and humid as hell. I need the A/C.”

He put his hand on mine to stop me. “We don’t have that much gas. You’ll just have to suffer in silence, Princess.”

To which I leaned over even further to look at his gas gauge. It was teetering at a little under a fourth of a tank. “Oh, that’s rich,” I said, withdrawing my hand. “So what was all that bullshit about never letting your tank get near a fourth because of the sediment, huh?”

He glared at me, his jaw tense. “If I hadn’t been driving *your* ass around

town all day long, I would've stopped to fill up.”

“Yeah, right.” I patted his thigh. “Or you love to be Mr. Know-It-All when really, you're just as human as the rest of us. Face it.”

Again his hand came down toward mine, but instead of swatting it away, his big man paw clasped around my wrist. “Don't test me, little girl.”

I could feel my pulse pounding underneath his grip.

I all but bared my teeth at him as I leaned into his space. “I'll test you if I want to. Maybe that's your problem. You don't have enough people in your life who dare talk back to you.”

The space in the cab seemed to steam up even hotter, the windows all fogging as his eyes went dark. “I know one way to shut you up.”

I smirked at him, feeling electricity race down my body. “I'd love to see you try.”

And then he wrenched me forward into his lap and our lips smashed together.

Chapter Four

JEREMIAH

I was kissing Ruth. I hated Ruth. Ruth hated me.

But she was kissing me and tugging at the buttons on my worn denim shirt as if for once in our lives, we were on the exact same page.

And dammit, we were.

I grabbed her plump ass and dragged her all the way on top of me. The erection that had suddenly sprung up hard as iron was happy, so happy, to feel all of her soft, womanly heat against it.

Fuck, she felt good.

And these damn shorts she had on. I could reach right up them and there—oh fuck, there was her skin. Her ass. I squeezed it in my hands and gloried in how it felt. After all these goddamn months of watching her strut it in front of me.

Then she started sucking on my neck and *fuck*—

I yanked back from her and took her lips again cause if she kept sucking my neck like that, I was gonna embarrass myself and come before I meant to.

And now that this was finally fucking happening, no way was it gonna slip away from me.

After she had enough buttons undone on my shirt, I pulled it off over my head. It wasn't easy since it was still wet, and it near got stuck on my shoulders. But Ruth, for once in her life, was helpful instead of just laughing

and nit-picking. She helped yank it off the rest of the way.

And then she pulled off her own and I had to stop, astounded by the perky fucking breasts that I'd only fantasized about heretofore.

I pressed her back to the steering wheel as I finally got my mouth on those tits. The horn honked and I didn't care, putting an arm around her back to brace her from the wheel as I licked and bit at her dusky pink nipple. The way she cried out and writhed on my lap told me she was liking everything I was doing.

She dug her hands into my hair and held me against her breast, so I suckled harder, and fuck, the way her nipple hardened into a tight peak under my tongue. She cried out in pleasure and that was it—I had to feel her.

The hand I had free I dove down to unbutton her shorts. She gyrated against my hand. It took way too fucking long to figure out the button, but I managed, and then I was slipping my hand down underneath her black lace panties.

I had to pull back and watch. She watched too as I slid my hand down her center. My work-tanned hand was dark against her pale belly. I'd exposed the top of her cunt and the sweet little curls there. Fuck, I loved a natural woman.

My breath caught as I slid my middle finger lower and I hit her moist center. She jerked forwards on my lap, her legs sliding open wider, her back arching.

"That's right, baby," I murmured, and when I glanced up, her eyes were wide and glazed.

I pulled my hand back from her center and sucked the finger drenched with her into my mouth. If I thought her eyes were lust-glazed before, it was nothing to when I did that. She jerked again on my lap and that was when I got it.

She'd never been fucked by a real man before, had she?

She was so intimidating; she'd probably only fucked little boys she thought she could control. Oh, honey.

I dropped my hand back down and I took my time, letting the anticipation build. And when I reached her center, I felt around for that little bud at the top of her slit.

Her entire body reacted when I made contact. Fuck, but she was so responsive. So on fire for it. For my touch.

How long since she'd properly shaken with a full-body orgasm? Maybe that was why she was wound so goddamn tight all the time.

I circled her clit lazily, massaging her lower back with my other hand, right at the top of her ass crack.

“W-why are we still wearing so many clothes?” she asked hoarsely.

“Because, sweetheart,” I said, dipping my hand at her back lower so I was clutching one ass cheek and pulling her tighter to me. Simultaneously, as I felt more and more moisture slicking her center, I dipped my finger lower to massage around her entrance. “Some things are worth the fucking wait.”

Her mouth dropped open like she was gonna say something else, but I shifted my hand in the front so I could really get deep and I slipped my finger inside her, feeling all along her fleshy walls as I went. And yep, there it was. The inside nubbin—the G spot. I started to massage around it while I dipped my head back to her breasts.

Rhythmically, I tugged her forward and backward over my pants-covered cock with my hand on her ass, other hand buried up her center. I surrounded her, owned her completely, and her responses rewarded me.

She became more and more lost to my caresses, to my command.

In the way I’d always fantasized she would.

Because I couldn’t fucking lie anymore.

I’d dreamed about this. Far too many nights alone, knowing she was just down the hall. All the discipline it had taken not to open my door and walk the ten feet to her room seemed impossible now. How had I managed all those months not to make up some excuse so I could knock on her door? To see her in a robe she’d hastily pulled on, her cheeks flushed?

I’d dreamed of the way I’d peel that robe right off. Of how I’d shove her against the door, a hand over her mouth to make sure she didn’t make a noise, just enough light to see the thrill and excitement in her eyes...

But it was too complicated. We’d lived in the same house. And then when she left and her best friend was marrying my brother—

I bit down hard on her nipple and she screamed. As she came. Hard.

I felt her contract deliciously around my hand.

I smiled and didn’t let up. Because now here we were. Now here she was, her hot body over me. No, now that I finally had her in my arms, I wouldn’t let up. Not until we’d both finally worked each other out of our damn systems.

Only when she was gasping and limp on top of me did I lift my head from her red, slightly abused nipples to look her in the eye.

“Do you want more?”

Her eyes were wide, pupils blown. She was still gasping for air. But she clenched her thighs around mine and obviously I hadn't done my job to the fullest because she was still clear-headed enough to be able to say, "Are you kidding? Fuck yeah, I want more. I'm on the pill and I'm clean. If you are too, then I want you to get out that big cock I can feel under my ass and fuck me with it."

Chapter Five

RUTH

He still had his hand buried up my pussy and he never stopped circling as he looked me in the eye. “I’m not sure that’s such a good idea, honey.”

My body convulsed around his fingers at the word *honey*. I’d be mad about that later. Right now I just really needed him to fuck me. “Why not? I feel how hard you are.”

“I’m not sure you can handle it the way I like it,” he said. But he wasn’t smirking or talking down to me. And his talented, oh-so-talented fingers were still teasing me.

The truth was, he’d just made me come harder than I ever had in my entire life. Even when I masturbated on my own. So he was nuts if he thought I was gonna let this go without pushing. “Whatever you can dish out, I can take.”

One of his eyebrows just lifted. “There’s not enough space in this cab.”

I looked out the window. The rain wasn’t letting up. I breathed out, difficult considering the way he was still playing with me. “Well, there’s no one to see, is there. And I don’t mind getting a little wet.”

This time he did smirk, slipping his fingers back and forth inside me. “That’s clear.”

I breathed out hard. “So what are we waiting for?”

I wasn't sure exactly what I was asking for, but I knew in this moment I wanted it more than anything else I'd wanted in a long while. And when he shoved open his door, my heart rate spiked in thrilled excitement. Like I was about to go skydiving or bungee-jumping. God, that was what this felt like. Leaping into empty air, having no idea if I'd be caught on the other side.

But now that I'd given Jeremiah the go ahead, he was moving with sure movements. He rolled down the window, which I didn't understand at first. Until he unspooled the seatbelt and pulled it through the crack in the window.

We were far enough from the bridge and around a thickly forested curve that even if there were people stopped on the other side, we couldn't see them. More importantly, they couldn't see us.

And then Jeremiah's hands were on me, helping me down out of the truck and then yanking down my shorts and panties all at the same time. Rain drenched us both as he manhandled me. Still, I let him. Because I... I liked it.

And I liked watching him shuck his own jeans and boxers and toss them with my shorts back into the truck. He stood there, completely naked except for his boots, as rain pelted him. He had to be cold but his cock hung long and hard against his thigh. And he looked at me without shame, eyes dark and hooded as he skewered me with his gaze.

"Hands," he demanded.

Blinking, I held my hands forward. He gripped one wrist and jerked it up in a smooth but not rough motion. He reached back through the window for the seatbelt, pulling my hands above my head and looping the seatbelt around my wrists several times, pinning them above my head, my back to the truck.

And then he paused, grinning as the rain fell in sheets all around us, drenching us. He grabbed his cock and came toward me. Rain dripped down my face and ran into my open mouth.

In spite of the chill, I'd never been so hot. Being tied up in the middle of nowhere during a storm—it should have been crazy. And it was. Crazy fucking hot. Especially as this giant of a man came toward me with his huge cock and I knew exactly what he was going to do with it. Or thought I did.

Because yes, he came against me and lodged the tip of himself at my center. But he didn't immediately thrust inside. Instead, he grabbed my ass and hiked my leg up around him, pinning me between him and the truck.

"Finally," he growled through the noise of the pounding rain, "I have you exactly where I want you." He smacked at my breast from the underside and I jolted.

Whoa. This was exactly where he'd wanted me? For how long?

But there was barely a moment to form the question before he was continuing his barrage of my breasts. Soft smacks at first that turned more and more intentional.

His cock flexed at my center, the tip nudging inside just a little.

Still he didn't thrust, even as I moved restlessly against him with my hips. Good God, I'd never had anyone ever—well, do anything like any of this. I strained against the seatbelt pinning my wrists above my head. I wanted to touch him. To pull him to me, to scratch at his back. To do something to let out the wildness he was making rear up in me—a wildness I'd only glimpsed but never... never like this, and never with anyone else before.

When he reached down with both hands and grasped my buttocks finally lifting me—easily, I might add, and God but that was hot—against the truck, I arched my back toward him which pushed my breasts out.

“Is this what you want?” he asked, thrusting his hips forward just the tiniest bit so that I could feel more of him against my sex.

I nodded fervently as the rain continued pelting my face.

“Out loud,” he demanded. Goddamn him.

“Just fuck me already,” I shouted in his face.

He paused and smiled, a slow creeping smile, like he might just decide not to, now that he had me all trussed up and panting.

I narrowed my eyes at him, about to start swearing a blue streak, but then — “Oh!” I cried out as he finally thrust forward and filled me.

And when I say filled me, I do mean *filled me*. To the brim.

I was so full. Full of him.

He shoved deep to the root and it wasn't a kind of mindless fuck. Because while he held me pinned to the truck with one hand clutching my ass and his cock sheathed deep inside me, his other hand came to my face. He grasped me underneath my chin so that there was nothing to do except blink away the rain and look him dead in the eye as he began moving his hips, fucking me deep and hard.

Every slide of his shaft through my already incredibly sensitized pussy—oh God. And the way our chests slid together—the bristle of his chest hair against my nipples.

I arched toward him, trying to kiss him. Trying for anything to grasp back some of the control, but he just shook his head and gripped my chin tighter.

I got the message.

I wasn't in control here.

For our clashes outside of this moment, I could challenge him all I liked, but here, in this animal space of body against body, he was the alpha.

And I could submit and experience the most mind-blowing pleasure I'd never even known existed or—

I mean, there really was no other alternative. I wanted on this train for every stop, every inch of track laid until the bitter end.

But that still didn't mean I couldn't fucking tease him into getting what I wanted, though. So I stuck my tongue out and licked his thumb that was closest, toying with just the tip.

I felt his cock stiffen and jolt inside me. I was affecting him just as much as he was me. Good.

He let go of my chin, but only so he could grasp the hair at the nape of my neck and drag my head backward as he continued to fuck me, harder now, rougher.

And when his mouth dropped to the sensitive flesh of my neck, right above my collarbone—

I howled into the rain and came hard around his cock, clenching and milking him.

His head came up and, oh God, his face was glorious, all clenched and bulging veins as he threw his head back and grabbed my hips with both hands as he fucked me harder still, our hips slapping against one another until he emptied himself inside me.

He pulled out right away, and his cum slipped down the center of my legs.

He reached down between us and drew back up with his cupped hands, smearing the mixture of us all over my heaving breasts even as the rain immediately washed it away.

It was still the fucking hottest thing I'd ever seen in my life, and the mesmerized, satiated look on his face as he did it—holy shit!

An aftershock sent my legs spasming, and he looked up at me, a boyish grin on his face as he reached back down between my legs. Not for more cum this time but to massage me where I was so sensitive. I immediately cried out and shied back from him against the truck.

But he just shook his head at me. "You've got one more for me, I know you do."

My mouth dropped open and rain dribbled in over my lips, down my

tongue. And he stood closer, his chest rubbing against mine as he worked two fingers inside me.

He was crazy. I'd already come twice, and so goddamn hard, I couldn't—

But then my entire body jolted as he started to massage that spot inside me. Jesus fuck, I'd thought the G-spot was an urban legend before tonight. And here he was, finding it time after time after—

I wailed as the orgasm started, my already sensitized body on edge and so ready for it.

And only now did he kiss me, swallowing and lapping up my lips and my tongue as I screamed, him never letting up those working, talented fingers of his.

It felt like minutes... or hours later after I'd collapsed on him, the world having gone so bright with the orgasm and then beautifully dim, rain dancing down my hot flesh, him cradling my head against his shoulder, that he finally traced his fingers up my arm and started unraveling the seat belt.

Oh... yeah. Right. I flexed my fingers, and they did feel a little numb. I blinked, feeling like I was coming back from a deep fog. What the—

He rubbed my hand to warm it up, and yeah, I guessed it was cold. I was actually cold all the way through really, standing out here in the rain. He released my other hand and I sort of fell against him. He was ready for me, though, and he caught me, one arm going underneath my shoulders and around my back.

"Here we go," he said gently, opening the door to the truck and helping me climb back in.

All my limbs felt limp as wet noodles. Seriously, what the hell? I'd never felt like this after sex. I mean, no, I'd never had toe-curling sex while being tied up in the middle of a rainstorm with Jeremiah Walker obviously, but still! What the fuck!

I crawled over to my side of the truck cab, glad now for the warmth inside.

Jeremiah came in after me. Our wet clothes were twisted on the floor of the cab. I shivered and crossed my arms over my chest, still blinking a little in shock at what we'd just done. I felt almost embarrassed to look at Jeremiah. We were both still completely buck naked.

"Come here," he said, breaking the silence, and I dared to look up at him. He had one arm held out.

When I didn't move, he slid over the bench seat toward me and pulled me

into his arms. I collapsed against him.

He massaged my wrists and I jumped a little. They were sore, I hadn't even realized, from being bound in the seatbelts. I blinked up at him but he just pressed my head back down against his chest. "Hush now," he said, his voice deep and rumbling. "Just rest now."

And for once in my life, I didn't challenge him. I did what he said. I rested my head against his chest, listened to his steady heartbeat, and lost myself in the warmth of him.

Chapter Six

JEREMIAH

Holding her in my arms after what we'd just—
Fuck, I hadn't let myself go like that in... years. And she was the last woman in the world I ever expected to with, no matter my stupid fantasies.

I dropped my head back against the headrest.

This was a part of myself I'd pushed down successfully for so long. Why the hell did it have to bust out now? This goddamn woman. She'd pushed my buttons at every turn from the very beginning.

It was still no excuse. There was a reason I'd held myself back from pursuing anything with her. It was impossible.

But really, it was fine. We hadn't really done any damage. One wild fuck during a storm could be forgotten.

She'd wake up tomorrow morning and we'd put on our clothes and go back to hating each other. Everything would be normal again. We'd both forget this ever happened.

I could forget the warm grip of her body on my cock and the sweet way she'd given in to my every command. I *could*.

Or at least I could bury it down with all the other shit from my past that I never let see the light of day.

I'd be fine.

Everything would be *fine*. Just like always. Just like I always made it.

I closed my eyes and tried to drift. It was uncomfortable and cramped in the cab but at least outside the rain had finally slowed. Still hadn't stopped, but it had slowed as the sun set and full dark settled all around us.

I should've made her drink some water before I let her fall asleep. I'd make sure she did when she woke up.

My cock was thick and hard underneath her—I wasn't sure how it was supposed to be anything else with a hot, gorgeous woman sprawled across me.

But eventually I was able to drift off. I didn't know how long for when suddenly Ruth was stirring on top of me and sitting up.

And then freaking out.

"Holy shit. Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit," she just kept saying over and over. She tumbled off of me.

"What?" I asked. She just kept saying, "holy shit," though, and before I could stop her, she'd opened her car door and was scrambling out.

"Ruth, Jesus, where the fuck do you think you're going?"

"I've gotta pee," she shouted back at me.

"Do you even know where you're going? Take your phone at least for a light!"

"I'm fine!"

I huffed out a frustrated breath, then followed her anyway. She could get over me seeing her piss. I wasn't letting her out of my sight. We were basically in the middle of the woods, and this was bobcat country. I'd seen one out on the ranch a couple months back. She'd lived here all her life so she knew it too.

There was barely a sliver of moonlight out so I was only moving by the sound of her footsteps and the rustle of bushes near the edge of the road.

"I won't look," I said.

She shrieked, jumping up. "Jesus, I told you to stay in the truck!"

"Actually, you said you were fine, and I determined you'd be safer if I came along. The buddy system is best in the wilderness."

She scoffed. "I'm barely fifteen feet from the truck!"

"And I feel better when I'm close."

"Jesus, you really are a control freak."

I didn't bother denying it.

"Hold your hands over your ears. I don't want you listening to me pee."

I rolled my eyes, not that she could see it. “I’m a guy. I’ve heard plenty of people pee before.”

“Not me!”

“Fine.” Anything to get her back in the truck. I put my hands over my ears. I could just make out her crouching back down.

I dutifully waited until she stood back up. “My turn.”

She made a disgusted noise. “I’m sure you’ll be fine against the woodland creatures. I’ll be in the truck.”

“Get some water from the back. I don’t want you getting dehydrated.”

“Control freak,” she hissed under her breath as she passed. I could just make out her shaking her head. I could also make out her breasts jiggling. I quickly looked away. Having a hard-on wouldn’t help me at the moment.

But right then, a wolf howled, I couldn’t tell how near. And she grasped for my bicep. “How about you bring the water in. I’ll be in the truck cab.” And then I heard her scrambling steps as she raced back to the truck.

After she was gone, all I could feel was the heat of her touch ghosting against my arm. She’d been afraid and she’d reached for me. It was disturbing how much I liked that. I quickly took care of business and then climbed up into the back of the truck to retrieve the two now-full bottles of water.

Ruth was huddled in the corner of her side of the cab when I climbed back in. She was holding up her shirt and shaking it out.

“Still wet?” I asked, knowing it was.

“Do you think it’ll be dry by morning?”

“We could turn on the truck for a while and put the shirts over the vents. The denim probably won’t be dry till morning. Maybe not even then.”

“Even just getting my bra and underwear dry would be a start,” she said. “And having some light for a little bit. It’s so dark and creepy out here.” We were close enough that I could feel her shudder. It made me want to pull her back in my arms but then I reminded myself that, right, that was over and done with. That was how it had to be.

I reached for the keys and started up the ignition. “Watch your eyes, gonna turn on the light.”

I punched on the overhead light. When I looked over at Ruth, goddamn, I was smacked all over again by the beauty of her, acres of beautiful pale skin. The way she was curled up, I couldn’t see much except her long legs and the side of her ass. I immediately glanced away, though pulling my eyes off her

took effort.

“Here, I’ll turn on the heat,” I said, keeping my eyes averted. “You can put your, uh, underthings against the vents to get them dry.”

“Kay. Thanks.”

I felt her scramble beside me and it had never been so difficult to be a gentleman.

Finally she was holding up the thin scraps of the little lacy thing she called a bra and her cotton panties against the two vents on her side.

“Wanna hand me your shirt? I can hold it up to these vents. And here, some water.” I handed her one of the full bottles of water we’d collected earlier.

“Oh. Sure. Thanks.”

How had we gone from bickering to wild sex to this stilted politeness? All I could say was that I hoped she was also doing the genteel thing and not looking ’cause my cock had a mind all its own and cared fuck-all about being gentlemanly. All it knew was that the slick cunny he’d been buried in hours ago was feet away and he wanted to be buried back there. Especially as I watched her throat as she swallowed. I reached blindly for the other bottle and drank some too.

It was from a distraction. Not when I was locked in this space with her. In spite of all my good intentions, I was hard. I tried to adjust myself but I wasn’t small, and yeah, buck naked here.

Out of my peripheral vision, I could tell that Ruth was handing me her shirt, so I reached out for it.

And as our fingers made contact, she gasped.

I didn’t think about it, it was instinctual. I looked over at her face to make sure she was okay. Which was when I saw where she was looking—straight at my lap. My cock jumped at seeing the way her mouth had dropped open, at the glimpse of her sweet little pink tongue.

Then she yanked her eyes up to mine and she realized she’d been caught. Her chest heaved up and down.

And my control snapped.

Fuck restraint.

“Touch yourself,” I growled.

“What?” she gasped.

“I wanna see how you touch yourself when you’re alone. Do it.”

Her breath hitched. And then she dropped the items she was holding to

the vents and her hand moved haltingly down her body.

“What are we doing?” she whispered.

“You’re touching your pussy and showing me how you make yourself come. That’s what we’re doing. And then I’ll probably fuck you again,” I answered honestly.

Her body spasmed at my words and her legs fell open, exposing fully in the light of the cab what I’d only been able to glimpse earlier.

And Jesus *fuck*, but she had a beautiful pussy.

“That’s right,” I said low and dark. “Spread yourself and show me.”

She let out a little moan but did what I said.

“Fuck,” I whispered, glad I’d just drunk some water because already my mouth felt dry.

Her pussy was beautiful, petal pink, and so wet she glistened in the light. The juxtaposition of her—acerbic Ruth, always ready to bite my head off—with her face all soft and vulnerable, opening her legs wide to me.

I swallowed hard and clenched my fist so I didn’t reach out for her. Not yet. No, I’d have my show first.

“Touch yourself,” I said again, my voice raw and brusque. “Make yourself come. I wanna see.”

I knew the moment her middle finger made contact with her flesh, because her entire body jolted.

My gaze flew up from her hand to her face, where her hazel eyes were smoky as they watched me watching her. But immediately they dropped and a blush rose to her cheeks. I’d embarrassed her.

But she didn’t stop touching herself. She was no wilting flower. She was Ruth. Bold, ballsy, take no prisoners. Even now. Because she was daring to do this, to do the one thing I knew terrified her most—submit to me.

And so I watched, eyes glued to her as she closed her eyes and bit the nubbin in the center of her top lip. She didn’t try to be like a porn star. At first, she barely made a sound. And she didn’t grab at her breasts or run her hands up and down her body.

Not until the end, anyway, when the hand not grinding at her clit rose to her breast. She didn’t palm it gently or plump it in a way I’d seen women do before. No, it was clear she was doing what I’d asked.

She squeezed the tips of her breasts *hard*, then harder still, forcing her nipples into stiff peaks, plucking at the other breast when it didn’t harden as quickly as she wanted. She started writhing on the seat, squeezed her nipple

and worked her pussy—and then came the cries.

“Oh— oh God. *Fuck—*”

Her eyes flew open, like she was surprised at how hard the orgasm was hitting her. And when they did, her eyes made searing contact with mine.

Enough was enough. I was hard as a goddamned stone, and seeing that she could just allow herself to come apart so genuinely like that in front of me, without artifice or pretending—goddammit, this *woman—*

I shifted on the seat, one hand on my cock, and I guided my seeking tip toward her dripping center.

Her eyes went wide again as I came near. It wasn't fear I saw there, but again that surprise. Maybe it was still the surprise that kept sparking through me. Was this really happening. Ruth— Me and—

Ruth's bared breasts and legs wide to receive—

My stiff cock brushing against the wet lips of her vulva.

Her eyes rolled at the contact and she moaned, reaching a hand to guide me toward her. I gave my head a shake and reached, grasping her around the wrist.

No touching, I said by pressing her wrist back against the seat back.

Her eyes flared and I smiled, snatching her other wrist up. She sucked in a breath and for a moment, her bicep flexed against my grip, like she might pull away. But in the end, it was only a moment of tension, her dark eyes flashing to mine before she gave in to me.

The power that swelled in my chest from her giving in, especially knowing it was a sacrifice willingly given—oh, I would reward her.

“Tell me you want it,” I demanded. “Beg.”

“P-please,” she said, her voice shaking a little. “Please fuck me.”

I braced my knee on the bench seat, shifted her underneath me, and slid home.

Chapter Seven

RUTH

By the time the sun rose, I was aching, sore, and had come more times in a twelve-hour period than I ever imagined was possible.

It was... uh, definitely one way to pass the time while being stranded between two suddenly roaring rivers.

We'd barely slept—just brief naps against Jeremiah's chest before either he or I would reach for one another again. And then we'd rearrange ourselves in the small cab. Me on my back on the bench seat. Me riding him while he sat in the passenger's seat, hands clenching my thighs. Me on my hands and knees while he stood on the nerf bar step up into the truck, driving so deep his balls slapped my ass.

I had been thoroughly fucked, eaten out, massaged, and then... cuddled.

Cuddled by Jeremiah.

We'd obviously entered into some strange pocket universe outside of normal time and space. That was all I could think as I looked, exhausted, out the window as the sun rose, pink streaking the finally clear sky.

Jeremiah stirred underneath me. I was sleeping all but on top of him, though I was shocked he'd been comfortable enough to actually fall asleep, lounged half on the bench, his long legs bent awkwardly into the footwell below—and with me tucked behind and half on top of him.

I scooted back against the door to give him space to sit up.

We were still both absolutely naked.

He blinked and rubbed a fist against one eye. “Morning already? We should check the stream to see if it’s passable.”

Right. The stream. It was such a shockingly prosaic proposition that it took me a second to answer.

“Wanna hand me my shirt?” he asked.

Of course. He couldn’t exactly walk over to check the stream naked. What if a car was stopped on the other side, waiting for the water to lower?

Because shit, it was officially tomorrow.

And that meant it was time to go back to the real world.

I was just handing Jeremiah his shirt and pulling mine back on over my head after securing my bra when—

A truck drove past.

My head swung to Jeremiah, eyes wide.

“I guess the water’s lowered enough that it’s passable,” Jeremiah said.

“No shit.” Still, I blinked a couple times as Jeremiah reached down into the passenger wheel well for his boxers and jeans.

I scrambled for my underwear and shorts. The underwear were more dry than the denim shorts but I pulled them both on anyway.

Jeremiah had to step out of the truck to put his jeans back on and I averted my gaze from his taut bare ass as he climbed out, my cheeks flaming.

Which was ridiculous, considering what we’d been doing all evening. I mean, we’d used some napkins he had stashed in his glove compartment to clean me up, but I was still messy with his cum, he’d emptied into me so many times. My breath caught at the memories and I was torn between wanting to run to a shower right away and wanting to linger with the scent of him all over me for the day at least as a reminder to prove to myself that this had all actually *happened*.

If not for the soreness between my legs, I might be tempted to think it was all a fever dream.

Especially when Jeremiah climbed back in the truck, his face completely composed and no-nonsense.

“We should hurry back to the ranch. They’ll be worried about us not coming home last night.”

I nodded, reaching down and pulling my cell phone out. “I’ll call them as soon as we— Well, I would have if my battery hadn’t died.”

Jeremiah reached for his phone and plugged it into a wire coming from

the center console as he turned on the truck. “You can text them from my phone as soon as we get somewhere there’s service.”

I nodded, looking at my lap.

Then he’d pulled the truck into drive and we were pulling forward, the trailer behind us clanking as it tugged along.

We rounded the corner and there was the stream that had trapped us last night. White water raced underneath the bridge, but at least it was an inch below the road now. It must have only just become passable.

Jeremiah took it slow as our truck and trailer rattled over, and then, just like that, we were on the other side. I couldn’t help looking over my shoulder out the back window.

It didn’t look like anything special, so why did I feel like our night back there had changed everything? I snuck a look at Jeremiah, but his face was unreadable.

I was just opening my mouth to ask what all this meant, if we were supposed to pretend like last night hadn’t happened or what, when Jeremiah reached over and switched the radio on to a morning news station.

They talked about the night rainstorms that had caused flash-flooding in the area.

He didn’t say anything else. He’d been so kind and accommodating last night, why couldn’t he sense I needed him to say something about all that had happened?

I started to reach out for him, maybe to touch his arm or his thigh. He must have sensed me because his head whipped my direction. “Don’t touch me,” he snapped.

I jerked my hand back. *Okay.* So he was still a jackass outside of... outside of the things we’d done last night. I turned my head away from him, glaring out my passenger’s seat window, not wanting to let on how much that hurt.

Had my body literally just been a way for him to amuse himself when he was bored? Then I shook my head. Fuck not getting answers. A man couldn’t — He couldn’t just dominate me like that and then—

“So what the hell was that last night?” I asked, my voice coming out more combative than I intended .

His gaze didn’t veer away from the road as he drove slowly, carefully, on the still rain-slicked roads. While the drizzle had slowed through the night, it must have only stopped for good maybe an hour ago.

Finally, his heavy eyes came my direction. “Last night can be whatever you want it to be,” he finally said as his eyes moved back to the road as we rounded a particularly sharp curve.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “And what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Well,” he said, tilting his head. “It’s clear there’s some”—he shook his head like he didn’t know how to finish the thought—“some chemistry between us. We can choose to explore that. Be friends with benefits, as it were. Or we can forget last night ever happened. It’s up to you.”

I snorted, propping one knee up on the dash. “Oh, sure. Let’s just forget you came in me so many times last night not even the napkins could keep up by the end. Frankly, I didn’t know that was possible for men. Four times in one night?” I shook my head, my belly tightening. “Shit.”

That had his head whipping toward me *real* fast. And the way his jaw was tight as his eyes quickly tracked up my thigh before his head jerked back to look out the front windshield told me he wouldn’t be forgetting any time soon, either.

“I’m not my brother,” he stated gruffly, eyes still firmly on the road. “I don’t do hearts and flowers. Or engagement rings.”

That had me cracking up. I literally slapped my knee I was laughing so hard. “Slow down, cowboy. And I always wondered why you never had any dates. Mystery solved.”

I shook my head, my giggles slowing. “As far as I understood, we were just talking about scratching each other’s itches. Stress relief.” I yawned and stretched. Because God, I hadn’t realized what a bundle of stress I’d been, what with all the wedding prep and trying to find a job for the last six months. The part-time job I’d taken as a barista to pay my half of the rent didn’t count.

But all my limbs felt completely relaxed. Okay, I was a little sore from using muscles I hadn’t for a while, but it was a good sore. And I felt like I could sleep for twenty-four hours. Easy sleep, though, not the restless tossing and turning I’d been doing lately.

“Stress relief,” he repeated, considering, and then he nodded as if he liked the sound of it.

He shot a quick glance my way. “Is this us actually agreeing on something for once?”

I smirked at him. “Don’t get used to it, buddy. I only submit in the

bedroom. Or the truck cab, as it were.”

“Or wherever else I manage to corner you alone,” he murmured under his breath.

And my own breath caught.

I smiled secretly to myself. Well, well, well. I’d been dreading the next couple weeks if I was honest with myself. I mean, I wanted to see my friend get married, of course I did. But managing it all was intimidating, though of course the money would be a godsend.

But now... now, I felt a prickle of anticipation for what was to come.

Chapter Eight

RUTH

Several days later, Charlie and I stood in Austin Bergstrom Airport waiting for her to pick up her parents.

Charlie checked her phone again. “Any minute now.” She bit her bottom lip anxiously as she looked up the escalator at the arrivals streaming down.

We’d been working on getting their suite ready back at the house almost nonstop. So nonstop that Jeremiah and I hadn’t had any time to sneak away to explore... well, whatever it was we’d started during our spontaneous overnight.

Everyone had been worried about us when we got back the next day, but more than that, they’d been surprised when we told them what happened that we’d actually managed to spend almost 24 hours together without choking each other.

I’d mostly managed not to blush and bit my tongue against commenting that I’d choked on Jeremiah’s cock when I’d briefly deep throated him, but it had been quite mutually pleasant.

Outwardly, we’d gone on bickering like usual, but the occasional hot looks he’d shoot me would make my toes squirm in my sneakers—and give me a shot of adrenaline to keep on keeping on.

The four of us—me, Charlie, Reece, and Jeremiah—had been up till past

two a.m. last night finishing up the last touches on the parents-in-law suite. Charlie and I were decorating while the boys finished up the plumbing work in the attached bath.

By the end of the night the room looked like something out of a magazine. And the toilet flushed! So it was a win all around.

“Don’t worry so much, it’s gonna go great.” I reached down and squeezed Charlie’s hand.

She looked over at me. “You think? I haven’t seen them since May and that was only for a few hours when Reece and I stopped by on our vacation in San Francisco. I’m not really sure my mother and I can stand being in each other’s presence for much longer than that.”

“You don’t have to be,” I assured her quickly. “I’m here to be your shield. Anytime you need. The wedding’s in five days anyway. And then you’re off on your honeymoon.”

“Still.” Her eyes went wide. “Five *days*.”

I grinned at her. “And then you’ll be married to your man.”

Her face eased into a smile and her shoulders relaxed. “That part I can’t wait for. Everything this year’s been such a whirlwind. I mean, eight months ago, I didn’t even know him. But now I can’t imagine life without him.”

“Which is hilarious because it took you two forever to get together.”

“But once we did,” she laughed, “there was no going back. He’s my one.” She got that starry-eyed look in her eyes she always did whenever she talked about Reece. “As soon as I got out of my own way, I could see that.”

But then she looked back up at the escalator full of people and started nervously nibbling on her lip again. “If only I can get to the happily-ever-after part.”

“Girl! Don’t worry. It’s only five days! I’ve got a ton planned, plus there will be more and more people coming in to help take the heat off you ever having too much one-on-one time with your mom. The guys’ boss and his family will be coming in tomorrow, and they’re bound to be a great distraction.”

She nodded rapidly. “Yeah. Yeah. You’re right. There’s nothing to worry about.” I wasn’t sure who she was trying to convince, me or herself.

“Besides, my car’s still in the shop, so there’s always the excuse of needing you to drive me around to check on catering or something. If she ever starts driving you crazy, just give me a hand motion, and I’ll say I need you to drive me somewhere.”

Charlie's forehead scrunched up. "But you don't need me to drive you. You know you can borrow my car anytime. I borrowed yours often enough before I got mine."

I lifted an eyebrow significantly. "Mom doesn't know that."

Charlie laughed. "When do you get your car back, anyway?"

I made a face. "I don't know. They called and said something had gummed up the engine, they weren't sure what. But God, don't tell Jeremiah. He'll just get all holier than thou about how I shouldn't have always run my car barely above empty and let the sediment or whatever pile up on the bottom of the gas tank."

Charlie rolled her eyes. "You two will have to put aside your differences and make friends *sometime*. You're my maid of honor and he's Reece's best man, for God's sake! You'll be walking down the aisle on his arm."

A little shiver went down my spine at the thought, but I shook the feeling away, quickly reassuring her. "Don't worry, we'll behave ourselves."

"You better."

"You worry too much."

She shrugged, her eyes narrowing. "Shit," she said under her breath. "There they are."

She pasted on a big plastic-looking smile and lifted her hand to wave. I followed her gaze to the top of the escalator where an impeccably dressed woman in a cream-colored pantsuit stood stiffly beside a harried-looking man clutching onto several large pieces of luggage.

Her mother strode off the escalator once it reached the bottom while her husband struggled to get the luggage off, creating a small bottleneck until he was able to shove the two large suitcases forward while dragging another behind him, along with another carryon and a large duffel on top of them.

Charlie had jumped forward, but her dad was free by then, and suddenly there was her mom, right in front of us.

"Darling," her mother said, and then her eyes scanned Charlie head to toe, her mouth tightening into a line of obvious disapproval. "You look... well."

"Hi Mom," Charlie responded, her voice sounding odd, at least to me. "Dad," she said with more warmth as she maneuvered around the tall statue that was her mother. "Here, let me help you with those."

"Oh, that's not necessary—"

But Charlie had already unburdened him of two of the largest suitcases. I rushed forward to take one from her.

They stood in front of each other a little awkwardly until Charlie finally went in for a hug. She hugged her dad first, then, both of them stiff, her mother.

“This is my best friend, Ruth. She’s the wedding planner I told you about.”

I gave a little wave.

Her mother’s scrutinizing eyes came my way, and like she had with her daughter, she gave me the once over. She didn’t bother hiding the fact that she found what she saw lacking.

Then again, with the perfect make-up and hair she had going on, it probably wasn’t surprising that she wasn’t into my t-shirt, jeans, and boots.

Still. She could’ve been a little less obvious about it. Charlie had tried to warn me about her mom, but I didn’t think she’d actually be such a caricature in real life. But apparently Napa Valley Rich Bitch had been the perfect moniker after all.

I smiled brightly, determined to make the time with this lady stress-free for Charlie. “This way. We aren’t parked far.”

Charlie’s mom exchanged a long-suffering look with her father. “I told you we could call a car.”

And I caught Charlie’s exasperated glance. Picking her mom up from the airport was supposed to be a nice thing, but this lady was a real trip.

“Nonsense,” I said, still smiling over-brightly. “Plus, it’d be too easy for a car service to get lost in the hill country when GPS cuts in and out. And this way you and Charlie can get started catching up. It’s going to be a busy week. We’ve got all sorts of things on the itinerary.”

“Oh,” her mother said, looking slightly mollified as she pulled out her phone. “I didn’t receive an itinerary.”

Aha. Right. “Well,” I said, tugging the heavy suitcase along behind me as I led the way out of the airport. “I’m still solidifying the details on some activities, but then I’ll shoot it right over to you. What’s your email?”

I’d shoot that email right as soon as I, ya know, actually wrote down the itinerary and made it all nice and pretty looking, considering at the moment the planned activities were just jotted down on a bunch of sticky notes all over my and Charlie’s apartment.

“Why tell you now when you have nowhere to write it down?” her mother asked coldly. “Really, I would have thought you’d have covered this detail by now. How is everyone supposed to coordinate their schedules when

we have no idea what to expect one moment to the next?”

Well, considering you're basically on vacation, lady, I didn't think you'd have much of a schedule to coordinate, but I just smiled and nodded. “Great point. I'll get right on it.”

Things just got better and better once we got out to the parking lot and to Charlie's car.

She'd been so proud of being able to save up enough money to buy it a couple months ago—a fifteen-year-old Honda Civic with some hail damage and a hundred thousand miles on it that she'd named Rhonda. She kept it pristinely clean inside and couldn't have been prouder if it were her own child. Considering where she'd been only six months earlier, homeless and on the run, I supposed it made sense.

And the way her mother stopped and looked clearly appalled at the car made me officially hate the lady.

“I know it's not much,” Charlie said quickly, rushing forward to unlock the passenger seat and open the door for her mother. “But I was able to save up my own money and not go into any debt for it. I know you always say that's important, especially since I was getting a new start here. And I actually got a really good deal. There was a little bit of cosmetic damage from hail on the roof so I got it for a steal—”

Her mother made a scoffing noise. “It's hard to steal something they were no doubt trying to *give* away.”

I saw the hurt register on Charlie's face before she laughed like her mom had told a joke. My hand clenched around the luggage handle I was holding. Her mother made a noise of distaste. “Well, I hope it's clean at least,” she said before sweeping herself into the front seat.

Charlie didn't meet my eye as she popped the trunk and headed there to put the luggage inside. I joined her, leaning over close so her dad couldn't hear. “You okay?”

She flashed a smile that didn't meet her eyes. “Fine.” She hefted the heavy suitcase and I helped her lodge it in the trunk.

“Here, Dad, I got that,” she said, reaching for the suitcase he still stood holding awkwardly to the side of the car. He handed it over passively. I got the feeling that was his role in the family. Standing by silently.

I helped Charlie get all the bags into the car and then joined her dad in the backseat for the World's Most Awkward Half Hour Drive to get back to the ranch.

Charlie tried pointing out landmarks along the way.

Her mother was supremely uninterested and spent most of the time on her phone.

Bitch Status confirmed. I swear, if this woman wasn't paying for the wedding, I'd be severely tempted to give her a piece of my mind. I'd never been big on tact. I'd have to be on my best behavior for the next week.

Her dad just sat like a lump beside me looking out the window. Did the guy even have a personality? Or maybe he had once, but it had just been shaved down over time by being forced to be a lapdog to his wife. Weird freaking dynamics. No wonder Charlie had wanted out of her childhood home as quick as she could. Unfortunately, she'd landed in the clutches of a monster, only recently escaping.

She deserved all the good things coming to her, and I determined all over again to make this week as smooth as possible for her, mother-of-the-bride-from-hell or not.

I could all but feel Charlie's relief when we pulled up to the ranch gate. "I'll get it," I said, jumping out to unlatch it.

I hauled the gate open and waited for the car to drive through, closing and locking it behind them before hopping back in. Just in time to hear her mother commenting, "I'm just saying, a manual gate? What century are we living in?"

"Things are different out here, Mom," Charlie said, and I could hear the tension in her voice. "There's no need to waste money on things that aren't important."

"What if it's raining?" her mother asked. "You still have to get out in the mud to haul open the gate? What if you're in heels?"

Charlie didn't answer, because obviously, yes, we did. And heels weren't usually ranch attire.

"That's the good thing about Texas," I piped up. "Most of the year not much rain."

"Except for when it rains so much there are *tornados*," her mother answered acerbically.

I barely bit back the retort that the tornado in question had done the world a favor by getting rid of her asshole former son-in-law, but that probably wouldn't win me any brownie points.

"Just a few more minutes now," I said brightly as the car bumped up the long gravel road. "I think you'll really like the suite we've prepared for you."

A noise came from Mrs. Winston's throat as if she'd believe it when she saw it.

I turned my head toward the window so no one would see me roll my eyes.

Minutes later, we were finally pulling up in front of the house. From the outside, you couldn't tell it was only half complete inside. It was two stories, like the original, but unlike the original, it didn't have a wraparound porch yet, or much in the way of landscaping.

We'd all been working so hard to get the inside finishing touches done, I hadn't really stepped back to think about what a first impression of the place might make...

But now as we drove up, I had to admit... It wasn't as impressive as one might hope. Not nearly what it would be once it was all finished up. It just sort of looked like a big square box with some windows cut out. The siding had been painted blue, but there hadn't been any shutters or window treatments put on yet.

"It's really nice inside," Charlie said defensively, obviously doing exactly what I was—looking at the house through her mother's eyes. Which was bullshit, because before now, we'd all been proud of the progress being made. Especially with the blood, sweat, and tears we'd all been putting into it lately.

"I see," her mother said, that note of distaste again in her voice.

I shoved out of my car door, casting my eyes again to the sky. *Lord help me not to strangle this woman. Give me patience.*

Reece came out the front door of the house, obviously having heard the sound of the engine. He waved at everyone in the car, a big, genuine Reece smile on his face.

He was in jeans and a white undershirt that were covered in drywall dust. He went over to stand by Charlie once everyone had gotten out of the car and congregated near the hood. He put an arm around Charlie and flashed his white-toothed grin at her parents.

"Mrs. Winston. Mr. Winston. Good to see you again. Welcome to the ranch."

Mrs. Winston gave him her characteristic once over and didn't seem pleased, but then, I wasn't sure pleased was an expression her facial features could actually make.

"Surely, we aren't such a surprise that you couldn't finish getting dressed,

young man.”

Reece gave a guffaw. “You’re funny, Mrs. Winston.” He shook his head as if she’d actually been making a joke—either that or he was just really good at diffusing tension. “I was just working on installing some drywall upstairs. Come on in, we’ve got your rooms all ready.”

He pulled back from Charlie and waved them inside. But when Charlie started toward the trunk, he said, “You take your parents inside, babe. I got the bags.”

The little smile of thanks she passed him before turning back toward her parents was a small thing—but it still hit me in the gut. There were a million little communications like that that passed between partners, real partners, that I wondered if I’d ever have.

“Well, I think you guys have it from here,” I said. “I’ll check back in for the last dress fitting tomorrow.” I looked Charlie’s way. “Let me know if you need anything. My phone’s always on.”

She nodded significantly. She was staying on here at the ranch in another of the rooms we’d just managed to finish renovating—well, we’d at least gotten a mattress in there—but she’d still be sharing a bathroom with her parents.

Tomorrow was a big day. Not only was there the dress fitting, but the twin’s boss, Xavier, and his family, came into town. They were traveling in an RV so we didn’t have to find accommodations for them, just a hook up to water, which we had.

Speaking of... I needed to go double check the site was all ready, and that we had extra provisions, and that the stables were ready, because they were bringing horses—

I needed to find Jeremiah.

Behind me, Charlie’s mother was fussing about her shoes getting muddy on the walk up to the house and I felt glad to be walking away from that disaster, and then guilty about leaving Charlie alone with it. Then again, ‘it’ was her mother, not mine. Besides, she had Reece there as a buffer now.

And if this wedding was going to get pulled off, I couldn’t mother-sit twenty-four-seven.

I ducked into the barn, but there was only Buck, doing something with some rope. “Hey, you seen Jeremiah around?”

He looked up startled, his eyes widening when he saw it was me. “What?”

“Jeremiah? You know where he is?”

He just kept staring at me. I tapped my foot impatiently. “Any day now.”
“Stables,” he finally mumbled. “Think I saw him in the stables.”

I turned with a wave of thanks and headed out across the small, weedy dirt path back toward the stables.

And yep, there was Jeremiah. It was nearing the end of a blazing hot Texas day and he’d taken his shirt off as he worked inside the stables. The doors were open on either end and he had a fan on, so there was a breeze. But it was apparently doing little to cool the sweat dripping down the canyon between his muscled shoulders.

I cleared my throat and he turned around from where he’d been spreading fresh hay out in a stall.

The sight of him was even more glorious from the front. Strong, hugely wide chest. Narrowing down to his slim waist and tight, sculpted abs.

I’d just cleared my throat, but it still felt too dry.

And I realized I was standing here looking him up and down, just like Mrs. Winston had me. But I imagined the look on my face was far from distaste.

When I finally lifted my eyes back to Jeremiah’s, he wasn’t looking at me like he felt distaste either. No, his eyes were blazing.

“Wanna scratch an itch?” I asked.

He threw down the pitchfork he’d been stabbing into the straw and strode toward me. “Thought you’d never ask.”

Before I barely knew what was happening, he had me up against the wall of the stable, all his hard, hot, damp flesh pressing into me.

“Fuck, you’re hot when you dress like this.” He massaged my ass through my jeans.

I laughed and looked down at myself. I was wearing a completely non-descript blue t-shirt, jeans, and boots. “Like a ranch hand?”

“Like the sexiest fucking ranch hand I ever saw,” he said, before his mouth came down on mine.

I opened to him and the stress of the day fell away. Monster mothers of the bride, all the shit I still had to coordinate, all the emails waiting to be sent—*poof*. Gone in a wisp of smoke as I opened my legs to Jeremiah and he took every inch I gave.

He slid in between my legs and his hands dropped down between us, first working at my button and then his own. His fingers being anywhere near my

sex had me tingling.

But it wasn't until he pulled me away from the wall and manhandled me so that I was bent over a nearby sawhorse that my blood really got pumping.

He leaned over my back and whispered in my ear, breath hot against the wisps of hair escaping my ponytail, "You'll want to hold on. I don't know that I can take it easy on you. Your safeword is *red*. Tell me your safeword."

"Red," I gasped out, my eyes wide as saucers. I was glad I was faced away from him. I didn't want him to see the excited shock on my face at the way he was— I'd never had any man be like this with me. And I'd had no clue that I'd respond like this. I was immediately wet. Drenched, in fact.

"Now don't say it again unless you mean it," he said, his voice low and growly.

I nodded.

"Out loud."

"Yes. I mean I won't. Not unless I mean it."

"Good girl," he growled, and the tone of his voice echoed throughout my body, like I could feel the vibrations of it in my sex.

I wiggled my ass against him and he laughed, low.

"Always pushing the boundaries, aren't you, little brat?"

I looked over my shoulder at him. "Maybe I just want to get fucked and you're stalling."

He'd lifted back to standing and he kicked my feet to open wider as I stayed sprawled over the sawhorse. I had to grab onto the wooden legs for balance and that made him smile. I barely just bit back a curse, and that was because I saw him slowly, ever so slowly sliding his belt out of its straps.

"W-what are you going to do with that?" I asked. I couldn't tell if I was scared or excited. I was suddenly feeling a thousand things at once. One thing was for damn sure—I felt alive. More alive than I'd felt in... well, a long time. I bit my bottom lip against the anticipation.

"Good girls wait and see. Bad girls are impatient."

He dragged down my jeans in one motion, panties with them, exposing my bare bottom.

"Well, isn't that a pretty little ass. But I can make it prettier."

And he smacked me with his bare palm, upward from underneath my right ass cheek, so that it wobbled and jiggled obscenely. And then he did the same to the other cheek.

Oh my God. I felt mortified. I had never had my bits *jiggled* so

remorselessly. Even more appalling?

How motherfucking *amazing* it felt.

I wanted him to do it again. And again.

I'd always thought of ass slapping as degrading. I didn't realize it could actually feel... so damn erogenous.

But Jeremiah, damn him, he missed nothing. "You liked that, didn't you?"

I kept my face down, hidden, trying to keep some of my dignity, but he just leaned over my back so he had access to my face. He nipped at my ear, then my jaw. "Tell the truth," he breathed.

I squeezed my eyes shut but admitted, "Yes. Please. It felt so good."

"Good girl."

He pulled back and then smacked me again, the same way. It smarted a little more since the flesh was sensitive, but he was on a roll now. He kept smacking me—spanking me.

Oh my God, he was *spanking me*.

And all I could do was bend over further and wiggle my ass toward him, begging for more of his touch.

Especially when in between spanking me, he'd caress my ass and reach a hand down in between my legs, teasing his strong fingers along the rim of my slick sex. He'd tease, tease, tease a little more, a little closer to where I needed him...

And then he'd pull back and wallop me again.

Until I was whining with the need to come. And eventually begging.

"Please, Jer, please fuck me. Come on, you're torturing me. I just need to come. Please just let me come." I twisted on my feet as his fingertips ran up and down my no-doubt pink ass.

"You think you deserve my cock now?"

"Yes," I said. "I deserve it. *You* deserve it."

He huffed out a laugh. "That's certainly fucking true." He breathed out heavily. "But first you learn who's in charge here. And that's me. You, on the other hand, still need to learn who's your Master. So will you take the bit?"

"The bi—?" I started, but then he held up his belt, loosely looped. As I watched on, he dipped it over my head and then, when I didn't struggle or say no, he demanded, "*Open.*" I opened my mouth and he fit the leather in between my teeth and cinched the belt around the back of my head.

"Now to get your safeword across," he said, leaning close so it was a

whisper in my ear again, “hold your hand up and open and close it. Practice.”

Breathing a heavy breath out through my nose since the leather in my mouth made it too difficult to breathe that way, I did what he said, lifting my hand to open and close it.

“Good girl,” he said, rubbing a hand over my ass in the way he might a horse’s flank. It was both wrong and erotic at the same time, but oh God, yes. Nothing was wrong here. Everything was permitted, and my horniness leveled up as I became even slicker between my legs.

He tugged on the belt, pulling my head backwards. “What a good, good little pony you are. I’m gonna ride you now and you’re gonna clutch me as tight as you can, little pony. You’re going to show me how much you love being ridden and how much you want me to come back to these stables and ride you Every. Single. Day.”

I tossed my head, more of a full body shiver, but it made my ponytail swing and Jeremiah smoothed his hand down my ass again. “That’s right, girl. You can show me you like my touch. Now give me that flank. Show Master how ready you are for him to ride you.”

I thrust my ass out toward him. And I was all but dripping.

There was no world outside this one we were creating in the moment. He was my Master, my rider, and I wanted desperately to be ridden. To know what it would feel like when he mounted me and grasped my reins and took over completely.

And then I felt his cock, long and thick, behind me.

“You’re in heat,” he growled. “I can smell you. Do you know how hard that makes me? I’ve been sniffing you out for so long, and now I finally get to mount you and claim you as mine.”

His words had me shivering again. “That’s right,” he said. “Toss your mane all you want. You feel this cock? This cock right here?” He pulled back on the belt at the same time I felt his huge cock against the lips of my pussy.

“You’re gonna swallow me down so good with that cunt of yours, aren’t you? You’re gonna milk this fat horse cock so good till I’m empty, aren’t you?”

I couldn’t answer, but even if I’d tried, he was tugging back on the reins so my neck was extended backward. Exerting his dominance even as he slowly, and I do mean slowly, torturously, slid his giant cock inside me, stretching and stretching me even though it had only been days ago that I’d last taken him.

I whined and shifted against his entrance and he kept firm pressure on the reins. Not enough to hurt my neck but enough to remind me of who was in control. I bit down on the leather as he filled my body, so big that he was always a strain to fit at first. Would it always be like this, I wondered, half alarmed, half thrilled.

I never wanted this moment to end, I wanted the high of suspended gratification, this lingering first contact before the rush toward climax began.

“Fuck, you’re tight as a glove,” he swore, pressure releasing on the reins for a moment as both his hands dropped to grip my hips, massaging them as he pushed in deeper still. “You’re all woman, aren’t you? God, these fucking hips. You’re enough to kill a man.”

He groaned as he sank all the way in and I could feel his balls against my clit. Still holding my hips, he ground down, rubbing himself all around and giving me friction that had me keening into the leather of the belt.

“That’s right, it’s a good thing I’ve got you muzzled.” He picked up the reins again and, still balls deep inside me, smacked my ass again. In the after-jiggle, oh my gosh, it felt amazing with him buried inside me and all the—oh, *all* the other bits. I squirmed back against him and he tugged my head backward with the belt.

“Time to ride, baby. Hold on.”

I doubted he was joking, so I did. I reached down and grabbed onto the sawhorse.

And Jeremiah started riding. One hand clutching one hip, the other keeping pressure on the reins, he started to fucking ride me. His cock sawed in and out of me, landing with a body-resounding *smack* with each thrust in.

“Ride, pony,” he called, “Giddyup.” He let go of my hip just long enough to smack my ass. Once, and then again.

And in the moment, I’d never felt more my animal self, giving over to animal pleasures. So when the orgasm rose up at his rough, dominant treatment, I couldn’t stop or hold it back and I didn’t try to.

It ripped through me like a hurricane and I gave over to it, my muscles shuddering and clamping down.

Jeremiah obviously felt it because he abandoned both reins and the grip on my hips. His arms came around my torso and he hugged me close to him while he rutted me almost crazily from behind.

And I fucking loved every second of it.

I wasn’t the only one losing control. He’d locked my arms against myself.

I still could have gotten free if I wanted to safeword him, but I didn't want to. He obviously had a thing about people touching him—so as much as I wanted to cling back to him as he thrust wildly and then even more wildly still as his orgasm rose. Then, in a final frantic rush he fucked and fucked me until he finally clutched me harder than ever before and I felt the rush of his release deep inside me.

We were both sweaty now and I'd never felt more intensely connected to another person, even though I was faced away from him.

He started to let go and I shook my head.

“Ot 'et,” I said through the leather gag and he got my meaning by the way I reached for his hands with just a pinky to show I didn't want him to let go of me yet.

So he stayed still several more minutes, him bent over me and arms clasped around me, both of us naked from the waist down, his cock buried deep in me, as we recovered our breaths.

Chapter Nine

BUCK

So she was fucking the boss. It was just like that bitch to worm her way back in here.

Buck stayed with his eye pressed against the slat of the stables until his boss finally stood up and pulled his dick out of the bitch, his cum slicking down her legs.

Buck shook his head even as he checked out her ass. Buck preferred his bitches skinnier, but there was no accounting for taste, apparently.

He pulled back from the see-through slat. Nothing to see now and he couldn't get caught. Not now that Ruth was back in his grasp.

It was time to figure out a more permanent solution to his Ruth problem.

Obviously, pouring sugar into her gas tank hadn't done the trick. He'd been hoping to hear about a tragic car accident, but nope, she just kept showing up like a bad penny.

And him, what did he have? He worked sun-up to sundown on land that shoulda belonged to *him*. But he was nothin' more than an afterthought to these people.

It weren't right.

Things oughta be made right. Even little kids knew that. Things should be fair.

And when they weren't, you had to stand up for yourself and make 'em

that way.

Chapter Ten

JEREMIAH

It was hard to stop myself from grabbing Ruth as she got dressed again and dragging her back to the sawhorse, or to the ground, or shoving her back up against a wall.

I'd just emptied my balls into her and had barely finished cleaning her up, yet here I was, getting hard all over again.

But the sun was going down and if I didn't show up for dinner with the in-laws, I knew Reece would wring my neck.

"You staying for dinner?" It was out of my mouth before I'd really thought through any implications she might take from me asking.

She looked over at me, her eyes a little wide as she tugged her T-shirt back on over her head. A shame to cover up those perfectly pert, lush breasts of hers held up in a lacy bra that I had to wonder if she wore just for me. Which made my hard-on even stiffer.

She shook her head though, glancing away from me. "It's a big day tomorrow and I should be getting back home."

"Without your car?"

"Charlie's letting me use hers since she's staying here with her parents."

I nodded. "Just make sure you're gassed up."

She rolled her eyes and then sauntered toward me, a saucy smile on her lips. "Yes, *sir*. And same to you."

She was teasing, but she had no clue how much her saying that had me wanting to flip her back over, this time over my lap. Oh yes, I could just imagine how right it would feel to have her ass up and squirming, the heat of her right over my rigid—

I grabbed her by the back of her head, hands gripping her hair, and dragged her in for a hard kiss.

She surrendered and crashed into my chest, her lips yielding to mine.

But then, almost as soon, she was pushing against my chest and pulling back. Goddamn this woman, never fully submissive, always pushing, pushing.

Part of me wanted to pull her back, to master her completely, but the part of my sanity I was still managing to hold onto let her go.

For now, anyway.

But maybe soon I could steal her away for a weekend. And show her what I could do when I really had my leisure. I'd tie her up exquisitely. To keep her exactly where I wanted while I played and explored each part of her at will. At *my* will.

Not now, though.

Now she danced away from me and I had to live with the memory of the taste of her on my lips. But that only made my cock leap, because I hadn't had the taste of her on my tongue, not really yet. And that was a travesty that I would absolutely fix the next time I had her beneath me. I'd latch my arms around those thighs of hers and lock her in place until I memorized the smell and taste of her, and had her screaming my name until she forgot her own...

"See you later, sexy," she said with a cute little wave as she sauntered out of the stable.

I shut my eyes and breathed out hard. When that didn't work, I put a hand down on my hard cock. "Down, boy. You heard the lady. *Later.*"

And I was left to try to walk off my damn stiffy as I cleaned up my work tools and made my way back up to the main house. Charlie's car was gone and I breathed out again, my body finally back under control. *Mostly* anyway. As long as I did not think of a certain curvy red-headed siren who could tempt the saintliest monk. And I was far from saintly. Ha.

I pulled open the door to the house and heard voices from beyond the foyer in the kitchen. Since we'd redesigned the house, we'd made this door the front door since we all used it as one anyway. Except now, instead of opening right into the kitchen, I walked into the foyer. The bottom floor was

fairly open concept except for the one-bedroom suite in the back, so even from here I could see everyone congregated in the area off to the side of the kitchen.

We didn't have flooring in here yet, so it was still just a concrete base with basic drywall up on the walls. Hardly the most welcoming, but it was clean, and we'd managed to scrounge up a big picnic table that Charlie had covered with a big plastic gingham tablecloth.

And really, who cared what the table looked like when you had catering from a premiere restaurant in the hill country? Reece had stopped off and gotten the meal earlier, with instructions to reheat and serve. It smelled fucking delicious and I couldn't wait to dig in.

In addition to the rest of the usual ranch chores—which on their own were enough to keep a man working all day—I'd been finishing up restorations on the barn. And that after staying up till an ungodly hour in the morning last night finishing up this place so it'd be not just adequate accommodations for Charlie's parents, but luxury, since apparently, they were some kinda hoity toity who couldn't handle any sorta rough living.

"Oh, look." Reece jumped up from where he was sitting like a damn jackrabbit and started my way. "It's my twin brother I've been talking your ear off about. Jeremiah," he said, clapping me on the back after loping over to me, "come meet Charlie's mom and dad."

I walked forward, my brother's arm heavy around my neck. As I got closer, I was wondering if maybe I should've run by the bunkhouse and changed—especially when Mrs. Winston's nose wrinkled in distaste like she could smell me. Mr. Winston sat beside her, eyes on her instead of me, and it was obvious where he took his cues from.

A weight sank in my stomach.

People used to look at me like this. Like I stank. Like I was street trash it was better for their eyes to skim right past.

"Sorry, it's my bad manners," I said, wiping my hands on my jeans even though they weren't exactly dirty. Well, not in the way this uptight lady imagined. I'd just had them all over Ruth's soft skin.

I looked to Reece. "Why don't I go change and I'll be right back?"

His face was apprehensive, glancing between me and his in-laws, and he gave a sharp nod. "Kay. Be quick."

But then Charlie stood up, looking appalled. "What? No. You're perfectly fine. Have a seat. We understand you've come in after a hard day at work.

Don't we, Mom?"

Her mother held a handkerchief that she'd materialized from somewhere to her nose and shot a glance my way. "Of course," she said in the falsest voice I'd ever heard. "Please. Sit."

Charlie looked mortified as I sat across from her, the furthest away from her mother I could manage.

"I'll serve you up some grub," Reece said with a smile, grabbing my plate from in front of me and hurrying over to the kitchen where the trays of food sat with their tops peeled back.

"So," I looked across the table at Charlie and her parents. "How was the trip? Not too bad, I hope?"

Her mother put the fork she'd been poking at her food with and lifted her nose. "It was absolutely appalling what they've allowed air-travel to become. What happened to the days of customer *service*, that's what I want to know?"

Charlie nodded along, as if a lack of customer service was the real problem with the world.

Mrs. Winston picked up her fork and speared a single pea, and then another and another, until she had five on the tines of her fork, and then she proceeded to eat them without ever letting her lips touch the fork. As if she was preserving her perfect lipstick or something equally ludicrous.

Then she looked over sharply at her husband. "Bernie, for God's sakes, don't play with your food. You know I hate that. Either commit or cover the plate with your napkin."

I watched Bernie to see if he'd tell his wife to fuck off but I had the feeling—

Bernie nodded and picked up his napkin, covering the plate dutifully with it and then putting his hands in his lap.

Yep. It was just what I thought.

I looked down at my food uncomfortably.

I cut into my rosemary chicken. And my hand shook.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't bring myself to lift the goddamned bite of chicken to my mouth.

Forcing my eyes shut, I dropped my fork back down to the plate and looked around the table, reaching instead for the glass of wine that had been poured for every place setting. But I swore I felt Mrs. Winston's eyes on my uneaten bite of chicken. Which was fucking ridiculous.

When I tried to key back into the conversation, I could only focus on bits

and pieces of what Charlie was rambling on about.

“The boys are doing such impressive work with the ranch... Yield of calves this fall was impressive for taking on the ranch so recently... Jer and Reece are lucky to work so close, they’ve never been separated their whole lives...”

It wasn’t true. Reece and I had been separated for six weeks once.

Six weeks that I never talked about to anybody.

Ever.

“*Bernie*,” Mrs. Winston’s harsh voice rang out. “Look what you’ve done now.” All eyes at the table zoomed in to watch her spit on her cloth napkin and then start to scrub at his tie where he had dripped some wine.

“I swear,” she laughed to everyone else at the table, “I can’t take this one anywhere. He’d tie his own shoes together if I wasn’t there to help.”

Bernie’s shoulders slumped as he submitted to his wife’s ministrations.

I shot up from the table, taking everyone’s gaze off of the humiliated Mr. Winston. “I think I will go get cleaned up after all. I apologize if that means missing the rest of this truly succulent meal.” I looked toward Charlie. “Your hospitality, as always, is warm and appreciated. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I hoped she could read my sincerity. And also that no one present could sense the slowly rising panic as I turned and all but fled the suffocating room that had suddenly grown full with memories.

Memories of a time I’d tried so very hard to forget.

Chapter Eleven

RUTH

Another big day, and one that I didn't imagine I'd be able to find any time to sneak away with a certain hunky twin for forbidden pony play in the stable. Even the memory had me tingling as I met with Charlie and her obnoxious mother for breakfast the next morning. I mean, her father was there, but he faded into the background so much that he may as well not have been, apart from the occasionally cutting comments his wife sent his way. But Charlie just ignored them, so I did too.

Luckily, her mother watched the Today Show religiously because Hoda and Savannah were just her *favorites*, so we were off the hook for a couple hours.

I got started preparing the food for the day in the half-finished kitchen while Charlie napped with her head down on the counter. Poor girl. She'd been running like a chicken with its head cut off for Lord knew how many weeks now. Ever since they'd gotten engaged a month and a half ago.

Yes, six weeks was a fast turnaround for a wedding, but far from impossible. Because look at us, here we were, pulling it off. By the skin of our teeth, maybe, but it was getting done.

While I waited for another mess of biscuits to cook, I put the finishing touches on the big group email itinerary I'd been working on late into the night last night. I read over it for the umpteenth time, then nodded and finally

hit *send*.

Charlie's phone buzzed in her pocket but she didn't wake up. Good. She needed the rest. Anyone could see she was run ragged.

"What's the meaning of this?" her mother asked, shoving the door to the kitchen so hard that it cracked into a wall of cabinets.

Charlie's head jerked up from where she'd been resting it on the counter. "What? Where? What is it?"

Her mother scowled at her. "Drool is *most* unattractive in a bride, darling."

Charlie started swiping at her mouth, obviously embarrassed. I put my hands on my hips. "Can I help you with something, *ma'am*?" That ma'am had almost come out something entirely different, but I was still keeping a lid on it. For the moment.

"This itinerary I just received!" Her shriek had me wincing. Jesus, the woman could wake the dead with that voice.

I blinked and smiled. "Yes? I thought you'd be pleased to get notice of the activities for the rest of the week."

She scoffed. "I expected a *usual* itinerary. Spa treatments. Hair appointments. Not— Not *this*." She waved her phone at me.

Out of patience, I reached for the phone but she yanked it back and I shrugged helplessly, looking at Charlie. "I listed out the dates and times for the wedding events. You want spa appointments or hair or whatever... I guess we can find time for those if you want—"

Her mother scoffed in outrage. "I thought I was hiring a competent wedding planner, that's what I *want*."

"Mom," Charlie said, her voice warning, but her mother was on a roll now.

"Not that anyone consulted *me* on what I wanted for my own child's wedding that I am *paying* for. But no, my one and only daughter couldn't have the wedding in civilization where friends and family could attend. She has to be exotic! And have her wedding out in the middle of nowhere, where I'm frankly surprised there's even central plumbing!"

"Well, I guess it's lucky you got here this week and not last one," Reece said as he came in, busting the tension with a big, jovial laugh. "We'd only barely got the main line running and hauled out the construction Port-a-potty over the weekend."

Mrs. Winston's mouth dropped open, clearly appalled, but Reece either

didn't notice or played as if he didn't.

"We just caught sight of Xavier's trailer coming up the road," Reece said. "Y'all wanna come out and say hi?" he said, smile still all-American bright.

Yeah, there was definitely no mixing up the two twins. Jeremiah was perpetually stormy and Reece was generally a laid-back guy given to sunshine. He was exactly what Charlie deserved. She'd had enough stormy in her life.

"Absolutely," I said, hooking my arm through Charlie's. "We've always been so curious to meet the great Xavier."

Charlie's mom just waved at us. "I'm feeling a little overheated." She waved at herself rapidly. "I think a hot flash might be coming on. Bernie," she turned and snapped at her husband. "Go get my mini-fan. It's by the bed."

He didn't even nod or voice assent, he just robotically got up from the chair where he'd seated himself and hurried to obey her.

"Fair enough," Reece said. "I'm sure you'll have a chance to meet them later. Just for whenever you do, please remember that Xavier is a vet who was injured overseas. His face was disfigured and people weren't too kind to him at first, so if you please, try not to treat him any different."

Mrs. Winston just huffed. "I would never look down on a former member of the armed forces. How could you ever insinuate that I would?"

"Of course not, ma'am," Reece hurried to say. "I just like to prepare people so they aren't shocked by his face, that's all."

His mother sniffed, obviously not mollified.

I tugged on Charlie's arm to get her away from the toxic drama queen. After meeting her mother it was a wonder she'd turned out as normal and down to earth as she had. Then again, it had taken her a helluva long time to find any kind of healthy in her life.

And I certainly wasn't gonna let her mama rain on her parade now that she had.

We stepped outside just as a huge RV parked and another truck hauling a horse trailer pulled in behind it.

A giant of a man got out from the driver's seat. A woman stepped out of the passenger side, and a passel of kids poured out from the back.

The woman leaned in the back seat and brought out a smaller child, a little older than a toddler, with a pink bow on her head, and held the little girl on her hip as she pulled back out.

Jeremiah intercepted them, coming from the barn, before we could make it out of the house.

I was still too far away to hear what was said, but I could see the little girl bucking to get out of her mom's arms. While Jeremiah shook the man's hand, the little girl rocketed toward us where we were stepping down from the house.

She sprinted toward Reece and leapt at him. He hefted her midair up into his arms. It looked almost choreographed, obviously something they'd done many times before, and her delighted squeals of, "Uncle Weece!" warmed even my cynical heart.

I glanced over at Charlie and just shook my head at the misty-eyed look on her face. "Girl, you are such a goner." I laughed at her.

Then she linked her arm in mine and pulled me forward out of the rest of the group.

Jeremiah looked at us over the man's shoulder. "Here's Ruth, who you bought the property from. And this is Charlie, the woman of the hour who managed to enchant my brother. Ruth, Charlie, this is Xavier."

I was glad for Reece's little reminder inside about Xavier's face. Reece had mentioned his boss had a scarred face before, but I guess I hadn't imagined it was quite as dramatic as it was. The whole left half was quite badly damaged. By fire? I had no idea, but there was obviously some story there.

Charlie smiled and waved hello while I stepped forward with my hand out.

"Hi," I said. "So good to finally meet you in person."

Xavier shook my hand, but he was not smiling. "I have to say, there were times last year when I couldn't imagine ever standing here shaking your hand. You caused my lawyers no end of grief."

I felt my cheeks heat even as his huge giant's hand enveloped mine. "This land was hard to let go of."

He nodded and didn't seem angry. "That's a sentiment I can understand. People don't value their connection to land enough these days. It's my opinion that connecting again to the land is the one thing that might be our salvation in these troubled times. So no, Miss Harshbarger, I don't begrudge you trying to hold onto any part of your family's land. I admire you, even. I hope my sons and daughters connect to the land as deeply as you have."

"Oh," I said, quite shocked that he'd taken my conniving in such an

affable way. Jeremiah had tried to explain that his boss had different feelings about land and profits than most folks, but it was infinitely refreshing to see it here up close and personal.

“Now,” he smiled, finally letting go of my hand and turning to Charlie, “I hear there’s a lovely new young lady to be welcomed into the family.” He reached forward and clasped her hand in both of his. “I’m so happy to get to finally meet you and spend a little time with you this week. Reece and his brother have always been special to me. They came to my ranch when I’d barely begun to build it into what it is today.”

He grinned at Reece. “Which is why I’m honored to gift you Lightning and Sally Anne as wedding presents today.”

Reece’s mouth dropped open and his head spun to look at Jeremiah, who was also grinning at him. “You knew?”

Jeremiah shrugged and gave a modest nod.

“You son of a bitch!” he said, but then gave his brother a harsh, rough hug. He let go of him only to turn to Xavier and give him a similarly rough hug full of hard back pats on both sides. Masculine affection at its best.

But when Reece pulled back, his eyes were shining. “Lightning?” He looked at Xavier incredulously. “But he’s one of your top-dollar breeders.”

Xavier shrugged. “I’ve got others. And if I ever need him to sire, I expect you’ll lend a friend a hand.”

“Of course,” Reece said, his eyes still wide with shock at the generous present.

“And this way,” Jeremiah said, smiling big at his brother, “you can start our own horse breeding program here. To really get your family started on the right foot.”

Reece nodded, eyes getting wider and wider as he started to really realize the implications. They could breed and train horses, from what Jeremiah told me about the work they used to do in Montana. It would bring in even more streams of income for the ranch.

I kept my smile plastered on my face even as I glanced away, looking out on the land. The land I’d looked out my bedroom window at every day of my life. I’d always dreamed of running horses out of this place in addition to cattle. The original stables here had been for the hands ’cause back in the day all cowboying had been done from atop a horse and not on a four-by-four. But they’d also stabled Caramel here, the horse I’d ridden and jumped in competitions into high school when they’d had to sell her off to pay the bills.

Ahead, Xavier's two boys had found some long sticks and they were sword-fighting with them. The little toddler girl had picked up a smaller one and was swinging it around, half stumbling and flailing as she did so.

Xavier's wife had come around to us and gave a wave. "Hi, I'm Mel. This wild pack," she gestured at the kids, "belongs to me."

"Mel of Mel's ranch?" Charlie asked, her face lighting up. "Oh my gosh, we've heard so much about you."

"Reece has chatted my ear off about you too, honey," Mel said, holding her arms out big toward Charlie. Charlie grinned and leaned in. The two shared a hug of the sisterhood and I wondered if there'd be a way for me and Charlie to sneak Mel off with our friend Olivia when I remembered, duh, bachelorette party!! We'd find someone to watch the kids. Pawn them off on the mother-in-law, ha! The plan was shaping up in my head better and better.

Why was I letting all this wedding planning get me so down and stressed out? Yeah, theoretically we were trying to make a good impression on Charlie's mom, but I bet no matter what we did, it wasn't going to impress that old hag, so we better make sure not to forget to have some good old-fashioned fun along the way.

"Ladies," I put an arm around each of their shoulders as soon as their hug broke up. "We know that the boys will be boys, but I'm thinking we'll have one last fabulous bachelorette blow-out tomorrow night to celebrate our girl here. How does that sound to y'all?"

Charlie looked surprised. "But there's no bachelorette party on the itinerary."

"That's cause I only made that thing for your mom. No offense," I made a face as I leaned in with a whisper, "but she's not invited. And tomorrow's perfect since it's a day *before* the day before the wedding, so you won't be hungover on your actual wedding day. See, I think of everything." I winked at Charlie, then turned to Mel. "Plus, there's no better way for our new friend to get to know the local wildlife." I waggled my eyebrows at her, then did an in-place salsa. "A little dancing. A little pitcher of margaritas. Or three. We'll stop counting as the night goes on."

Mel laughed. "You must be Ruth?" she asked and I nodded.

"I always knew I was gonna like you girls if we ever met."

"Hell, yeah," I held out my fist. She bumped it and we both grinned.

Chapter Twelve

BUCK

He sat at the corner of the bar nursing a Bud Lite and watching the women pour in, chattering like magpies. He dropped his face toward his beer but he didn't need to. They were all wrapped up in themselves without a glance to anything or anyone around them.

Yup, that tracked. Ruth Harshbarger always stomped through this world as if it was all hers for the taking, no matter who she fucked over on the way.

He upended the stein of beer in front of him and then signaled for another. He might as well while he had the tab open.

Wasn't like he could afford to close it after his run of shit luck at the card tables over in Austin last night. He'd been so sure his ace high was enough to close that goddamned hand. How the fuck was he supposed to have guessed that the fucker beside him was going to pull out pocket kings at the last minute? That was some bullshit, but no one would listen when he bellowed that the guy was cheating, and *he'd* been the one they'd thrown out.

He shook his head and took the full stein that was replaced in front of him. He might as well enjoy this last night out before they cut up his damn Visa.

He took a long swig and glared across the bar at the bitch who was the cause of his every misfortune.

If not for her, he'd be a rich man right now.

He'd be wealthy, a man of stature. A man no one would ever toss out like yesterday's trash. No, instead they'd be shitting themselves to get out of *his* way, to roll out the red carpet for him. *That* was the life he'd deserved.

And the scales had been out of balance for long enough. Things should be *fair*. She didn't just get to ride off into the sunset when he— When everything was—

He took another long swallow of beer. He'd stopped tasting it a long time ago. And damn, he had to fuckin' piss.

But after that—after that he was gonna give that bitch what was comin' to her. It was her fault it had come to this, not his. A man could only be pushed so far. A man could only be pushed so far.

Chapter Thirteen

RUTH

“**A** toast!” I called out, loud enough to be heard above the pumping country music, lifting my beer up. The four of us—Charlie, our other best friend Olivia, and Mel were all seated at a table off to the side of the dance floor, as far away from the speakers as we could get. “To Charlie. Olivia and I will always be your best friends, through thick and thin, in sickness and in health, amen!”

Olivia giggled. “Those are wedding vows, not a toast.”

“Friendships are more important than marriages, everybody knows that.”

Charlie thought about it for a moment, then nodded and lifted her glass of vodka soda to clink my beer bottle.

I grinned and turned to Melody. “And to new friends. Welcome to the posse.”

“The pussy posse!” Olivia sputtered out a huge laugh, and then covered her mouth. “Oh shit,” she giggled. “I think I’m drunk.”

“Since when do you outdrink me?” I asked. “And clank your damn bottle so I can put my arm down.”

She lifted her bottle and finished the toast, “To friends near and far.”

“To friends near and far,” we all intoned and then tipped our heads back and took swigs of our various drinks.

“Okay, so what’s the scoop?” Charlie asked, patting her hand on the table

in Melody's direction. "What were Reece and Jeremiah like back when they lived at your ranch?"

I leaned in, ready for all the gossip.

But Melody was annoyingly retrospect. She just shook her head and grinned. "These are *my* boys we're talking about here. I came to get to know y'all."

Charlie arched an eyebrow. "To make sure I'm good enough for him?"

Melody kept her easy smile but didn't say no.

"But Charlie's the best!" Olivia said, eyes wide. "Everybody thinks so. I bet even Jeremiah is bummed his brother snatched her up first."

"Ew, God, no," Charlie said, tossing a napkin at Olivia, at the same time I shuffled in my chair, sitting up straighter.

I know people had fantasies about twins and all, but I was glad that Reece and Jeremiah were the kind who kept strict boundaries when it came to their love lives.

Though apparently that wasn't the case of everyone who lived back at the ranch they'd come from, because as the hours went on, we all opened up, even Mel.

"So wait," Olivia said, eyes wide. "There's a woman that lives on your ranch and she's got two fellas..."

Mel nodded wryly. "Two partners, yes." It had become apparent throughout the evening that she liked shocking Olivia.

Olivia sat back and fanned her hand at her face rapidly, her cheeks getting pink. "Well, I can't say as I ever thought about that." She was quiet another moment, staring out into the crowd before muttering as if she'd forgotten we were even there. "But I guess with the right guys, it doesn't sound half bad..."

Charlie let out a bleat of laughter. "Honey, you can barely handle it when you have *one* guy on the hook. Imagine trying to handle two at once."

Olivia shuddered. "Oh my God, you're right." Still, by the look on her face, I could tell she was still thinking the idea over. I just shook my head. It wasn't like I was one to talk. No, I wasn't taking on two lovers at once, but sneaking around with Jeremiah—it was certainly playing with fire.

I couldn't rid myself of the feeling that Mel had her eyes on me all night, like she could sense something was going on between me and Jeremiah. It was clear she'd taken on a sort of motherly role toward all the men who'd lived on her husband's ranch even though she was barely in her mid-thirties. I

guess when you had little ones running around, maybe it came more naturally?

Mel seemed like a superstar to me. She had her shit so together, she was this superstar mom, and it was clear she and her husband were still disgustingly in love even after all these years together...

God, in comparison, I was a total mess. I bet when she was my age, she had things so much more figured out.

I was twenty-five and *still* barely had a direction in life or an idea of what I was gonna do when I grew up, much less any roots down anywhere. I'd be starting all over from scratch when I moved to Fort Worth. And yeah, sometimes uprooting and moving worked out like it had for Charlie, but I knew those were rare odds. And as the daughter of a gambling addict, I knew better than to bet on long odds.

And suddenly, in the middle of this bright, loud party, I felt melancholy.

All this would be going away. The camaraderie. The friends. Being able to go to a bar where I recognized faces and names. Where I had a place.

I'd been telling myself this was all a bonus of moving on—because people recognized me back, and here I would always be Ruth Harshbarger, the girl whose dad fucked up royally and screwed over half the town by running up debts.

In a new place I'd have a blank slate, something I'd never experienced before.

But blank slates were exactly that... Blank.

You had to build everything from scratch. And making friends as an adult was *hard*. During the period where everyone had cut me off before I'd been able to pay people back after selling the ranch, I'd been friendless and it had been a cold and lonely time. I'd always just taken friends for granted. But then they suddenly weren't there anymore... except for Olivia. She had a busy life of her own, though, and there had been a lot of cold and empty nights alone on the ranch until the boys and Charlie came, bringing life with them.

But before that—I hadn't known a loneliness quite so empty as being on that ranch in winter without a soul to talk to and no one to call. And with nowhere to go where I'd be welcome.

It would be different this time, though. I'd get to know people. I could be social and come out of my shell with people I didn't know.

I looked over at Charlie, grinning and taking slow sips of her vodka,

which was again running low. She was listening to Mel tell another story about the guys on the ranch, how apparently one of them, a guy named Liam, just *loved* playing pranks on everybody else.

So when they'd hired a new guy on to take up some of the slack from Reece and Jeremiah leaving, apparently Liam decided it was time for one of his infamous pranks.

"He would not let up on this guy," Mel continued. "Saran wrap across his door in the morning. Putting just enough stuffing in the toe of his boots so they didn't fit right, but it wasn't obvious. No one would fess up. So Blue, the new guy, is getting more and more pissed. But Liam's not about to let up. And he's *also* been pretending to be an American this whole time, like he's not Irish."

"And what does your husband say to all this?"

"Xavier stays out of it. As long as the guys put in their hours and don't give him trouble, he leaves them be. But Blue did start noticing that our kids laughed whenever they were nearby and Liam spoke with an American accent. He thought it was another prank and it was, but he couldn't figure it out. It was driving the poor guy nuts."

"So what happened?" Charlie asked. "Did he ever get a clue?"

Mel's grin was slow. "Oh yeah, I'd say he did. Since he didn't know who was doing it all, he decided to take his revenge on all of them, all at once."

"It started in the morning, with donuts. He brought a separate box for me and the kids, but the one for the guys? All jelly-filled donuts. Except they were special. He'd also piped some ketchup into them. Most of the guys spit them out, all except for Liam who ate all of his and said it was delicious."

Olivia was laughing her ass off, hiccupping from the alcohol and the story.

I backed away from the table. "I'll go get another round."

"But you have to hear how the story finishes!" Olivia cried.

"I've grown up around men my whole life," I said with a laugh. "I can imagine. So that's two Fat Tires and a vodka soda, yeah?"

Mel and Olivia nodded but Charlie reached out and grabbed my forearm. "Just tell them mine is for the bride-to-be. They'll know what I mean."

I nodded but frowned after I turned away. What did she mean by that? I went to the bar and gave my order, repeating the words Charlie had told me to say. The bartender nodded knowingly and several minutes later gave me a little cardboard carrier with the drinks to carry back.

On impulse, after I'd turned back toward the table, I paused and looked down at the cup of vodka soda. I took one glance toward the table where the girls were sitting. They were all still laughing and fully absorbed. So I picked up the vodka and took a small sip.

There were the bubbles of the soda... but no vodka in the drink.

My head jerked back up to look at the table.

Oh shit.

No, no, no, I didn't need to go jumping to conclusions. Maybe she just didn't want to get smashed the night *before* the night before her wedding?

But I'd never seen Charlie hold back before.

Either way, I had to know. I was moving away, for God's sake. And if there was some other reason...

I stalked back to the table, set the drink tray down on the table, and hooked my arm around Charlie's as I leaned over to speak directly in her ear. "Why are you pretending to drink vodka when you aren't really?"

I pulled back and looked in her face and I saw it there plain as day. "Oh my God, you're pregnant," I whispered, and then clapped a hand over my mouth.

Charlie's eyes went wide as saucers and she shot back in her seat.

"You are?" Olivia squealed. "Oh my God, why didn't you tell us? Congratulations!" She almost fell over herself as well as Mel, jumping up and leaning across the table to try to hug Charlie. All she managed to accomplish was tipping over the two very full beers I'd just put down.

"Jesus!" I swore and barely managed to grab the bottlenecks right as they started pouring brown liquid all over the table and Charlie was stepping back even more, shaking her head back and forth.

"No one's supposed to know," she said, so quietly I more read her lips than heard her above the loud music. "Not until after."

Her hand went to her tummy, which was still flat as far as I could see.

I nodded. Having gotten to know her mom and how judgmental she was, I could get it. And maybe it was really early along, maybe they'd just found out—

"How far along?" Olivia asked excitedly, all but bouncing on her feet.

Charlie's eyes bounced furtively among the group. "Three months."

My mouth dropped open; I couldn't help it. She was three months

pregnant and she hadn't told me? We lived together and were best friends. At least I thought we were.

"Is that why you're getting married so fast?" Olivia asked, and my head swung around toward her. Jesus, she really was drunk. She usually had more tact, but it was true when she was drunk, she would just say whatever was on her mind. It had ruined more than one relationship—when she got drunk and told her boyfriends what she really thought of them. I'd been grateful in most of those cases, but now I was really wishing we'd *all* been drinking vodka sodas minus the vodka tonight.

My eyes came back to Charlie right as a raucous country song started over the speakers and a whoop came from the crowd as people around us flooded to the dance floor.

"Bathroom break," Charlie said. "Come on."

"I'll stay and keep the table," Mel said.

Charlie looked at her gratefully while Olivia and I followed her toward the back of the bar and into the women's restroom. Closing the door behind us provided a modicum of quiet compared to the roar of the music beyond.

"Okay," I said. "Spill."

Charlie looked at both of us, anxiety on her face as she wrung her hands. "I didn't mean to hide it from y'all. It's just, Reece and I thought it would be best to keep the news to ourselves."

I frowned. "I can get not wanting to tell your mom, but—"

Charlie shook her head. "It's not just that. Reece always worries what his brother thinks of him. He feels like Jeremiah only just stopped thinking of him as a fuck-up. But getting me knocked up and having to throw a shotgun wedding—"

"But you love him, right?" Olivia asked.

"Oh God, yes, I do, I really do! Our timeline might have gotten a little... well, moved up because of the baby, but I'm seriously the happiest I've ever been in my whole life."

It reflected in her face too. When she smiled, it lit behind her eyes.

Her hands went to her stomach. "And to have a baby on top of it all..." Her voice trailed off as her eyes grew shiny and her smile grew even wider. "It's a miracle."

"Oh, honey," I said, and threw my arms around her. "I couldn't be happier for you."

She hugged me back. "Really? You don't think we're being reckless?"

I laughed as I pulled back. “Anyone who tells you life goes according to set plans are full of BS. But you do realize that Jeremiah can do math. When this baby pops out three months early, he’s going to put two and two together.”

She shrugged. “We figure by then he’ll be too enamored with the idea of being an uncle and we’ll already be married, proving we’re mature and handling everything. Reece is an amazing man and I hate that his brother can’t see that.”

“I don’t know. Jeremiah’s been letting up on him lately, hasn’t he?” I asked.

Charlie shrugged. “A little, I guess. He’s just been *big brother* for too long. He doesn’t know how to relax and let go, you know?”

Oh, I knew. That man had a control problem. Granted, I happened to enjoy that little quirk of his. But only for a few more days, and then I was out of here.

Which meant I’d only get to see the new baby on visits when I was able to get enough time off to come down. My heart sank.

If this was the time for confessions, I ought to open up and tell Charlie I was leaving.

But I was clearly a coward, because as Olivia cooed over the baby and pressed her hand against Charlie’s stomach, I just stood there silent and still as a scarecrow.

I told myself it was Charlie’s day and I didn’t want to detract from it, but maybe I was just still in denial myself. This was where I wanted to be. These people were my family. I hated that there wasn’t a place for me here.

Oh God, was that what I was doing sleeping with Jeremiah? Was sleeping with him my desperate last gasp at holding on to this life?

“Come on,” Olivia said, grasping Charlie’s hand and jumping up and down. “Now we have even more reasons to celebrate. Let’s go dance!”

Charlie laughed but then her eyes went wide and she pulled her hand back. “First, I gotta pee. Oh my God, they weren’t kidding about the being pregnant and needing to pee every five seconds thing. And I’m not even showing yet!”

She hurried off into a stall while Olivia pulled a makeup kit out of her purse and started refreshing herself. I could only sort of stare off into space. *A baby*. Charlie was going to have a baby. I don’t know why it blew my mind so much, but it did.

But then Charlie was back and Olivia was stuffing her makeup kit back in her purse and then I was reaching for the bathroom door.

As soon as I opened though, I let out a little shriek of surprise at who was standing on the other side.

“What are *you* doing here?”

Chapter Fourteen

BUCK

I watched on from the other side of the bar in disgust as the women's damn knights in shining armor showed up. The women had all flocked like women do to the bathroom and I thought I mighta had my chance to snatch Ruth out from among them.

But no, right at that exact moment, Reece, Jeremiah, and that big, deformed bastard visiting for the week all swept in, stopped by the table, and then the twins angled toward the restrooms, surprising the girls as they came out.

Which just fucking steamed him. Cutting him off from his quarry again, right when he'd psyched himself up to finally take action.

What was he gonna do now? Keep waiting? Waiting for fucking what? For the world to end? His was falling down all around him as he sat here. He had no more fucking money and with another missed payment, they were gonna repo his damn truck.

He staggered off his chair and wove through the crowd toward the exit. Think. *Think*. He pounded on the side of his head as he wove and stumbled down the sidewalk toward his truck.

There had to be some way to make it all right.

To make it *fair*. It couldn't be too late. It was never too late.

Fuck, his head was bleary. It was hard to think straight.

Tomorrow. He'd figure it all out tomorrow.

And then she'd pay.

He'd make her pay.

It was the last thought he had as he yanked open his door, dropped into the back seat, and passed out.

Chapter Fifteen

JEREMIAH

I woke up only a little bit bleary-eyed the next morning. I hadn't had much to drink last night at the bar with the women, but I knew I was the only one.

They'd all been well on their way to blotto by the time we'd shown up. Well, Charlie had looked pretty steady on her feet, but after we got there, I never saw her without a vodka soda in her hand. Olivia giggled every time she got a new one, but then that girl was three shots past blasted.

Neither Reece or I was super comfortable with the thought of the girls out barhopping without anyone there to watch out for them, and it turned out Xavier had even stronger feelings on the subject when his wife was involved, so it was inevitable we'd ended up crashing their party.

And it was fun.

Although seeing Ruth in that tight, revealing little number she'd been wearing last night and keeping my hands off her had been difficult.

Ever since we'd begun... whatever it was we were doing... well, it just seemed *wrong* for her to be close and for me not to be able to put my hands on her.

And every time she danced with some other asshole there, right in front of me as if to spite me, I wanted to yank her away from him and slam her up against the wall to remind her exactly how well I could satisfy her and satisfy

her so completely she could forget the face of any other man she'd ever met.

But considering my brother and future sister-in-law, not to mention our boss and his wife were right there, I'd had to cage my more caveman-like urges.

Meanwhile, Ruth just kept dancing and grinning and apparently having a grand old time, like she knew she was taunting me and was loving doing so. From the wicked little smiles she flashed my way when no one else was looking, I would have guessed it was a performance all for my benefit.

Which just made my hand twitchy for her backside.

Not that I was able to get my palm anywhere near said backside, because she just winked at me as she sent Charlie home with us and took an Uber home with Olivia.

At least I wasn't the only one hard up. I smirked over at my brother sprawled on the cot across from my bed. He was drooling all over his pillow, arm off the cot, dragging on the floor.

"Hey, asshat," I said, tossing my pillow at him. "Up and at 'em."

He jerked up when my pillow hit him, looking around in alarm. When he saw it was just me, he grabbed the pillow I'd thrown at him, shoved it under his head, mumbled, "Five more minutes," and slumped back down.

I rolled my eyes, then took pity on him.

I'm sure he would have liked to have gotten up close and personal with Charlie last night considering how they were cemented to each other on the dance floor.

Too bad Charlie's mom was waiting up for us all to come home last night. She hurried Charlie in the house and glared at Reece for getting her baby home so late. I'd almost busted up laughing in my brother's bereft face right in front of the in-laws.

I don't know where they'd been planning to sneak off to, but the mother-in-law had definitely put the kibosh on those plans.

Probably for the best, considering that had been about four hours ago and now it was time to be up and at 'em.

I walked over to my brother and yanked the pillow out from under his head. "Five minutes are up."

He groaned. "Noooooooooooo."

"Yes," I said. "Now get your ass outta bed. It might be the day before your wedding, but you live on a ranch and there's shit to do. Come on, we gotta get the feed out."

Reece gave one more groan of protestation but, unlike when he was younger, he didn't keep on whining and complaining. He got up and, still only half awake, climbed into his jeans and shrugged on a shirt and boots.

We went about our morning chores feeding the cattle and horses, then headed in for breakfast.

Charlie looked frazzled as she cooked scrambled eggs in the bunkhouse kitchen while pancakes sizzled on a side griddle. Her eyes shot immediately to Reece as we came in. "Thank God, you're back. I think I might just strangle my mom if I'm left alone with her any longer."

Reece immediately went over and took over cooking the eggs. "Sit, sit," he said, gently kissing the side of her head. "I got this."

I paused in the doorway, watching the two of them. I had to admit, he was good with her. It was like meeting her had been the last kick in the pants to grow up. After years begrudging my troublemaker brother, maybe he really had finally settled down and become the man I always hoped he could be.

And if he was a grown man and not my immature little kid brother who needed watching after anymore...

All I'd ever known was the two of us, scraping and fighting against the world.

But watching Reece and Charlie, I could see what they were building, their own little unit, the two of *them* against the world.

It was a good thing. And if I was feeling a little displaced... I took a step back from the doorway, but Reece turned to me.

"Jer, can you get the big tray? We'll need to carry all this up to the big house so we can have breakfast with the in-laws. You gotta come too, 'cause the more people, the more buffer we can give Char from her mom."

"Sure thing," I said, but even as I went forward, I couldn't help thinking, whoa, whoa, whoa, since when was my little brother the one giving orders around here?

But I just loaded up a tray with the large stack of pancakes and bottle of syrup. Reece covered the pan of eggs and Charlie carried plates as we all trekked back over to the big house.

Charlie's mother was not impressed by the fair provided, naturally.

"Well, I usually prefer crêpes but I *suppose* I can make an exception." She looked sharply up at Charlie. "Is it vegan? You know I'm strictly eating vegan lately."

"Absolutely," Charlie said straight-faced, even though I'd seen the mix

she'd used and doubted it was.

I also doubted that her mother understood what “vegan” meant since she spooned some of the fluffy eggs onto her plate.

The silence around the breakfast table was painful. Her father read the Austin American Statesman; he must have picked up a copy yesterday in town? I just chowed down and watched my brother and Charlie occasionally attempt awkward conversation that was quickly shot down by the Dragoness-in-Chief.

“After breakfast I’m going to go pick up Ruth so we can finish getting everything ready for the rehearsal dinner tonight,” Charlie said.

Her mother made a disgruntled face as she looked toward her daughter. “I thought the point of hiring a wedding planner was so that you didn’t have to think of any last-minute plans. It’s supposed to be *your day*.”

I knew Charlie well enough to know she was *barely* holding back an eye roll. Instead, she forced a smile through her teeth. “Yes, but I *want* to be involved, and Ruth is one of my best friends. I think it’s fun to be involved.”

Her mother wiped daintily at the corners of her mouth with a napkin. “Well, one might think you’d want to spend what little time you have with your mother since we so rarely get to see one another anymore. I mean, my God, you move out here in the middle of nowhere. You don’t call, you don’t write, you just disappear, and I have no *idea* where my own flesh and blood is—”

“Well, now you do, Mom,” Charlie said, the edge on her voice starting to show. “So now we can visit each other whenever we want. Reece and I can come visit you and Dad in California—”

“Oh, do you mean it?” Her mom’s hands shot across the table as she grasped Charlie’s hands. “Because we’d love to have you back in our time zone. This whole adventure out west has been... a lark. But it’s time for you to come home now. I’m sure all your friends would welcome”—her eyes flitted to my brother—“your new man.”

“My *husband*,” Charlie corrected. “After tomorrow, he’ll be my husband.”

I didn’t miss the distasteful look that crossed Mrs. Winston’s face at the word. It was almost enough to have me pushing back from the table and slamming my napkin down.

It was so clear that these people thought they were better than us, my brother and me. They might as well just come out and say that they thought

we were poor white trash. What galled me is that they weren't even wrong. What else could you call yourself when your own *mother* didn't want you? When I'd done plenty I wasn't proud of over the years to get by?

But to sit here and have this sanctimonious woman look down her nose and sneer at my brother as not good enough—

I shoved another big bite of pancakes in my mouth to keep from saying anything. Apparently, that was an uncouth way of eating, though, because Mrs. Winston's eyes came my way and then quickly averted away, the corners of her mouth twitching down again in disgust. I smiled, dug another big bite around in what syrup was left on my plate, and then shoved an even bigger bite in my mouth. My lips barely closed around it, and my cheeks were stuffed with pancakes as I chewed.

"Yes, well. You know your father could find a temporary position for him at his corporation while he attended night classes to get some sort of degree. Then I'm sure we could help him move up the ladder in no time."

"But he works here," I said, mouth still stuffed with pancake.

Charlie looked distressed as her eyes ping-ponged between us and Reece held his hands up. "Charlie—"

"Charlotte," her mother cut in, eyes cold. "Her name is Charlotte."

"*Charlotte* and I," Reece acquiesced, far more patient than I woulda been with this lady, "are happy where we are. We'll be glad to visit but we're making a good home here."

Charlie smiled at him and looked grateful, but his answer certainly wasn't winning him any points with his mother-in-law to be.

"Well," she said tightly, clutching her coffee cup with a white-knuckled grip. "I'm sure we can talk more and settle things after the wedding. You're right, we should just focus on one thing at a time. And tomorrow is your special day." She reached out a hand and caressed Charlie's cheek. "My baby, getting married."

It might have even been a sweet moment, if her mom hadn't proceeded to sigh and drop her hand while murmuring under her breath, "*again*."

Reece wrapped up breakfast pretty quickly after that and trundled Charlie off to go pick up Ruth. He really was a good partner, buffering Charlie like that and getting her away from her terrible mother as quickly as possible.

I watched with arms crossed from outside the house, near what would eventually be a wraparound porch, as my brother helped Charlie in the car and gave her a kiss before sending her off.

Xavier and his family were gone for the day to see Pedernales Falls—one of the many great natural water features in the area from the spring-fed rivers in Central Texas. There were lots of rocks for the boys to jump into the river from and even the younger ones could have fun splashing in the water on the beachy shore.

The rains had moved on and it would get into the high nineties by the afternoon. Ruth would be happy—the forecast called for the sunny weather to continue on for the rest of the week, so the outside ceremony tomorrow should be able to go off without a hitch.

We were having the ceremony back behind the rebuilt house underneath a big oak tree that survived last year's storm. The twister *just* barely bypassed the huge tree, even though ten feet to the left, it had carved up the earth, including the Harshbarger family ranch house that had stood there for a hundred years.

I walked over to my brother after he sent his bride-to-be off to pick up Ruth and clapped a hand on his back. “Come on, little brother, let's go for a ride.”

Reece looked at me, eyebrows up in surprise. “Where? I thought we had to—”

I dragged him forward a few steps, my arm firm around his shoulders until he jerked away from my rough grip.

“Hey, asshole, you can't kidnap me the day before my wedding. Where you taking me?”

I rolled my eyes. “Don't be so dramatic, prima donna.” I held up my hands. “By all means, go ahead back inside and do some more bonding with the in-laws.”

That had him freezing in his tracks. He only had to take one quick glance back at the house before he was in-step beside me. “What'd you have in mind, big brother?”

I laughed and clapped him on the back again, so hard he stumbled a step. Hey, I didn't make the rules—brotherly love had never been the gentle or ooey-gooley kind between us. We'd been kicked out of plenty of foster homes for *rough housing*, which could get so intense occasionally one or the other of us would come away with a bloody nose. Turned out it was good practice for when we ended up on the streets and learned to fight back-to-back, fists out, to the world that always seemed to have it out for us.

We were the only one each other'd had for the longest time. Yeah, things

had changed some when we'd found Xavier and he'd taken us in and given us the only family we'd ever known beyond each other.

But this was different. Reece was getting married. Tomorrow he'd be made one with Charlotte. Maybe one day, hopefully a long fucking time from now, they'd even have kids. Fuck, I couldn't imagine Reece as a dad, he was only just now beginning to act like an adult instead of the fuck up I'd had to watch out for and get out of scrapes his whole life. But someday. Starting tomorrow, he was starting a family unit that was separate from me. And it was good. That was the way it was supposed to be.

As we approached the stables, Mike emerged with one of the roan mares Xavier had brought, all saddled.

"Got 'em ready for you, boss," Mike said.

Reece looked at me, again perplexed.

I shrugged. "I figure the day before my little brother gets married, maybe we could take one last ride, just the two of us. Us against the world. And I can give you your wedding present in private."

Reece looked not only surprised but moved, if the way his jaw working and him swallowing was any tell. I rolled my eyes again and slammed him on the shoulder. It shoved him to the side a bit. "Now outta my way. You're riding Sally Anne here and I'm taking Lightning."

"Hey, why do you get the stallion? They were *my* wedding presents!"

I laughed and looked at him over my shoulder. "Yeah, but Xavier says he's barely broke and it'd be *my* ass if I got you thrown the day before your wedding. Plus," I said before disappearing into the stables to find Lightning, "I get dibs cause I'm the oldest."

Chapter Sixteen

JEREMIAH

I sat gingerly at the rehearsal dinner chair that evening.

“I told you, you shoulda let me ride Lightning instead of you,” Reece said with a big-ass grin from across the table. We were all out at a fancy restaurant terrace on Lake Travis—they’d had a late cancellation that Ruth managed to snatch for us.

I grimace-smirked an acknowledgement in my brother’s direction. “Yeah, yeah. If you’d been on Lightning when he bucked like that, you’d have ended up with a broken ass instead of just a bruised one. I am the master of the tuck and *roll*.”

Reece laughed and looked out on the table of our gathered friends and family. “Yeah, more like the master of the awkward fall-and-holler-your-ass-off.”

“Hmm, and yet,” I undid the cufflinks and shoved up the sleeves of my dress shirt. “Not a scratch.” My legs were ripped up all to hell and my tailbone hurt so bad I was trying my hardest to lean forward and put most of the weight of sitting on my thighs, but no one needed to know that.

I grinned. “Plus, I got right back up on that—” *fucker*. I stopped myself just in time and glanced to the right where I saw Charlie’s mom reaching for her pearls as if to start clutching them, “that *horse*. So all’s well that ends well.” I sat back a little without meaning to and struggled not to wince

through my smile.

We'd had a great time on the ride, other than the tumble from Lightning when I'd challenged Reece to a race. And the racing wasn't because I was a testosterone-filled jackass who always had to prove his superiority to his twin brother anymore—no, it wasn't because of that. I challenged Reece to race and tried my fucking hardest to beat him because I was intentionally being *nostalgic* for those times.

And if Lightning wasn't exactly on the same page as me and bucked me off when I tried nudging him a little too fervently in his hind quarters—well, I was just chalking that up to an excellent learning experience for all involved.

Plus, giving my little brother the win like that on the day before his wedding was really just the gentlemanly thing to do.

It was nice for all of us to be sitting down like this. Especially when Ruth had done us all a solid by putting the parents-in-law at the opposite end of the table by some of her parents' old friends she'd wrangled into coming. Ruth and Charlie had been on the go all day and after Reece and my brief hour trail ride, so had we.

Ruth's to-do list wasn't endless—it *had* been doable. But only barely.

But Charlie had grabbed her friend's hand and dragged her to sit down and enjoy the actual meal with us. That had been about half an hour ago and we'd all been eating good food, and more importantly, drinking fucking fabulous wine. I wasn't usually a wine guy. I was a hefeweizen guy all day long. But fuck if this cabernet—or whatever the hell this ruby red magic drink was—didn't go down smooth after the fourth or fifth glass. I'd lost track—I just knew the waiters at this fancy as fuck place never let my glass get more than half empty before they were there topping me off.

I felt loose and magnanimous—two words that were usually much more often ascribed to Reece than me. I was the uptight twin. The stuffy one with a stick up my ass. I knew that was what people thought of me, but tonight I didn't give a fuck.

It felt like this afternoon I'd finally cleared the air with Reece, maybe once and for all.

Reece hadn't even laughed when I'd gotten thrown—he'd immediately jumped off Sally Anne to make sure I was okay, and when he'd reached down a hand to help me up, I'd clasped it in confidence.

Yes, after he'd made sure I was alright, he had hopped back up on his

horse and continued the race, finishing long before me since I'd finally decided safety was the better part of valor and took it slow, getting to know our new stallion rather than put my neck on the line again.

But when I finally caught up to Reece at the ridgeline, he wasn't smug. No, he was in one of his rare contemplative moods, staring out at the vast vista of the Texas plane, wheat-colored Bermuda grass as far as the eye could see. It was almost time to harvest again.

"You know," he said, hand loosely on the pommel of his saddle, "I don't know if I ever told you how grateful I am that you decided to drag me along on this little adventure of yours."

"What are you talking about? It's both of ours."

I'd brought my horse right up beside his and he looked over at me with a *yeah, really?* expression. He shook his head. "No way Xavier would've trusted me with this much responsibility on my own. Hell, *I* wouldn't've trusted me."

"Well." I held the reins loosely as we looked out on the sloping hills that seemed to go on forever, huge wide Texas sky overhead. "A lot can change in a year. Moving down here, taking on the ranch—"

Reece laughed. "C'mon, we both know it was Charlie that made the difference. I hate to be one of those men who needed a good woman to turn him around. And I was trying before she got here. I don't know if you'll believe that, but I really was working on my shit. But she just..." He'd trailed off. "She gave me a *reason* for it to stick, ya know? The future wasn't just this hazy *maybe someday* anymore. And I know you don't believe it'll stick, but I swear—"

I shook my head, "No, no, man. I'm sorry I gave you such shit about it at the beginning. I can see it. You have changed. I'm sorry I was holding onto the past like that. You and Charlie are something special. It's why I wanted to bring you out here. I'm proud of you, man. I know I've given you a harder time than anyone, but I'm proud of the man you've become."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small box. "It's why I wanted to give you this today." I handed it over to him.

Reece's brow scrunched. "What is it?"

"Open and find out."

He took the box and his big fingers fumbled, but he finally managed to tear the brown paper I'd taped around it and pulled out the simple gold cardboard box inside. He cracked it open.

Reece's eyes immediately shot up to me in surprise. "Holy shit, how do you have this?"

"I kept hold of it since it was the only thing we had left of her."

Reece gingerly lifted our mother's tiny gold locket out of the box. "How? You're telling me you had this the *whole* time? Even when we were broke in San Fran? You never pawned it?"

I swallowed and looked away from him. "I always took care of us, didn't I? We never starved. A family is supposed to have heirlooms to pass down." I shrugged. "And it's just gold-plated. Don't get too excited, it's probably not worth much."

"Well, Jesus, I'm not gonna sell it now, I'm just saying!"

"I thought you could give it to Charlotte."

He nodded and gently dropped it back into the little box. "It'll mean so much to her." He looked up into my eyes. "It means a lot to me. Jesus, even more knowing you held onto it considering everything..." He'd trailed off and then met my eyes again.

"Will you finally tell me what happened during the six weeks you disappeared?"

I closed my eyes and took another long swig of wine. No need to replay that part of the day. Wasn't anything to say about it anyway. I shut Reece down like I always did whenever he ever brought it up, turned my horse around and said we needed to get back because the women would be back soon. I'd been right, too, because as soon as we'd finished brushing down the horses, Charlie had pulled in with Ruth in tow.

The rest of the day had been a whirlwind, getting the chairs delivered and stored in an unfinished room of the house, putting together the platform where the ceremony would be performed, helping the big tent guys get it out of the truck and up, lining out where the chairs would be staged, and finally, doing the rehearsal run through of the ceremony.

Tomorrow I'd be walking down with Ruth on my arm as one of Charlie's bridesmaids, but today I'd just walked with Olivia since Ruth had still been busy working on some finishing touch or other. But still, it had been special standing beside my brother watching on as Charlie held a cluster of rolled newspapers as a stand-in for her flowers, two-stepping down the makeshift 'aisle' they'd marked out on the grass on her father's arm. I swore I'd never seen Charlie grinning bigger than when she'd walked that aisle toward my brother.

I'd looked out and seen in the waning sunlight that even Ruth had stopped her nonstop running around to watch them run through the ceremony. Xavier was officiating—he'd done the online certificate thing, and to hear the big man's voice booming out the wedding vows, followed by Charlie's sweet voice and then my brother's... Well, it was enough to even get to me. And I usually considered myself the least sentimental bastard on earth.

But watching my brother gaze with the most sincerity I'd ever seen on his face as he stared into his woman's eyes—it hit me. Hit me deep.

And then we'd all loaded up and headed into Austin and this posh restaurant that I knew was mostly for Charlie's parents than for anyone else. If it had just been us, we woulda likely had the rehearsal dinner somewhere like the Salt Lick, one of the most famous BBQ places in the hill country. Somehow, I didn't think finger-lickin' good BBQ would have appealed to the pretentious Mrs. Winston's standards. Ruth had still booked them to cater the wedding tomorrow though, cause she knew what real Texas folks expected at a wedding, no matter how supposedly "posh." She'd also contracted with a local tearoom to have cucumber sandwiches. The woman knew how to cover her angles.

I had to say, Ruth was an impressive woman, and I wasn't just saying that about the way she'd been captivating me carnally lately. It was half the damn reason I couldn't get her outta my damn head. A pretty face and a tight body were fairly a dime a dozen. But a woman of quality, who challenged you in and out of the bedroom... or the truck cab as it were...

Fuck, my pants were getting tight under the elegant tablecloth just remembering. My eyes drifted across the table to the siren in question. She was seated across from me, sitting there beside Charlie. The two of them had their heads together and were giggling about something, but Ruth caught me looking at her, and if it was possible, her cheeks went even rosier.

Goddammit, she was the most stunning woman I'd ever seen in my entire life. Like, kudos to my brother and all, but Charlie didn't hold a candle to Ruth's vivacious firecracker energy. She was so full of *life*.

It had been hard to keep my hands off her all day. Only being busy myself and knowing she barely had a second to spare as it was had kept me away. But now, feeling so loose, and watching the way her hair shone under the lights of the sconces, and hearing her bell-like laughter ring out every few moments from something Olivia or Charlie said...

I pushed back from my chair as the servers brought out dessert.

“Where you off to?” Reece asked.

“The little cowboy’s room,” I deadpanned and he laughed, but at the last second, I shot a quick glance Ruth’s way. I didn’t miss the way her eyes flared at my look, and I moseyed over to the bathrooms, taking my time.

When I heard footsteps behind me as I got to the dark alcove where the restrooms were located, I grinned. Especially when I felt small, feminine hands slip into the back pockets of my Wranglers. “Where you headed, cowboy?”

I spun and there Ruth was, reading my mind just like I hoped she would. I opened the door to one of the two restrooms and slammed it shut behind us. Ruth was right there with me, flicking the lock at the same time the motion-sensor lights flickered the lights on.

Her hands were on the lapels of my suitcoat and she was dragging me toward the narrow counter. “God, I’ve been dying to get my hands on you all day,” she whispered hungrily, and naturally, my cock jerked all the way to attention at hearing her throaty admission.

She hopped up on the counter, tugging me between her legs and wrapping them around my waist as her dress bunched up. God, I loved how perfect that felt. How natural. How the entire day felt like it had been leading to this moment.

I leaned in to kiss her, but she leaned back even as she linked her arms around my neck, a sly smile on her face. “God, you have no idea how much I want to kiss you and then fuck your brains out. But we haven’t had a chance to talk all day. How are you? I saw you and Reece coming in with the horses.” She withdrew her arms but only so she could run her fingers through the hair at the sides of my head, her nails digging into my scalp. “Did you guys have a good talk?”

I swallowed hard and leaned my weight slightly into her. I’d never really experienced this. The feminine softness of someone touching me like this, wanting to hear about my day or know how I was. Maybe it was the wine addling my head, but suddenly this—*Ruth*—she was all I wanted.

All I’d ever wanted, if I was honest. I leaned my head to the side, so that my cheek was in her palm, my eyes closed. Fuck, but her hands were soft. She grew up doing work as hard as I did every day but her hands were still somehow soft. And they smelled good, like she used some sort of flowery lotion. It made my cock even stiffer, and positioned between her legs like I was, one probe of my hips had me nestling into her heated sex, only my jeans

and the skirt of her dress separating me from conquest.

But for once in my life I was content right here, lingering in the before. Only with this woman who had put some sort of hex on me.

I turned my head even further and kissed her palm, then began trailing kisses up her arm. “Talk later?” I asked, my voice full in a way I couldn’t explain. I wasn’t sure I could manage talking right now. I was feeling too much. I needed to let the feelings out—to fuck them out. To satiate all of this—this *whatever* it was that was full in my chest.

She smiled and nodded and leaned down, her hands sliding back around my neck, her fingers burying in the slightly longish hair there. I needed a haircut. But then I closed my eyes. Or maybe not, because fuck, I loved the way that felt, her fingernails scraping against my scalp like that as she worked her fingers through my thick hair.

I never let women touch me. But Ruth’s touch in this moment, it was electrifying even as it felt dangerous.

And then our lips met. Fuuuuuuuuuuuuck, her lips were soft. And her tongue flicked out as we kissed. She briefly suckled the middle of my upper lip, her tongue working the nerves inside.

I grunted and grabbed her body, jerking her to me tighter. The little vixen had discovered that spot somewhere along the line and knew that right there on my inner upper lip was somehow like a nerve attached straight to my dick.

All of a sudden, I was done with gentle and the strange emotion caught in my chest. My cock wanted inside her sweet little—

Apparently, she was thinking along the same lines, ’cause she flipped up her dress all the way and my mouth went dry. She wasn’t wearing any underwear. Fuck. Fuck, she hadn’t been wearing any underwear this whole time.

My eyes flew up to her, where she was grinning saucily back at me. “I hoped we’d find some time together tonight.”

My hands couldn’t drop to my belt fast enough. I didn’t bother with niceties. I unbuckled, unbuttoned, unzipped, pulled myself out and then shoved inside her waiting wetness.

We both groaned as I finally slid inside.

Again her arms came around me, clutching me to her, and again, I allowed it.

I hadn’t felt a woman’s arms around me since... since...

But no, I wouldn’t think about that. I breathed in the scent of Ruth, her

lotion, her shampoo, her skin, trying to ground myself.

I was here, with Ruth, in this bathroom. My jaw flexed.

Here. Now. I was here. Not there.

Not there.

Still, my chest constricted until I peeled Ruth's arms from around me and pinned them behind her back.

She arched her chest out toward me and spread her legs even wider. "Oh God, yes. Jeremiah, you feel so good."

And just like that, one hand holding both of her wrists tightly, I was back. I opened my eyes and looked down on Ruth so gorgeously splayed out below me on the counter. Her cheeks were splotchy and red with her building pleasure, her lips ruby red.

I huffed out like a bull as I pulled out of her and then shoved roughly back in. Her eyes rolled back as my cock filled her full, so full because goddamn, she was a tight fit.

A knock came at the door behind us. Ruth's alarmed eyes shot to me.

"Occupied," I called out roughly as I dropped the hand not holding her arms to her clit.

Fuck, I loved how wet she got for me. My finger was immediately covered in her juices as I slid my thumb around her clit, rubbing up and down her slit to where my cock was buried inside her. She shuddered underneath my touch.

Fuck, watching her writhe there beneath me made my balls tighten. I massaged her clit while I continued to fuck her. The knocking didn't come again. There were two bathrooms after all, and I wasn't going to be hurried when fucking this gorgeous creature. Never.

In fact, though I loved this angle, I wanted her to watch what I was doing. I wanted her to look in her own face as I fucked her. I wanted to see her face as she watched herself.

But first I'd get her off here. I knew my baby always had more than one in her.

So I pulled out and leaned over, putting my mouth on her dripping cunt.

I'd finally let go of her wrists, a good thing because she slapped a hand over her mouth to quiet the breathy squeals that started up the second I began tonguing her clit.

Fuck, there was nothing sweeter than burying myself chin deep in the right woman. I loved Ruth's pussy. Hers was by far my favorite. With her

legs opened wide to me like this, she was like a fully blossomed flower, the lips of her vulva full and flushed with life. When I massaged them with my fingers up and down to her hole and then notched my chin fully inside her slit and latched my mouth onto that little bud of hers—

She just absolutely lost her shit, and it was the most beautiful fucking thing I'd ever witnessed.

Her legs shook. Her torso shuddered. Her little squeals escaped no matter the hand secured over her mouth.

I gave her so much pleasure in that moment, I could feel her world rocking. When her orgasm finally subsided and I stood up, wiping my mouth on my sleeve, she looked at me with pupils blown, slack against the counter, and I took pity on her.

“Should I carry you back to your chair, beautiful?”

But her eyes zeroed in on my hard cock and she shook her head. She only gave me one word: “More.”

I grinned at her as I reached for her waist and lifted her off the counter. She was a curvy, lush woman, but still weighed nothing to a guy who tossed around giant hay bales for a living. I lifted her and spun her around so that she was facing the mirror. Together we looked at her flushed cheeks and smeared eye makeup. Her eyes always watered when she had one of those huge, body-rocking orgasms. I grinned at her over her head.

“Brace your arms on the counter, baby,” I whispered in her ear as I flipped her skirt back up and rubbed a hand over her soft, sweet little bare ass. I kept going, sliding my hand down between her legs until she let out a needy little whine and bent over, widening her stance so I had better access.

“That’s my girl,” I cooed in her ear. “Now watch yourself in the mirror as I fuck you. I want to see you watch yourself as I make you come.”

Her eyes did the fluttery roll thing as I nudged at her entrance with my cock. I helped feed myself into her slick cunt with my hand and then I pushed in.

She let out a breathy little moan. Goddamn. Every time. Would it ever get old, hearing that noise? I couldn't imagine it ever could.

This was Ruth. Ruth, who'd driven me crazy, never letting a single point go without arguing the hell out of it. But seeing her submit so sweetly, and clench on my cock as I pushed into her... Fuck, but I felt like a king. I bottomed out inside her, and then a wild impulse hit and I put one hand around her neck.

Her eyes in the mirror lifted briefly to meet mine before dropping back to look at her own face. Or rather, to look at my hand on her neck. At which point she nuzzled her ass out and wiggled it, signaling she was into everything I had for her.

A fresh rush of blood hit my cock as I lightly squeezed her dainty little throat and felt her swallow.

What the fuck was this woman doing to me?

I didn't know, but I also didn't take my eyes off her as I fucked her slow and kept a careful pressure on her neck.

She gave me such trust, so completely, so effortlessly.

And I didn't take it easy on her.

With the hand not at her throat I reached between the counter to massage her clit. She was more swollen than I'd ever felt her.

I barely touched her before she was thrashing, pushing forward against my hand at her throat as if looking for even more constriction.

I gave it to her.

And right as I was about to spill into her, unable to handle the erotic scene a moment longer, I released her neck and we both came, her pussy clenching so hard around me I thought my goddamn spine was going to be sucked out through my dick because holy fucking Christ!!

Afterward, we were both bent forward over the counter, me still impaling her, cum leaking out down her leg, and my hand still at her throat, though limp now. I massaged her throat gently and placed kisses at the nape of her neck.

She was so goddamned beautiful, so fucking perfect.

I dropped my hand down to her breast, the other still lost in the wetness of her pussy and I clutched her to myself.

I didn't want to let her go. Didn't want the moment to end. In this post-sex euphoria of what felt like the hardest, most complete orgasm I'd ever experienced, I couldn't let her go.

She was still trembling underneath me and didn't struggle to get away.

So I kept holding her, occasionally swirling my fingers in her pussy and making her body jump and twitch with aftershocks.

It was only another hard knocking at the door that finally broke the spell and had me lifting to stand upright.

I bowed my head into Ruth's back a moment as I finally pulled out of her delicious body, hating that it was over already and we had to separate. I'd

never experienced this with a woman. Usually when it was done, I was the one looking for the exit as quickly as I could. But with this damn woman, I just wanted to stay in the moment, I didn't want to let go of her body, or for her body to let go of mine.

The door handle rattled and I turned my head to call out roughly, "Occupied."

Ruth finally roused beneath me, standing up as well and reaching for the paper towel dispenser. No doubt to clean me off her, dripping down her legs. I don't know why the thought had my half-stiff cock jerking. It was a caveman's response, the thought of my cum on her skin arousing me.

I leaned forward just as she finished gathering a wad of towels, and bit the back of her neck, not hard, just enough so that I could taste her skin and feel her shudder beneath me.

She groaned low and then turned in my arms. I took her mouth voraciously. She kissed me just as hungrily back, her arms coming around my neck. For once, I allowed it. I was too hungry to taste her. To feel her kissing me just as hungrily back.

How could we still be this crazy for each other *after* fucking? I grabbed her hair and pulled, ruining the updo just like I'd ruined the rest of her makeup as I tugged her face back from mine. And goddammit, I loved the way her wide, lust-filled eyes came to mine.

"Don't do it," I said, the words spilling out of my mouth on impulse. "You don't belong behind a desk, stuck in a lab somewhere decoding intake data or whatever the fuck you said you'd be doing. You belong on the land. Doing what you love."

She blinked rapidly, her soft body suddenly stiffening. "What are you saying? It's my job. I have to have a job—"

I shook my head and the words just shot out of my mouth. "I'm saying be old-fashioned with me. I'm saying marry me and run this ranch with me and maybe the horse program if you're interested in that too."

She choked and then sputtered, her eyes as wide as saucers. "W-what? Is this a business proposition or did you just— Did you just propose to me?"

I groaned and bent my forehead to hers. "It's coming out wrong, huh? I just, I don't think it's wrong to want to be part of a world where loving a woman means loving her through and through. I want it all. Could I have ever imagined a woman who loves the same kinda life I love, is smart as a fuckin' whip, smarter than *me* sometimes—which, being the ass that I am,

grates for about five seconds before it just turns me the fuck on? No. No, I never even fucking dreamed there was a woman out there like you.” Saying it all out loud, I realized how true it was. And how much I wanted her. As my wife. In my bed. Always.

“Oh.” She blinked hard, still looking shell-shocked.

I grabbed her by the back of my neck and pulled her in close. Sure, what I was doing was fucking nuts, but people fell in love fast all the time, just look at my brother and Charlie.

“What I’m trying to say is, this is what love is. The oh-shit-this-one-actually-checks-all-the-boxes part and the I-want-to-wring-her-neck-or-fuck-each-others-brains-out-nonstop part together. That’s love.”

She blinked up at me. “A-Are you sure?”

I grinned at her, an elated feeling lighting up my chest. “I don’t fucking know. But I’ve never felt anything like this before. You’re all I can think about. I used to get so mad at my brother for falling in love with some woman or other, left and right, I never understood why he got so moon-eyed —”

“No.” She shook her head goofily back at me and interlaced our fingers. “Me too. I was always so cautious in relationships. Never opening up or letting myself be vulnerable.” She shook her head in a grimace and made a slice across her neck with her finger. “Never.”

“So this,” I said, my voice deepening as I stepped closer, our chests touching, “I’m the only one you’re letting this close.”

“This is crazy,” she giggled, running her hands through my hair. “Are we really doing this?”

I pulled away from her far enough so that I could go down on one knee. She still had the wad of paper towels in her hand and she was disheveled as all hell. She’d never looked more radiant. And I wanted to do this right, even if I didn’t have a ring yet. I’d fix that as soon as I could.

“Ruth Harshbarger, will you marry me?”

“Yes!” she whispered in voice so full of joy, I knew she felt the elation too. And then she pulled me to my feet and cemented her body to mine as we locked lips.

Chapter Seventeen

RUTH

It was Charlie's wedding day, the day all the planning had been leading up to, but I'd barely slept a wink last night.

Jeremiah had proposed.

Proposed!

I was engaged.

I mean, holy crap. We'd agreed not to tell anyone. Neither of us wanted to take away from Reece and Charlie's special day.

But about every three seconds, I'd have a little internal giddy freak out. Jeremiah wanted to marry me! We were going to get married. Jeremiah loved me!

I smiled to myself as I finished tying a bow with a little bit of tulle around the last of the chairs. Everything was almost ready for the ceremony. We'd been running around nonstop all day. I'd barely gotten to say two words to Jeremiah other than him stealing me away for a brief two-minute make out session when I ran inside the bunkhouse to grab a protein bar.

Last night we hadn't gotten any more time with each other after I'd finally put myself back together and made what I could of my smudged makeup. Luckily, when we finally stumbled out of the bathroom, the party was breaking up. Jeremiah waited until I got into my Lyft before he got into the van they'd rented to take everyone else back to the ranch—Matt had

volunteered to be the DD for the night.

My grin was big as I looked out on the finished product of the day's hard work. Part of me was shocked it had all come together. Yeah, I'd been on the phone for half the day, and while the catering van from the Salt Lick had been on time, the tables for all the food to go *on* had naturally shown up late.

But all the guys had pitched in, even Xavier's eldest boy, and everything was finally ready. The yard was absolutely *dripping* with flowers. The florists had really gone above and beyond. A stunning installation of white orchids and other flowers covered the archway at the end of the aisle the bride would be arriving through. Flower bedecked trellises were set up alongside the serving tables as well. They'd turned the yard into a mini-Eden. It was magical.

Just in time too, because the guests would start arriving any minute.

It was a hot day but that was to be expected, and under the shade of the large oak, where we'd staged the chairs and ceremony platform, with a breeze, it was almost pleasant as far as Texas was concerned. Especially as the sun started to drop. If the timing went right, Reece and Charlie would be saying their vows right at sunset.

I sighed happily. The pictures would be spectacular. Which reminded me

But when I looked around, panic only briefly spiking— I breathed out in relief. There was the photographer, taking some preliminary shots, doing their thing.

Everything really was going off without a hitch.

I laughed to myself.

Wow, I was just so used to catastrophe after catastrophe, I almost didn't know what to do when things went well.

My hands lifted to my heated cheeks. Okay, the only thing left was for me to go change. I was a sweaty mess from running around all day. And I should go check in on Charlie and make sure she was on schedule. She should be finishing up hair and makeup. And it'd be good to make sure Momzilla wasn't driving her too nuts.

I headed back around the big house toward the front entrance, a huge grin still on my face. God, my face hurt from smiling so much.

Because once again my thoughts were circling back to my secret joy.

Jeremiah *loved* me. After all my months of crushing on him, imagining what it would be like to...he not only liked me back, he *loved* me.

Pleasure and happiness flushed through me. I'd never been happier in my whole *life*.

Then a tiny voice chimed in, one I'd been trying to ignore all day, and I frowned: He didn't actually say *I love you*.

I shook it off. He'd said, "this is what love is," and that was essentially the same thing. I was being nit-picky and stupid to want him to say it in a particular way, like it was some magic formula.

I pulled open the front door just in time to hear Charlie's voice sounding tense. "It's fine, Mom. This is the way I like it."

"But if you just put in these extensions I brought, you could have a proper updo. There's still time to change it. Think of the pictures, darling. You don't want to look like a boy in your own wedding pictures. Or worse, a lesbian!"

"Mother!" Charlie sounded officially pissed now, and I didn't blame her.

I hurried through the foyer and into the bedroom. "Hiiiiii," I sing-songed. Charlie was seated in front of a makeshift vanity the makeup and hair artist had set up. She was standing off to the side looking uncomfortable as Charlie glared up at her mother. Mrs. Winston stood haughtily beside her, long hair extensions in her hands. If I hadn't known what they were, I would've thought she was holding some kind of animal.

I averted my eyes back to Charlie and I clapped my hands. "Babe, you look amazing!" And she did. Her pixie hair cut was adorable and her makeup perfect. Understated but perfectly done. Her eyes were highlighted and looked huge and Bambi-ish, with long dark lashes. Her hair had been slightly styled with little flowers pinned here and there.

She looked like an elven princess, an effect I knew would only be enhanced once she got into the beautiful, flowy lace dress she'd picked out.

"You're perfect," I whispered, just for her.

Her eyes met mine and she smiled. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," I nodded.

"That's what I've been telling her," Olivia said from where she'd been sitting on the bed. She was dressed in a simple sundress, lovely as always.

"Which is good." I looked down at my watch. "Because guests are going to start arriving any minute and we're T minus forty until the ceremony starts. No more changes to hair or makeup. It's time to get into the dress!"

Charlie grinned at me, then up at her mom. "See, no more time to change things."

"Here," I pulled my phone out of my pocket. "I'll text the photographer

so they can come in and get pics of you putting on the dress.”

Everyone nodded and I shot off a quick text. I’d chosen a female photographer specifically for this purpose.

As I finished sending the text, I saw an unread message from Jeremiah.

THINKING OF YOU, GORGEOUS. YOU BEEN DRIVING ME MAD IN THOSE SEXY LEGGINGS ALL DAY. CAN A FIANCÉ STEAL A MINUTE WITH HIS WOMAN ANYTIME TODAY?

I grinned, but then remembered I had to get dressed myself. I shook my head happily as I shot off a quick text back. PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE. I’M GETTING CHANGED WITH CHARLIE. SEE YOU WHEN WE WALK DOWN THE AISLE.

I felt such a surging thrill as I sent the text. Because as I’d set up everything today, all I could think was that one day soon, I’d be doing all this for myself.

Could life really work out like this? One day everything changes and suddenly you get everything you ever wanted and all your dreams come true?

I would get to stay on the land I always loved, the land my family had worked for generations. Even if I didn’t own it anymore, what did that matter? Could we ever really *own* land anyway? I’d get to live here, and with the man of my dreams.

It was almost too much. My face was going to hurt from smiling—my cheeks were already sore. Still, I couldn’t stop as I slipped into the bathroom and gave myself a quick sponge bath under my arms to get refreshed. I yanked the deodorant out of my large purse and reapplied it, then hastily put on some makeup.

I rejoined Charlie in just my bra and underwear since my dress was on a hanger in her room. She was just stepping into her gown. Her mother was helping her with the buttons from behind, and the photographer was there, the shutter on her camera snapping away.

I slid behind them and hurried to put on my own dress, a peachy ModCloth dress that Olivia found for me. It was tight on the bodice and then got all floofy at the bottom, like a retro fifties dress. It did look fabulous on me—I was shocked at how feminine I felt when I put it on after it came in the mail. For a girl who was used to wranglers, being covered in mud, and smelling more like cows than perfume, feeling so girly was a nice change.

When I looked up, the photo op was finished, or had at least stopped, because Mrs. Winston was frowning down at the buttons. “I’ve been telling you to restrict calories all week, but did you listen to me? No, of course you

didn't. And now we can barely button your gown." She shook her head, her tight lips pursed.

"Here, why don't I try?" Olivia took over working on the long line of buttons up the back of the dress as Charlie's alarmed eyes flashed toward me.

The pregnancy really wasn't showing but I guessed looking at her now, I could see some changes. Her breasts were more full and overall she just looked really healthy—far better than the starved-looking waif who'd first showed up on the ranch eight months ago.

"Reece is going to be grouchy about all these buttons tonight," Olivia joked, breaking the tension.

Mrs. Winston made a disgruntled noise like such things were not to be talked about in civilized company, but Charlie just giggled and glanced over her shoulder. "Right?"

And I grinned harder thinking about how I'd just reminded my own Walker twin that patience was a virtue.

I went over to Charlie and clapped my hands excitedly. "You're perfect. Reece is gonna shit himself when he sees you." I ignored Mrs. Winston's noise of dismay at my curse. I was done tiptoeing around her. I'd done my job. This was Charlie's moment now, and she was one of my best friends.

I threw my arms around her, careful not to smudge any of her makeup or to disturb her hair. "I'm so proud and happy for you," I whispered to her. "You deserve happiness more than anyone else I know."

When I pulled back, her eyes were shining and she swatted at me before fanning her face. "Don't make me cry, bitch. We just finished my makeup."

"Oh, don't worry," the makeup artist said from the corner where she was packing up. "I do weddings all the time. That's why I put so much fixative on at the end. That makeup is waterproof and tear-proof. So make sure to use the makeup remover I gave you at the end of the night to get it all off."

Charlie laughed and nodded gratefully, gently dabbing at her eyes with a cloth Olivia magically produced.

The photographer jumped in and snapped several more pics of all of us.

With Charlie finally buttoned into her dress, there was only a little bit more waiting until it was time.

"Let me go make sure all the groomsmen are where they ought to be," I said and Charlie nodded.

But when I stepped outside, Jeremiah was there, and he had Mike with him. Mike and Reece had gotten close over the past six months, far closer

than he ever had with Buck, who either stuck to himself, or was out with various girlfriends, or who knew where the rest of the time he wasn't working. He'd been invited to the wedding but I hadn't seen him around all day. The other good friends Reece had back at Xavier and Mel's couldn't get away since they'd had to stay back at Mel's ranch to run it.

Reece had sworn he didn't mind who all was there, as long as he was walking away with Charlie at the end of the day.

"Ready?" Jeremiah asked me, and just seeing him, being near him, once again had that stupid grin busting out across my face. I nodded, not quite trusting my voice. Then I cleared my throat because, Jesus, I wasn't some stupid teenager.

Though he made me feel like one when he leaned in and whispered in my ear, "Goddamn, you're beautiful. I want to rip that dress right off you. It's gonna be torture making it through this ceremony."

I pulled away, my face flushed, and I was glad that Mike was absorbed in his phone. I mean, God, the intimate way Jeremiah had just pulled me into him, if Mike glanced this way, he'd be an idiot not to guess that we were—

But then again, if we were going to get married, we'd be telling everybody soon enough. It would only be a secret a little longer. We just needed to make it through the day. Another giddy thrill ran through me and I allowed my hand to drop to Jeremiah's for a quick squeeze before letting go.

"Let me just go get Olivia. Poor Charlie. She's had nerves all day. Her mom's not helping, naturally. And oh my God," I leaned into Jeremiah confidentially, "I swear I almost had a heart attack when her mom was buttoning up the dress and started in on Charlie about gaining weight! We've managed to keep the baby secret this whole time and then right before the wedding she almost—"

"Baby?" Jeremiah jerked away from me and I realized my huge faux pas a second too late.

I clapped a hand across my mouth. It was just a slip of the tongue. I'd gotten used to him being my confidante. I'd totally forgotten that Reece wanted this secret kept from him too.

"Shhhh. Hush," I waved my hands frantically at him, glancing again over at Mike, who had looked our way and then quickly back down at his screen.

I stepped in close to Jeremiah and whispered. "Shh, don't say anything. I forgot. They wanted to keep it a secret from everyone till after the wedding."

But Jeremiah was looking anything but calm. He grabbed me by the

elbow and dragged me several feet away from Mike. “Are you seriously telling me that my little brother knocked Charlotte up? This is a fucking shotgun wedding?” He shook his head and swore. “I shoulda known this was too good to be true. Reece didn’t change at all. He’s still just an irresponsible little—”

“Uh, excuse me?” I made a disbelieving noise. “Your brother is not irresponsible. He’s great.”

Jeremiah looked at me like I was a naïve idiot. “Oh, come on. You think this means true love?” He scoffed. “We all thought it was weird, them getting married so fast. It’s the oldest story in the book. Our dad married our mom for the same reason. And he was gone three months after we were born, so don’t tell me about how *great* my brother is. He’s just repeating history.”

I took a step back from him.

Mainly so I wouldn’t slap him.

“How can you say that? You know him better than anyone.”

He looked at me and his eyes were hard. “Exactly.”

I just shook my head, my heart hurting for Reece. To have grown up with someone so judgmental at your side, always expecting you to fuck up and then saying *I told you so* every time you made a mistake...

And this was the man I was planning to make a life with?

The internal question hit me like a kick in the guts. It was like everything was crashing down in waves. I tried to push away the thought but Jeremiah stood there in front of me looking so angry, stubborn, and intractable.

Then, behind us, Olivia opened the door. “Oh good, everyone’s here,” she said, her face bright. “It’s time, isn’t it, Ruth? Charlie’s getting antsy in here.”

Oh God. Charlie. It was Charlie’s day. Charlie and Reece. They were getting married, come hell or high water.

Or a stubborn, annoying twin brother who would *not*, I repeat *not*, interfere with this wedding going forward.

I forced a smile for Olivia. “Just give us one more minute.”

Thankfully, Jeremiah stayed quiet until the door shut again. Then I grabbed his lapels and jerked him close and spoke about two inches away from his face to make sure he got the message.

“Listen here. You are *not* going to fuck up this day for your brother. I don’t care *what* you think about it. Reece loves Charlotte and she loves him back. They are going to have a perfect wedding day and you aren’t going to say one goddamned *word* about this. Do you get me?”

He stared at me stone-faced and I jerked his lapels again. “Nod if you get me.”

He shrugged me off but nodded, standing stiffly upright like a rod had been shoved up his ass.

I let go of him and let out a long rush of breath. “Fine. Let’s get through this.”

All of the day’s joy turned to dread as I opened the door to retrieve Olivia, Charlie, and her parents.

“It’s time!” I said as brightly as I could. Charlie frowned at me, always too perceptive for her own good. But thankfully, she was distracted by hearing the wedding music change. We’d carefully picked out the music, and she knew it was the song before the wedding march began.

I tried to enjoy her eyes lighting up, but my stomach was still sour with Jeremiah’s accusations. Reece wasn’t like their father. He would never leave this beautiful woman or their child in the dust. He *had* grown up, and if his own brother couldn’t see that, all the more tragedy when everyone else could.

“Daddy?” Charlotte looked toward her father, who must have joined her while I was outside. He looked tall and refined in a tux as he stood to take her arm. Her mother wasn’t anywhere to be seen and I assumed she’d gone to take her seat in the front row.

The vulnerability in Charlie’s eyes as she looked toward her dad made me forget Jeremiah and everything else.

This *was* her day, and in spite of her terrible mother I was still so glad we could give her this. I was happy her parents were here for this and that they were finally supporting her. God knew we couldn’t choose our family. Sometimes showing up was enough.

When I next smiled at Charlie, it was genuine. “Come on,” I motioned toward them. “It’s time.”

I prayed that Jeremiah had gotten his shit together by the time we stepped outside. I hurried in front of Charlie and her dad to push out the door first, just in case I needed to shoot him the evil eye to get him in line. But when I stepped outside, Jeremiah was standing in line beside Mike, a pleasant enough expression on his face, even if he was standing a little stiffer than usual.

Good enough.

“All right,” I said, infusing my voice with a cheer I didn’t necessarily feel anymore, “it’s time, everybody! Places, places!”

Olivia came out of the house last and scurried ahead of me to take Mike's arm while I lined up behind her and took Jeremiah's. Charlie and her dad were behind us. It was a small wedding party, sure, but all Reece and Charlie needed.

We'd run through this all last night, but my stomach was aflutter with butterflies. As we all walked around the corner of the house right as the music changed to Pachelbel's Canon, I yanked Jeremiah down by his arm so I could hiss at him, "Promise you won't make a scene."

He jerked back and glared down at me. "I know how to behave myself."

I breathed out in relief, but he just shook his head like he had a bad taste in his mouth. Whatever. We had a wedding to pull off. I couldn't care about his *feelings* right now. Especially when his feelings were so stupid.

I tried to push down my anger at him for even reacting the way he had, but took another deep breath as we all gathered behind the group of tall bushes the florists had brought in to block the seated crowd's view of us. Who did he think he was, anyway, Mr. High and Mighty?

Shake it off, shake it off, I told myself as Olivia and Matt started their arm-in-arm march down the aisle in front of us. And fucking *smile*.

I flashed my teeth and hoped it looked cheerful and not like a grimace as Jeremiah and I stepped out on cue once Olivia and Matt were halfway down the aisle.

The music chimed out all around from strategically placed speakers. The crowd was full, almost every seat taken. No one in town was gonna miss a chance at food and a spectacle like this, even if both Reece and Charlie were relative newcomers. The Harshbarger Ranch was an institution around here, and everyone had been curious to see the new build after the twister took the old house off.

I was glad. It gave a festive cheer to the event. I knew every face in the crowd and most of them I'd at least introduced Charlie to. Hopefully, even more friendships could come out of this, cementing her and Reece's place in the community.

And looking ahead at Reece waiting beside the huge Xavier, he couldn't have looked more different from his twin. He was grinning goofily, leaning dramatically to the side like he was trying to peek around me and Jeremiah to get even a glimpse of his bride. Reece was sweet and nonjudgmental and playful and—

Everything his brother was not.

I clutched Jeremiah's arm tighter as we reached the front of the aisle. I was hesitant to let go of him and go stand on the opposite side of the altar. I knew he'd promised he wouldn't make waves, but I seriously swore that I would strangle the bastard if he ruined this for my friends.

But when he finally unpeeled my arm from his, still with a glare, he at least stayed silent when he went to stand beside his brother. It took everything I could not to bite my nails as they stood side by side, features identical and yet still, never more opposite.

Jeremiah stood stiff as a soldier while Reece was grinning so big I thought his face might split in half when Charlotte finally appeared at the top of the aisle and the music changed to the wedding march. Not to mention the tears I saw cresting in his eyes. He didn't wipe them away, either. No. He just stared in awe at his wife-to-be as her father brought her down the aisle to him.

When her dad lifted the veil and he saw her face to face, the tears fell and still he didn't seem to care. He pulled Charlie close and dropped his forehead to hers as he whispered something to her I couldn't hear. But I could read her corresponding smile and read the body language as she sank into him, the lines between them disappearing for a moment before she pulled back, only their hands linked.

They both grinned like fools throughout the entire ceremony, repeating after Xavier with sometimes wobbly voices. Charlie was openly crying by the end, but the makeup artist was true to her word, her makeup didn't smudge one bit.

Jeremiah kept up his stupid stoic stance the whole time but I ignored him and lost myself in the romantic moment of my best friends uniting in love.

When Xavier finally announced, "You may kiss the bride," the crowd got to its feet and cheered as Reece dipped Charlie and kissed her deep. And uh... for a good long while. Whistles and laughter came from the crowd until, long moments later, he lifted her back upright and released her. They were both grinning and laughing, including Xavier, who only looked slightly more terrifying when he laughed.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife!" Xavier declared.

I felt a wave of relief wash through my body. Holy shit. We'd actually done it. They were married now, with no major hiccups. I laughed along with everyone else as the couple walked back down the aisle. Everyone opened the little bags of birdseed they'd been given and they tossed it on the newlyweds

as they passed.

And then it was on to the reception, just in the field off to the side. We'd put up a big tent for the reception (in case of rain) yesterday along with tables. All the guests helped move the chairs from the ceremony space into the tent around the tables while Reece and Charlie took a moment to refresh themselves inside.

"Yes, over there," I guided some guests where to go. "Yep. Barbeque from the Salt Lick is the main course but there are vegetarian options too."

They thanked me and then moved past, chairs in tow.

And then Jeremiah was in front of me, towering and blocking the Texas sun. "You. We need to talk."

I pursed my lips. "Can it wait? I'm kind of busy here."

Jeremiah looked around. "Everyone's figuring it out. Then they stand around and eat. It's self-explanatory. Come on." And he took my elbow and started dragging me to the side of the house nearest the bunkhouse, where there weren't any guests. "We need to talk."

"Fine," I said, jerking out of his hold. "There's no need to manhandle me."

As soon as we were around the corner and away from prying eyes, he started spitting accusations at me. "How could you not tell me my brother had knocked Charlie up? I fucking *proposed* to you but you were keeping something this huge a secret from me? In what world is that fucking okay?"

I blinked at him and crossed my arms over my chest. "Excuse me? You wanna maybe rethink your tone? I'm not your brother's keeper, and by the way, neither are you. Charlie's my best friend and she asked me to keep a secret."

"And I was going to be your *husband!*" he all but shouted.

I sucked in a breath and only managed to eke out a single word. "Was?" followed by a choked out, "Past tense?"

He threw a hand out. "Oh, come on. You really think we'd work? I was basing that on some romantic nonsense thinking my brother had finally—" He shook his head hard, and it was like with every second he was becoming more remote. "But he hasn't changed, not really, because people don't. No one ever changes. Shit will always fall apart and I have to be the smart brother who doesn't let himself get caught up in it. I can't get distracted or— Or whatever fantasy land we were living in."

I stepped back. He might as well have punched me in the face. He didn't

want me. That was all he was really saying. He was using a bunch of other words, but I heard what it boiled down to. He didn't want me.

Fucking fine, that was a familiar enough feeling in my life.

"Fuck you!" I lunged forward and shoved his chest. "Fuck you for pretending to—"

"To what? Have all my shit together?" He held out his hands and I frowned, because that hadn't been what I was about to say. "I don't!"

"Oh, that's more than obvious. It's clear you're no more mature than all those little pricks I fucked in high school."

He caught my arm and looked at me hard. "Careful."

I just shook my head, giving him a venomous smile back. "Oh wow, look at the big man. You wanna knock me around some now, huh?"

"What? Jesus." He let go of me and backed away. "Fuck. You don't know me at all, do you?"

And tears burst from my eyes because I did know him, dammit, and it was the only reason I'd let him in so deep. But none of it mattered. Because now here he was breaking my heart anyway.

I looked up at him through my tears. "Why are we fighting again?" When what I really wanted to ask was, "Why are you doing this to me?" and to beg him to take the last five minutes back.

And I wanted him to laugh at me and say he didn't know why we were fighting and then pull me into his arms and run his fingers through my hair. I wanted him to say everything would be all right, or we'd figure it out tomorrow after everything cooled down.

But he didn't say any of those things.

He looked at me, his brown eyes full of sorrow, and said, "I think it's because we were never meant to be. Two people who drive each other this mad—"

I shook my head, scoffing. "That's what you said love was. The I-want-to-wring-his-neck-and-also-fuck-his-brains-out-at-the-same-time.

Remember? And being the only ones who checked all each other's boxes?"

Again he held his arms up, looking at a loss for words. "Maybe that was just—"

A woman could only handle so much. "A what?" I asked. "An idiot mistaking lust for love?"

He stood there looking miserable in front of me.

I breathed in. And I breathed out. My guts were twisting inside and

embarrassment flamed my cheeks red hot. But right behind that was icy anger.

I looked down at the ground, collected myself, and then marched the few feet I'd put between us to where Jeremiah stood. And, in a single fluid motion, I slapped the bastard hard across the cheek.

"That," I said into the stinging silence that followed, my face only inches from his, "is because you're a liar, Jeremiah Walker, and a coward." I pointed my finger in his face. "Because I know you felt it too. And it was the real fucking thing."

And then I turned on my booted heel and walked my ass away from him and out of his *life*.

* * *

Or I would have, anyway, if there was any justice in the universe and I wasn't still obligated to go spend the next few hours at his twin brother's wedding reception.

Having your heart ripped out, shredded into pieces, and then stomped on—and then having to smile and pretend like everything was wonderful and you were just so happy for your friends, one of whom just happened to look like the man who'd smashed your heart into bits—not my idea of a great day.

But today wasn't about me, so I grinned and bore it anyway.

At least Jeremiah stayed away from me. But as I busied myself pretending to fuss over catering and helping the servers keep everything restocked—the tables and champagne flutes, I was steadily bleeding out from the inside.

Which was stupid. We'd only been engaged for a single night—not even twenty-four hours. And he'd been drunk last night—or at least a little wine and sex hazed. I should have known he wouldn't mean it in the morning. Stupid. I'd been so *stupid* to let myself believe, for even a second, that—

"Hey, are you ready, they're about to cut the cake—" Olivia said as she caught me in an unguarded moment hiding behind the catering truck. "Whoa. Are you okay? Did something happen?"

I tried to wave my hand and blink back stupid tears. "It's nothing. I'm fine."

She crossed her arms and blocked my path. "Uh uh. I've known you since

second grade, Ruth. I know when you're lying. What happened? Did someone say something nasty about your dad? Who was it? I'll punch them."

I laughed through my tears and swiped at my eyes, then lurched forward and hugged my friend. "God, you're the best. I'm going to miss you so much."

She stiffened slightly in my arms and pulled back. "Miss me? Where the hell are you going?"

I breathed out and swiped again at my face. Shit. My makeup was going to smear if I didn't stop it soon. I didn't have Charlie's mega-mascara on, just the cheap grocery store kind.

I looked my longtime friend in the eye and breathed out hard. God, it hurt, the brief future I'd allowed myself to envision along with Jeremiah's faux-prosal. But it was gone and now I was back to reality.

"I've taken a job up near Fort Worth. I leave in a few weeks. I didn't want the news to overshadow the wedding so I haven't told anyone."

Olivia's mouth dropped open in shock. "Not even me?" She sounded hurt and now that we were here, I could see what a dick move it was.

"I'm so sorry, hon. I think I just didn't want..." I shook my head. "I didn't want to admit I was really going." I looked out at the land I'd so long called home, that I'd fought so hard to hold onto. "Everything's changing." I looked back at her. "But you and me are family and nothing will change that."

Now she was the one with tears in her eyes and she pulled me back in for another hug. "Nothing'll be the same around here without you, bitch," she whispered in my ear. "Whose gonna be my drinking buddy now?"

I laughed. "Well, luckily you've still got Charlie. She's not going anywhere."

But Olivia just shook her head. "It's supposed to be the three of us. And now she's getting married. And having a baby. You're moving onto some awesome career. And I'm still just here. Same as always."

"Don't say that. You're fabulous. And I'll come back and visit all the time. It's only a three-hour trip back. I'll be back so much and crashing on your couch you'll be sick of me."

She looked up at me, her lovely features crumpled. "Promise?"

"Promise."

We both laughed a little and then she said, "Jesus, look at us!" She reached in her purse and produced a compact and packet of tissues. "They're

about to cut the cake and we'll look like goth chicks with these black tear tracks in the pictures if we don't clean up!"

We hurriedly swiped at our eyes and then Olivia dabbed fresh concealer under her eyes and then offered it to me. We were nearly presentable if a little puffy eyed by the time we made our way back to the party group all gathered near the cake.

Charlie was glowing as she stood by Reece, who looked like he'd just won the lottery as he stared down at his bride. It hurt, seeing that face with that look of love on it. Not that Jeremiah would ever look that way at anybody. He'd never allow himself that kind of vulnerability. Everything in me wanted to look around and clock where the evil twin brother was, but no, I forced my eyes to stay on the happy couple.

Charlie glanced out at the crowd, briefly making eye contact with Olivia and me before grinning and spinning around so that her back was to us again.

She tossed the colorful bouquet backward over her head and, as if in slow motion, I could see it heading right toward me. It would have been easy to reach out and pluck it from the air. It would hit me straight in the center of the chest if I didn't.

So I stepped backward several steps and Olivia had to dive sideways in a daring last-minute catch before the flowers hit the ground.

Around us, the crowd cheered her, but as Charlie turned around to look at us, I could see her eyes were quizzical when she saw how far away I was standing from where I'd previously been.

I just couldn't, though, not even for my friend. Even such a silly tradition hurt too bad in light of Jeremiah's retracted proposal.

"Now for the cutting of the cake!" I announced, forcing a wide, happy grin over my face as I beamed at the couple as if my heart wasn't being forced through a shredder.

Reece took Charlie's arm as he led her the few feet toward the huge, tiered wedding cake set up on a card table near the tent's northernmost corner. The crowd followed, happy murmurs and the clink of glassware as champagne flutes as people drank deeply.

In fact, the day could not have turned out more perfect. For once, the day was cooler than usual. It was only in the mid-nineties instead of sweltering over the hundred-degree mark. Under the tent it was positively cozy, especially with the mid-afternoon breeze.

Yes, everyone was using the printed wedding bulletins as makeshift fans,

but that was just a habit from church.

The caterer had already cut two perfect pieces of cake for Reece and Charlie, so they only had to pick up their individual plates. Reece forked a delicate bite and slid it into Charlie's mouth. She swallowed it quickly, then reached out with her hand to grab Reece's piece, snatched half of it up, and shoved it in his face.

Before she could stop him, he snatched her up and kissed her, smashing the already smushed cake between them.

It would have been a sweet, funny moment.

It really would have.

If only the bride hadn't pulled away in alarm seconds later with a warning hand up and a slightly green looking face. Then she slapped a hand over her mouth, turned, and fled for the edge of the tent. Lucky for her, it wasn't far.

And then everyone who was gathered so closely around had the undue pleasure of hearing Charlie throw up all that she'd managed to get down this morning and afternoon.

Reece immediately rushed to her side, rubbing her back, and handing her a napkin. But overall, he didn't look too surprised or worried. Something I apparently wasn't the only one to notice.

"Charlotte?" a voice rang out. And then suddenly Charlie's mom was pushing through the crowd. "Honey what's— Did you have something bad? Did you eat the beef or the chicken, because I had the chicken and I can't afford—" And then her mother stopped, gasping. "Oh my God, are you pregnant?"

And the anvil dropped.

Charlie could have lied. It would have been easy to shake her head and save her dignity in the moment, in front of the whole town no less.

God, I could have killed Mrs. Winston in that moment. Why did she have to air family laundry in front of this group of relative strangers? She didn't know these people from Adam, but Charlie and Reece *lived here*. And gossip like this traveled faster than a tick on a spooked deer. Everyone would know by sundown.

I expected Charlie to shrink away or try to placate her mom like she had every other time on this trip.

Instead, she surprised the hell out of me. She snatched the napkin out of Reece's hand, wiped her mouth, then walked over to her mother and stood up tall to her.

“I’ll have you know that it is my *honor* to announce,” she hooked her arm through Reece’s and jerked him possessively to her side, “I am *honored* to be having a baby with this man. Maybe we should have been honest from the start. It was definitely one of the reasons that made us choose to get married, but it was far from the only one. I love this man, through and through. Everything he is and everything he will become.”

Then she turned back to Reece and clasped her hands like they had back at the diner. “I’m fucking ecstatic to get to partner at your side as you go on the journey, love. It’s the honor and pleasure of my life. And I, for one, cannot *wait* to see you as a father. You’re going to be amazing at it.”

Then she spun back on her mother. “But *you*. We’ve all been walking around on eggshells ever since you got here, all because I wanted to preserve some kind of relationship with you so my child would have grandparents to know and love. But I should have known that anyone who could stand passively by while their daughter was married to an abusive monster, even when I *told* you, I *begged* you for help—”

Her mother waved a hand to cut her daughter off, the high color in her cheeks evidence enough that she didn’t appreciate having the tables turned on her and having *her* dirty laundry aired in front of the public instead. Her mother leaned in and hissed, “You always were an overly dramatic child,” Mrs. Winston snapped. “We thought you were just exaggerating for attention. And considering this little display, I can’t be sure we were wrong. When you make a *commitment* to a man, you stick to it. But no, the first time you ran into a little adversity, you wanted to quit your marriage. Of course I counseled you the way I did, and I stick by it. Jeffrey was an excellent husband and it’s a tragedy we lost him the way we did.”

“Leave.” Reece said, stepping in front of his wife. “Go. Right now. You’re no longer welcome here.”

Mrs. Winston tried to look around him at her daughter, her face the picture of offense, but Charlie had turned away from her, burying her face in her husband’s back. She glared back up at Reece. “Who are you to speak to me that way? Who are your people? Oh right, you’re *nobody*. You’re nothing. You think you’re so much better than Jeffrey, taking advantage of my daughter when she was vulnerable and chaining her to this dead-end life by planting your bastard in her belly—”

“Mother! That’s enough. Reece is right. You’re welcome to leave now. I wanted you in our child’s life but not if you’re going to be like this. I’ve

chosen my family now—real family so that for the first time in my life I understand the meaning of the word. If you ever want to be part of it again, things will have to change. Either way, I need you to leave right now.”

Then Charlie turned back to Reece and the way they looked at each other in that moment, it might as well have been as if the hundred and fifty of their closest friends and relatives around them had all disappeared.

Charlie threw her arms around Reece and tucked her face into his chest as he enveloped her in the safest, most secure looking hug in the world. My chest hurt just watching them, especially as they continued ignoring everyone, including Charlie’s parents. Reece kept his arm securely tucked around her shoulder as they walked back toward the house.

“The bride needs some rest. Keep celebrating, enjoy the food and open bar and I’ll be right back!” Reece called over his shoulder.

Mrs. Winston just huffed and crossed her arms over her chest, her lips thinned in disapproval. “It’s a *disgrace*. A bastard conceived out of wedlock. My grandfather must be rolling over in his grave to see what’s happened to his bloodline. We were raised better.”

If I punched the mother of the bride at her own daughter’s wedding, that would be a *bad* thing, right? Especially since I still had one last check for fifteen grand to secure from her.

My hand was still itchy anyway.

No chance though because then she was grabbing her husband’s arm and dragging him back around the house. The man hadn’t said a single word during the altercation between his wife and daughter. But he hurried along at his wife heels. House-trained for sure, that one. I bet he didn’t even pee on the carpet anymore. Lord only knows how Charlie came from those two—one of nature’s little miracles.

Not that there was anywhere for them to go—I was their ride back to the airport.

Maybe I could do something crazy for once and actually... enjoy the wedding I’d worked so hard to put together?

Especially since I saw Jeremiah walking in the direction of the house. If he was going to confront his brother about the pregnancy, well, I was full up on drama for today, thank you very much.

People were starting to flow out onto the dance floor as the band really got going. I’d just check one last time with the caterers that we weren’t running low on anything and then I’d go catch up with Olivia where I could

see her seated across the tent at the open bar.

After the day I'd had, an open bar sounded *juuuust* about right.

But it turned out when I found the caterer, they were freaking out about a second van with the second course getting lost, and by the time we'd helped them navigate to the ranch, it was almost sunset. I was about to start looking for Olivia again when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I'd left it on vibrate ever since the service earlier but kept it close in case of any last-minute catering or supply emergencies.

I pulled it out and looked at the screen. An incoming call was coming from an unfamiliar number, but considering all the people I was wrangling today, that wasn't surprising.

I clicked the green button and raised it to my ear, stepping a little into darkness and closing my other ear with my finger against the loud music in the background. "Hello? This is Ruth."

"Ruth. Buck here. The Winstons wanted to go back to the airport and I couldn't come up with a reason not to. So we're halfway to Austin but I'm stopped at a rest stop off highway 12. Right before it hits 71. You can't miss us. I overheard them saying something about a check they owe you? They're trying to drive and dash, but I'll stall 'em if you hurry. Say the SUV's overheated."

"Shit," I swore, dragging a hand through my hair. I was depending on that money. They'd signed a contract and them turning out to be unhappy with their daughter was no reason to stiff me for all the work I'd done. That wasn't how contracts worked. Plus, yes, most of it was my commission, but three thousand of it was still what I owed on the bar tab, due at the end of the night! They couldn't just—

Infuriated, I snapped into the phone, "Thanks, Buck. Don't let them move a muscle. I'm on my way. Be there in fifteen." My eyes fell on Olivia's sporty little Honda. She wouldn't mind me borrowing it for a good cause. "Or less," I finished, then hung up and started texting Olivia as I jogged toward her car.

As expected, the keys were up in the sun visor. I hopped in and navigated around the makeshift parking lot that had been created out of our front field. I gunned it as soon as I was out of earshot of the wedding and didn't take my foot off the pedal until I neared the 71 switchoff.

It was full dark by the time I got there, but I found the sign for the rest stop. Good God. If the Winstons were pissed earlier, they'd be doubly so

essentially being held captive at the side of the road by a roughneck cowboy like Buck.

I was truly surprised at him coming through like this. Usually he was so standoffish, I was a bit shocked for him to have even gotten involved at all. We'd invited everyone who lived on the ranch to the wedding, of course, but everyone else had been part of the wedding party, and it only occurred to me now to wonder if Buck had felt left out. I hadn't seen him anywhere near the wedding and just assumed it wasn't his scene. I vowed to make a better attempt to know the man after him doing this solid for me.

I jumped down from Olivia's truck just a few feet away from where Buck's beat-up little Nissan SUV was parked. The man had shit taste in cars but I got it, sometimes you just had to take the car you could afford instead of your dream car.

I didn't see any movement inside, but it was dark, so I leaned down and knocked on the back passenger window.

"Hello?"

Which was when I saw Mr. and Mrs. Winston sitting up ramrod straight in the backseat, duct tape not only over their mouths, but wrapped around their entire faces and heads.

I started to screech and jump backward. What the fuck??

"Don't worry, I got you," came Buck's familiar voice, and I relaxed, but only for an instant, because the second I looked over my shoulder, I knew something was wrong. Which was confirmed when Buck finished his sentence. "I got you. I finally got you all to myself, little Ruthie. And no one's going to show up to stop me this time."

Chapter Eighteen

JEREMIAH

I waited until my brother and Charlie came back out of the house and rejoined the party before pulling him aside. I'd been seething the entire ceremony. I didn't know if I was more pissed at Reece or Ruth—him for putting me in this position and getting in between me and Ruth when we'd had something—no, I shook my head. It was better it self-imploded now rather than later.

We'd both just been running too high on insane sexual chemistry and overflow wedding pheromones. All of it was surface and based on a lie. Reece was only marrying Charlie so quick because of the baby.

Although... I had to admit, the way my little brother looked at his bride during the ceremony when they repeated the vows after Xavier... I shook my head. It didn't matter if my brother had found the real thing. Love.

What mattered was the lies. It was all based on a lie. And him being impetuous. Which always led to disaster. Sure, it all smelled rosy and looked beautiful now. But who was gonna have to pick up the pieces when everything blew the fuck up, huh?

Cheery band music played in the distance as I stood cross-armed outside the house. Finally the door cracked and I straightened as Reece looked out as if checking for the all-clear. When he saw it was just me, a look of relief crossed his face.

“The in-laws aren’t anywhere around, are they? I’ve finally got Charlie back in a celebrating mood and her stomach’s settled. I don’t want anyone else ruining her day.”

My arms went back across my chest. Oh, he was gonna pretend to be Mr. Responsible now? Mr. Protective Caretaker?

Where was this guy when he shoulda been putting on a rubber however many months ago? Nowhere, because my brother was all about whatever got him his jollies right there, right then. And now he was a husband and about to become a father?

“You and me need to talk,” I stated, and his demeanor changed because he could tell I meant business.

He pulled the door tighter behind him to block Charlie, calling over his shoulder. “Just a few more minutes, babe. I’ll be right back. No, nothing’s wrong. Just keep resting. I’ll come get you in a few.”

Then he stepped out to join me and shut the door behind him.

“All right. Fine. It’s been a long time coming,” he said, glaring at me. “Let me have it.”

I was a little taken aback. Usually when it was time to school my brother, he stood back and took it.

“Actually, you know what?” he said, shaking his head. “No. I’m fucking fed up with your high and mighty bullshit. You being born a few minutes early doesn’t actually make you older. We’re the same fucking age. I’m a grown ass man and I’m tired of your judgmental bullshit. My wife knows enough to tell off her parents when they’re trying to get into our life when it’s none of their business and brother, I’m ready to do the same to you.”

“It’s not the same at all. I took *care* of you when—”

“Did you? ’Cause the way I remember it, we took care of each other.”

I scoffed. “You have no fucking idea the shit I did for you.”

He threw his arms out. “Because you won’t tell me! You think you’re so high and mighty but you don’t even know how to communicate. Being with Charlie has taught me what actual grown-up relationships look like and brother, I can finally see that *you’re* still the child. We were never taught how to talk about shit, much less how to heal from all the trauma—”

I scoffed again and started to turn away when he grabbed my shoulder. I yanked away but he just got in front of me.

“Yes, fucking *trauma*. The way we grew up, that was fucking traumatic. We fucking survived and that makes us survivors. But you don’t just go

through that shit and come out normal. You have to deal with it. You can't just keep ignoring it. You have to talk about it, work through it—"

"I work just fine," I said through gritted teeth.

It was his turn to scoff. "Oh, that's what you call whatever the fuck it is you're doing?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Stomping through life, gruff and grumpy as hell? Pushing anyone away before they can ever get too close? You think that's *healthy*? Shit, if I wasn't so forgiving, you would have pushed me away too."

I stared at him. I wanted to punch him to get him to shut the fuck up.

But he just kept going. "For example, what the hell is going on with you and Ruth? Anyone with eyes in their heads can see you have feelings for the woman."

"She's moving."

He registered surprise and I remembered she hadn't told anyone else yet.

"And she lied to me."

"About what?"

"You getting Charlie pregnant."

He looked at me like I was nuts. "You mean she was loyal to her friend and kept a secret Charlie asked her to?"

He shook his head. "I'd ask what the fuck is wrong with you, but I know. Brother, both of us created this story where you were the one of the two of us who had their shit together, but that was a lie. You were just better at shoving it down deep. I think I was the healthier one all along because I could react to shit. I could show my emotions. You just shoved it all down so fucking deep and never let anyone else in. But it's not better. You aren't some fucking paragon. I'm sorry, brother, but you aren't. You were always just as fucked up as me."

I stood there, in the uncomfortable situation of being the one schooled.

I wanted to argue. I wanted to tell him to go fuck himself.

But all I really wanted was to go find Ruth, grab her to me tight, and never fucking let go.

Come to think of it, that was a great fucking idea.

I clapped my brother on the shoulder. "Good talk. Congratulations on the coming kid. You married an amazing woman and I think you just might be a great dad."

He looked surprised. "So... we're good?"

I nodded. “We’re good.”

“Oh. Well, great.”

Then I turned and went to find my own woman. God knew I hated to admit when I was wrong, but I wasn’t so much of a jackass that I couldn’t see it when I was being hit in the face with the truth. And Reece was always excellent for that.

So, yes, I was an ass and it was time to find my woman, tell her that, and beg for her forgiveness.

Except she was nowhere to be found.

I caught up with Olivia near the bar, flirting with some hick looking motherfucker. “Hey, Liv, you seen Ruth?”

She shook her head. “But I can call her.” She pulled out her phone from her purse. Right. I shoulda thought of that.

But her brows furrowed at something she saw on the phone.

The band started up some song that had the crowd cheering so that I missed what Olivia said next.

“What?” I shouted and she turned the phone so that I could see a message. It was from Ruth.

Ruth: BORROWING YOUR CAR TO GET CHECK FROM THE WINSTONS. BUCK STALLED THEM ON WAY TO AIRPORT SO I COULD CATCH UP. BE BACK SOON!

My eyes searched out the time tag. It had been sent almost two hours ago. I messaged back from Olivia’s phone in case Ruth was still mad at me and blocking my calls. HOW LONG TILL YOU’RE BACK?

And then waited impatiently. No response.

I looked back at Olivia. “She should be back by now, yeah?”

Olivia shrugged, leaning close to shout over the music. “Yeah, it’s less than an hour to the airport from here, so even if she went all the way there and back...”

I frowned and handed her the phone. “Find me if she texts back.”

I pulled out my own phone as I walked away toward my truck, dialing Ruth’s number. Why the hell would *Buck* of all people have offered to drive Charlie’s parents back to the airport. Well, if they offered to pay him, I bet he would. But if they were paying, then why would he be stalling so Ruth could catch up?

I wish she’d offered more damn information in the text. I saw Reece and Charlie rejoining the guests. Good. At least they could recoup the rest of the wedding and get memories of their special day that wouldn’t be tainted by

that witch of a mother-in-law.

I hoped she wasn't giving my Ruth trouble now.

My Ruth.

Dammit, it was true. I'd thought of her as mine for...a while now. I was jealous of that fucking job because it took her away from me. Even having her live all the way in Austin was interminable because she wasn't under the same roof as me. And now she was going to move to Fort Worth?

Not if I could help it.

I didn't bother telling Reece where I was going. He'd had enough of me for one day. He had his bride to look after and I still wanted him to be able to salvage some of his wedding day without thinking an iota more about his in-laws. If they were giving Ruth any trouble, I'd deal with it without ever involving him.

And I'd tell Ruth what a giant fucking idiot I was. I hurried around to where all the vehicles were parked, pulled out my keys, and hopped in the truck.

Before I pulled out onto the gravel road leading to the side trail that led to town, I looked at my phone and clicked on the GPS app.

I'd cloned Ruth's phone a long while back, after the tornado. I'd done it with everyone's phone—Reece and Charlie too. After Charlie's bastard of an ex showed back up—then his best friend a week later, blustering and blowing smoke about foul play—well, I wasn't going to take chances when it came to my family. Ruth was Charlie's best friend, and Charlie was my brother's girl, i.e., she was family. That was what I told myself, anyway.

But now I knew as I clicked on the button that tracked her phone and felt a bone-deep relief that I could see exactly where she was, it had always been more than that. I'd needed to know she was safe not because she was Charlie's friend. I'd needed it for me. And good thing, too, because her little dot wasn't flashing anywhere *near* the airport.

I zoomed in on the phone and frowned. Why the hell was she out near Five-Mile Dam? And then, just like that, the dot disappeared. The fuck?

I clicked the button for her phone again, but nothing.

An error message appeared when I clicked for more information. ERROR: DEVICE HAS BEEN TURNED OFF OR LOST SIGNAL.

"Dammit," I said, throwing the truck into gear and peeling out.

Maybe she'd just decided to go take a rest at the Dam instead of coming back to the wedding after she'd taken Charlie's parents to the airport? In the

dark?

Maybe she was avoiding *me*.

But still, Five-Mile? It was a swimming hole in summer. There was nothing to do there this time of year. It wasn't exactly a hiking spot.

Whatever. I'd get there and we could finally have it out, once and for all. I'd put all my cards on the table, or try to.

Reece's words echoed in my head: *You were always just as fucked up as me*. Could I admit that to Ruth and explain that I needed her? That I wasn't as perfect as I always pretended, even if it was hard for me to swallow my pride and fucking admit it. There were reasons I was the way I was and maybe someday I'd even be able to open up and talk about it...

In the meantime, I just shoved the truck into fifth gear and opened up the engine as I sped down the back streets of the hill country as the sunset streaked across the sky.

Twenty minutes later, the sun had dipped below the horizon and the pinks and oranges were settling into the purple haze of twilight as I pulled into the Five-Mile parking lot.

I drove from one end of the parking lot to another, my car lights on bright. But nowhere did I see Olivia's little Honda.

Goddammit, I'd seen Ruth's phone lighting up right near this spot less than half an hour ago. Where the hell was she?

Had I missed her on the road somewhere or had she already moved on? But when I pulled out my phone to see if I could catch her GPS dot, I couldn't get any signal. "Fucking great," I muttered, shoving my phone back onto its holder in the dash as I spun the truck around and pulled out of the driveway onto the backroads again. I drove a little ways down the stretch of road in the direction I hadn't come from and slowed when I saw a vehicle pulled off and parked on a slight inlet a little way down from the dam.

I came to a stop and squinted at the car. It wasn't Olivia's car but it looked familiar. Then I caught sight of the gold naked woman emblem on the back of his mudflaps.

Holy shit. It was *Buck's* car.

I was shoving out the door of my truck even as I tried to figure out what the *hell* Ruth would be doing out here in the middle of nowhere with Buck of all people. They never interacted that much, as far as I knew.

Then again, maybe she had *really* wanted to get back at me. Or wash me out of her system. The best way to get over one man was to get under another

one, some bullshit like that.

One part of me knew I couldn't blame her after everything I'd said and done, while another, less evolved part of me wanted to find Buck and leave him without any teeth for daring to touch what was mine.

Not knowing what I'd do once I found them together, I couldn't stop myself from stomping forwards toward the SUV and yanking open the door.

Only to find no one inside. The raging bull in my chest was only slightly mollified. Because I realized a moment later that just because I hadn't found them in flagrante in the car didn't mean they weren't curled up somewhere else cozy nearby.

I turned on my phone's flashlight and looked around in the increasing darkness. At first, I didn't see anything but the normal Texas scrub brush that lined the sides of all Central Texas sideroads... until in the distance, I glimpsed a small structure. A storage hut of some kind? An old bathroom for Five-Mile Dam Park before it had become the lost, forgotten place it was now until folks remembered it each summer when the water levels rose enough to make it of interest again?

I lowered my flashlight and stomped toward the place. How had they even gotten inside? And Jesus, I knew Ruth was adventurous, but coming out here in the middle of nowhere to fuck *Buck* of all guys? I wasn't usually judgmental when it came to my coworkers, but Buck was by far the weakest link at the farm, happy to slack off work whenever he could. And the way he spoke about women... well, yeah, I was surprised Ruth would dally with him no matter how pissed I'd made her.

Brambles pulled at my slacks and I barely dodged a large cactus as I made my way toward the structure. Getting closer didn't help me figure out what it was meant to be used for any better.

But I did see a door, cracked a little, and I could see light pouring out from within.

They were in there.

I swallowed hard.

A bigger man would have turned around right there and gotten back in his truck. But I wasn't a bigger man. I needed to see for myself, even though the image would torture me.

So I pushed open the door.

And realized that yet again, I'd been a complete fucking idiot who had completely underestimated the situation I was in.

Because as I opened the door to the most fucking horrific scene of Ruth struggling uselessly, duct-taped to a chair, the Winstons unconscious or worse on the ground, the unmistakable feeling of a gun barrel pressed to the back of my neck.

“Step inside and don’t make a single fucking noise,” Buck’s voice came so close I could smell his alcohol-soured breath from behind me. In fact, the fucker smelled so bad, he must have intentionally been standing downwind. These Texas boys grew up hunting and tracking. How long had he been stalking me? Ever since I got out of my truck, stomping around and flashing my presence like the big dumb bastard that I was.

“Okay,” I said, lifting my hands up in the air. “Not sure what I’m walking into here, Buck, but I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Shut the fuck *up*,” Buck said, digging the barrel of the gun more painfully into the back of my neck until I took a step forward into the small hut. Which looked uncannily like something out of Dexter’s wet dreams, apart from the fact that it was missing plastic spread out everywhere. But I couldn’t tell if the two elderly folks on the ground were even breathing. I wasn’t a fan of Charlie’s mom and dad or anything, but I hadn’t wanted them *dead*.

“Ruth?” I asked. “You okay?”

She just looked at me with wide eyes like, *are you kidding?* Fair point.

“On your knees!” Buck shouted from behind me.

I stayed standing, not moving an inch. “So you can execute me? I don’t think so. Let’s just take a second and talk this thru. Is it money you’re looking for? Cause I’m worth a lot more than Ruth here. In fact, if you let her go and keep me, this would all be a lot more easy to handle. One hostage instead of three, it’ll be a breeze. And Xavier, my employer, is wealthy. He’s like a father to me and he’ll pay if you just—”

And then I turned and tried to yank the gun out of his hands. I was taller and larger than Buck, and physically superior. But the bastard must have been on his guard. He pulled the trigger and even though I was able to yank the gun up so the shot landed in the ceiling instead of my forehead, all my focus was on the gun.

I didn’t even see him pull out the needle until he’d shoved the shot into my thigh and depressed the plunger, right as I knocked the gun out of his hands.

I started to scramble after it, but only made it one single step before

crumpling to my knees.

Ruth's muffled screams against the duct-tape at her mouth were the last thing I heard before the world went dark.

Chapter Nineteen

RUTH

I couldn't believe this was happening. It was already so horrible, being caught and manhandled by *Buck* of all people, him babbling at me the whole time between taking swigs from a seemingly endless supply of beer bottles from a cooler he kept in the foot of the passenger side footwell of his truck—babbling about how I'd ruined his life.

His driving had been terrible and I had the slimmest hope that a cop would pull us over for reckless driving. But he was taking backroads, not the highway. I'd felt another hope rise when I heard the sound of another truck and the rustle of someone outside.

But Buck had just put his finger to his lips, grinned maniacally at me, and then slipped out of the cabin.

The next thing I knew, Jeremiah—*Jeremiah*, of all people! How had he found me? What was he doing here?—had somehow appeared at the door. I'd tried to scream and warn him but it was too late.

Then there was that brief second where he'd even managed to get the gun away from Buck!

But in the end, none of it mattered. I recognized the packaging of the sedative Buck had yanked the syringe out of. It was for the damn *cattle*, and I had no idea how much he'd used on the Winstons or Jeremiah, or if they could possibly survive it.

And now I was left alone again, with a psychotic Buck, breathing hard as he looked down at Jeremiah, slumped on the floor beneath him.

“Take *that*,” Buck said, kicking Jeremiah hard in the lower back. I screamed uselessly into the tape gagging my mouth.

“What?” Buck said, looking over at me. “You got somethin’ to say? All this is your fault. None of ‘em would even be in this if it wasn’t for you.”

I went still and swallowed, then nodded and looked down, then bowed my head before finally looking back up at him.

He stared at me for a moment, unsure, before asking, “I take that tape off, you gonna start screamin’? Because no one can hear you out here. This bastard’s the only one dumb enough to come looking for you in the middle of the night on this stretch of road. Though how the fuck did he find us?” Then he frowned and came toward me, feeling all down the folds in my puffy dress until his hand landed on my phone. He looked at it in disgust, walking around behind me and shoving my finger against the little pad to unlock it. “Did you manage to send a text for help, you little bitch?”

I shook my head back and forth rapidly as he came back around to the front of me, finger tapping through the apps on my phone.

He came over, grabbed the tape at the corner of my mouth with his dirty-fingernailed hand, and ripped it off in one swift go.

“Who else did you text, bitch?” he yelled in my face.

“Ouch,” I gasped, then sucked in a large breath of air through my mouth. Buck was so pungent I could all but taste him on the air—but also the cedar forest air around us. “No one,” I gasped. “I didn’t even text him.” I nodded toward Jeremiah. “I don’t know how he found me.”

Buck turned around and reached into Jeremiah’s pocket, pulling out his phone. He unlocked it the same way he had mine and then started laughing, looking up at me. “Loverboy was tracking you. Guess he knew you were a faithless little bitch.”

Jeremiah had put a tracking app on my phone? When? Who the fuck cared? I tried to listen hard and could just make out the sound of rushing water, so we were near a river or a stream of some kind.

Not that that information helped narrow it down considering we were in Central Texas and you could barely throw a rock without hitting a stream or spring of one kind or another. Especially considering the rain we’d had lately. Even the usually dry creek beds would be running with water right now.

No, goddammit, it was official, I had no idea where Buck had taken me

and less and less confidence with each passing moment that he'd told anyone where he was going or that I was even missing.

But maybe he'd told his brother where he was going?

Or... more likely, he'd just taken off like a goddamn cowboy all by himself to come find me.

And now here we both were. Trapped by this man who was clearly more than a crayon or two short of a boxset.

Buck glared at me, face only inches from mine. "So?" he demanded. "Don't you recognize me?"

I stared back at him incredulously. "Um, yeah. You're Buck. You've worked with me for—"

"NO!" He slammed the wooden wall behind my head, shaking the entire hut. "I said, *look* at me. Fucking *look!*"

I did. I looked. And saw the bloodshot eyes of a man who would have little problem doing violence to me or maybe any woman. I shook in my seat as he raised the gun toward my temple.

"Look!" he shouted again. "Don't you fucking see him? Our father? I have his fucking *eyebrows.*" The hand with the gun swung wildly toward my face as his hands gestured with every word. So it took a second for what he'd said to sink in.

But as soon as it did, it wasn't a surprise.

Of course my father had cheated on my mother. He'd been unfaithful to his family in every other sense of the word, so of course in this most base and basic way he had been too. He'd not only cheated on my mother but fathered *children* with some other woman.

"Sister," Buck said, leaning in and smiling, his foul breath between us.

I jerked back from him, revolted by him, by everything he was saying.

"Don't want to hear that Daddy dearest fucked around on Mommy?" Buck sneered, backing away but only slightly. He was still bent over in my space, so close that when he spoke, his spittle landed on my cheeks. "Well, he did. And he told my mother that he'd leave yours and come and be with her. He told her that for years. Years and years we lived in a shit little apartment on the shit side of I35. All while you grew up *here*, in the hill country on your *ranch*, riding horses and being the belle of the redneck county motherfucking ball."

He waved his hands wildly, his steps unsteady as he paced back in the tiny space of the shed, smaller than ever with Jeremiah's big body on the

floor.

“Daddy pays for college, for *everything* for his little angel, and what do I get? A child shot from the same cock? The same *blood*? I get a few cards over the years. Once, in junior high, I came home and caught him fucking my mom in the kitchen. Before he left, he came by my bedroom and pulled out a couple twenties for me, like I was her pimp.”

I winced, understanding how deep of a bastard my father was now. Some small part of me had always hoped there was some sort of redeeming quality in him deep down... and I do mean *way* deep down, because he was a fucking asshole on the surface. But no, this just confirmed what had always been my lived experience of the man.

“I’m so sorry he did that to you, Buck. He was a terrible person. Believe me, growing up with him was no gem, either—”

“Don’t you dare, you little fucking bitch!” he screamed with renewed energy, the gun rising back to my temple with alarming alacrity. “You think we’re going to stand around sharing oh our poor daddy stories?” He laughed caustically.

“When Mama was too washed up for him to keep coming around, he ignored us completely. And when Mama died, and I came to your house, and I knocked on your door, shivering, starving, begging for help so I didn’t go into the system, begging for my own *father* to take me in, when I was barely fourteen years old, do you know what that man did?”

I shook my head and then whispered, “No. I don’t know what he did. You know I don’t.”

“That’s right,” he said with a bitter smile. “You don’t. Because he was so concerned with you and his wife not knowing of my existence that he drew me to him in what I thought was a hug. But it was really only so he could turn me around to hide my body with his and cover my mouth and nose with his hand. And then he pulled one arm behind my back and perp-walked me out past the corner lot until we were covered by the neighbor’s fencing.”

I sucked in a huge rush of breath. “I’m so sorry. Did he at least—”

“He told me if I ever came within a hundred feet of him again, he’d get a restraining order against my ass. But if I disappeared forever, he’d give me a thousand dollars. Right there, on the spot. No matter what, though,” Buck laughed caustically, “he said as he shook me hard, would there be no further contact between us. Daddy didn’t have no son.”

Buck pulled his gun from the holster at his hip and traced the barrel down

my cheek. His voice went darker, more serious. “Only his precious *daughter* got to bear his name. And so when he died, of course his ranch went only to her. Only everything for *her*.”

“Buck,” I breathed out, “it breaks my heart hearing that—”

“Oh, I’ll break your heart,” he said, and punched me in the gut. I coughed in pain and writhed over in half as far as the restraints would allow. Oh *God*, that hurt. “But maybe I’ll start with your lungs.”

I heaved for breath as I looked back up at him. This man who shared a father with me. My *brother*. We shared the twisted DNA of that man and this was what could become of it. Or maybe it was the way he was nurtured, maybe our father’s hatred and rejection had made him this way.

I’d have to deal with the mixed feelings of realizing that my father, who I’d always understood to have hated women, preferring me when he’d had a son of his very own to run the business... But then again, maybe my dad’s ego was such that he would have found fault no matter who his progeny were, because apparently neither of us was enough of a reflection of himself or his values. Not me, who fit into his world, from his perfect but otherwise barren wife, to his son, who was a boy but born from a mistress, and overly surly to boot.

But I couldn’t think of any of that right now. I had to be smart. Strategic. Obviously trying to empathize with him wasn’t going to work. But maybe I could appeal to him in other ways.

“So what’s the plan here, brother?” I asked, making my voice monotone and staring him in the eye. “You want to kill me, but what are you going to do with them?” I nodded toward the three people on the floor. “What do Jeremiah or Charlie’s parents have to do with this? Be smart. You need an escape plan.”

He laughed in my face. “Escape? I’m not the one tied to a chair, bitch.”

I tilted my head to the side. “No, but even if you kill me, kill all of us, where do you go next? You need money, Buck. You never got what you deserved, isn’t that what all of this is about? Dad screwed you over. But you can still make it right.”

His hand came to my throat and he squeezed. “Shut the fuck up! There’s nothing left of Dad’s money. You said so yourself.”

I nodded, feeling my eyes bulging as he squeezed my windpipe off. I was only trying to stall for time, but what if I only pissed him off and made him kill me quicker? Shit. Oh shit, I couldn’t breathe!

But he finally let go of my throat and I gasped for air as he demanded, “Talk.”

“You’re right,” I finally said, my voice raspy from being choked. “But *they* do.” I nodded back toward the floor, this time at the Winstons. “They have a lot of money. And they’ll pay up for him. He wasn’t wrong about that. But only if they’re alive and able to pay the ransom.”

Buck frowned, and I could tell his alcohol-befuddled brain was struggling to follow the logic of what I was saying.

“They’re rich,” I said, offering what I hoped were the magic words. “I mean, really, really rich. You stumbled into a jackpot and didn’t even know it.”

He reached for his gun again and raised it back toward me. “You better not be trying to trick me.”

I shook my head vigorously. “You saw the wedding they were paying for and the clothes they wear. Check the label on her jacket. It’s Chanel, and not a knock off. All you have to do is go drop them somewhere with instructions on how to pay you. And they’ve been unconscious the whole time so they won’t know how to trace you back here. Just think,” I said, rushing now that I saw he was considering my words. “You could get everything you always deserved and then be over the border to Mexico before anyone even realized what was going on. You’ll live like a king there.”

He was imagining the life I was picturing for him; I could see it on his face. Then he looked back down at the floor at the two older folks, then to Jeremiah.

“What if they don’t pay?”

“They’ll pay.”

He glared back at me. “What if they don’t?”

I swallowed. “Then you do whatever you were already planning to do with us.”

He smiled at that. A slow, cruel smile. “Who says I won’t even if they do pay?”

I let him see the tremble in my lip, and it wasn’t just for show. He might be drunk and not too bright, but he was also unstable and violent. He was completely unpredictable and I had no idea what he might do next, if he’d listen to what I was suggesting or slug me in the stomach again.

But then, as the seconds ticked interminably by, he finally shoved his gun back into the holster at his side and leaned down. He grabbed Mrs. Winston

roughly by her arms and kicked the door to the shed open. He started dragging her out the same way he'd dragged her in. I winced at how painful it looked but she was still completely knocked out, limp as a stuffed doll as her body bumped ruthlessly over the wooden step at the door's threshold.

I stared at Jeremiah, willing him to move, to twitch—*anything*—but he stayed as still as stone for the five minutes it took Buck to get Mrs. Winston to the car and come back for Mr. Winston.

Mr. Winston wasn't quite as inert as his wife, though. Was he starting to wake up from the tranquilizer? He groaned and his eyelids fluttered when he hit the same sharp wooden step at the doorway. Buck paused, but when Mr. Winston immediately fell silent again, he continued to drag the slight man over the punishing, uneven ground.

I closed my eyes. I wanted to start squirming and immediately start fighting my bonds. But no. *Be patient. Just be patient. He's almost gone.*

I waited to hear the engine in Buck's shitty little truck start up, straining to listen. I was straining so hard to hear faraway sounds that when the door to the cabin slammed open again, I jolted in surprise.

It was still just Buck, naturally. He had his fat roll of duct tape in hand, naturally. He leaned down and yanked Jeremiah's hands behind his back, rolling him roughly onto his stomach in the process. Around and around he rolled the tape until Jeremiah's wrists were secure behind his back. Buck did the same thing to Jeremiah's ankles. Only once he'd used a significant amount of tape did he stand up and wipe his brow. He turned and glared at me, the only expression his face seemed capable of making.

"Don't move a single fucking muscle. I'll be right back."

I nodded obediently, but that didn't stop him from coming toward me with the duct tape roll in hand. He ripped off a piece and resecured it over my mouth before turning and walking out the door.

A little while later, I finally heard the sound of a truck starting and driving away.

Only then did I slump in my bonds and breathe out for what felt like the first time in hours.

"*Ereiah,*" I tried to scream Jeremiah's name through the stupid tape on my mouth, wriggling and writhing against the bonds at my wrist and ankles. Of course he didn't look up. Mr. Winston had been dosed several hours ago and only now had he started to stir.

Buck had tied tape around my chest and arms too, but if I could just get

my wrists free... The tape was tied so tightly, I couldn't even twist my arm in the tight loop of tape. Dammit. All the twisting just made it feel *tighter*. I swore into the gag at my mouth.

Over and over and over, I fought against my bindings, and swore, and fought some more... and swore some more. The whole time, I felt a ticking clock over my head. How far away would Buck go to dump out the Winstons. He'd go far if he was smart. Then again, it was Buck we were talking about.

Then again, he had managed to stay under the radar all this time. Dammit, why hadn't I been paying attention to my creep radar when it came to Buck? I'd always felt there was something slightly... *off* about him. But if Reece and Jeremiah trusted him, so could I. Or so went my logic whenever my spidey senses tingled about Buck. Whenever I bothered thinking about him, which frankly, I just hadn't bothered to do very often.

But apparently, the whole time he'd been obsessing about me.

Because, oh my God, was it him who'd been sabotaging the fences all last year before the tornado, back when I'd still been living at the ranch? And my car? The sugar in the tank? It had to be him. How long had he been planning this and what exactly *was* this?

That Buck didn't intend for me to make it out alive seemed clear.

I struggled even harder against my bindings, rocking the chair back and forth on the plywood floor of the shed.

I stopped just before I knocked the chair all the way over. Fat tears sprang out of my eyes even as I was furious at them. Now was no time for crying. I had to get us the hell *out* of here while Buck was gone.

I had no delusions about the Winstons actually paying ransom for Jeremiah or me. I'd just wanted to get Buck the hell out of here, to stall for time so I could try to escape or for someone else to find us.

The more I tried to wriggle free, though, the more helpless the situation felt. It wasn't as if I had something sharp like they did in the movies to cut the tape with. The more I twisted against it, the more the tape bunched up and became even more ropelike. Goddamned duct tape. I'd seen specials where people built *boats* out of this crap. It was impenetrable.

Oh God, oh God, what if I couldn't get free? What if all of this had been for nothing? I'd refused to let myself think about it, but now it seemed more and more certain that Buck would drop off the Winstons, then come back and enjoy finishing off every revenge fantasy he'd cooked up over the years.

My breaths became short, huffing too fast out of my nose since my mouth was covered and I jerked in my chair, rocking it but not caring, too panicked in my need to get free. I had to get out of here. I had to get free and go for help, I had to—

Oh shit!

I'd rocked the chair too hard and I'd tipped it just like I was afraid of and then I was falling, falling over sideways, right toward Jeremiah—

I crashed into the floor with a jolting, "*Oof.*" And landed half on top of Jeremiah in the small space.

Not that he even twitched, he was still knocked out cold. And unlike in the movies, my wooden chair hadn't shattered on impact or anything helpful like that. Nope, I was still just as trapped, but now I was sideways on the floor, my head on Jeremiah's chest.

I bowed my head into his warmth as his huge chest moved up and down rhythmically in his unnatural sleep.

And unable to do anything else, I let the tears flow.

Chapter Twenty

JEREMIAH

No. Fuck no. *I couldn't be back here.* I'd escaped. I'd escaped and gotten me and Reece as fucking far away from here as quickly as humanly possible.

So why couldn't I move?

I heard her voice, *their* voices, in my head. Always in my head. I was blindfolded on the bed. She'd wanted it that way and though I'd been uncomfortable with the idea, I'd agreed.

It was just supposed to be one night.

What was one stupid night of my life compared to me and Reece's future? It was no contest. Reece had been at death's door when I dropped him off at the shelter earlier tonight. They'd only had space for one more so I pushed him inside and ran.

And then hit the streets the way so many of our peers did.

Enough. It was all fucking enough. Me and Reece had gone to the streets to escape the foster system, but we'd turned eighteen four months ago. It was time to get us the fuck outta here.

But to do that, we needed money. And more than we'd get from a good Saturday juggling or picking pockets at the park.

My jaw flexed as I sorted through possibilities.

The solution was obvious.

If I was honest with myself, I always knew it would come down to this. A shudder went through my body the more I thought about it. Then I hiked up my backpack and held my head high. I wasn't going to sit here and wallow in my sad little life like a damn baby.

I lifted an arm over my head in a futile attempt to protect myself from the rain and then started jogging in the direction of Polk Street.

The jog didn't do much to warm me up since all my clothes were soaked through. I saw a few other figures dotted up and down the street when I got to Polk. They all stood on the sidewalk near the curb.

Hawking their wares.

Their bodies.

Most of the other street kids Reece and I knew did it. They talked about their 'clients' like it was no big deal. And it wasn't really. Not compared to another night of seeing Reece suffering, sick, and never knowing if we'd have a roof over our heads for the night or not.

I hesitated only one more moment before dropping my backpack, then pulling my jacket off and tying it around my waist. My soaked shirt was molded to my chest. I ran a quick hand through my hair.

I hadn't had a proper shower in a few weeks but me and Reece were far more conscientious about personal hygiene than most of our fellow unhoused. I always made sure we had a stick of deodorant between us and we sponged down every time we had access to a bathroom.

I looked up and down the road. Cars continually drove past but none slowed down. It was only around eight o'clock. Maybe too early for this sort of thing.

I rocked back and forth on my toes, shoving my hands in my jeans pocket. Christ, was I supposed to do something other than stand here? Was there some secret wave I should make at the passing drivers to let them know I was open for business? How the fuck did this work?

But just as I was thinking that, a beat-up gold-toned Buick with peeling paint slowed down and pulled over in front of where I was standing.

I peered at the car, taking a step forward. Between the darkness and the drizzling rain, I couldn't make out the driver. Were they just looking for a parking spot or—

The passenger side window rolled down and I cringed when I saw the face that emerged. The driver was leaning over to peer at me. He was a red-faced guy with about three chins and a case of adult acne. He looked me up

and down in a way that made my stomach queasy.

“Fifty to blow me,” the guy said.

I backed away, hands up. “Hey man, I’m not into that.” It was just an impulse response. I wasn’t stupid. I knew most of the pickups here were dudes looking for... but no. Just no. Not my first time.

The guy scowled at me. “Fuck you.” The car wheels screeched as he pulled back into traffic.

“Hey. You.”

I looked behind me and saw a couple guys headed my direction.

“Yeah, you. Who you think you are, crashing our spot?”

Shit. One of the guys was as skinny as me, but the other one was thick around the middle, with wide shoulders. The last thing I needed was to end up with a broken nose or worse, in the hospital.

Maybe this was a bad fucking idea. Especially just jumping in like this. I should have gone to Star or one of our other friends and asked them to show me the ropes. But fuck, I didn’t want to deal with any goddamn pimps. I just needed to get a little bit of cash and—

“What? You fuckin’ deaf? I said, who you think you are, motherfucker?” The big guy pulled something out of his pocket. Holy shit, was that a knife?

I backed away from the approaching men. Just as I did, a beamer slowed down by the sidewalk in front of me.

Screw it. Even if it was another troll, the situation was getting way too fucking hot here. I ran for the car, jerking the back door open and jumping in before yanking it shut behind me.

I was greeted by two surprised faces looking back at me from the front seat. A man and woman, both who looked to be in their late thirties. They were dressed up—the guy in a suit and the woman in a black cocktail dress. Neither was stunning, but they weren’t ugly either. Just plain old regular folks. Well, maybe not so regular considering they were trolling Polk Street looking for a prostitute.

“Hey,” I said, giving an awkward wave. “So, uh, we can discuss terms while we drive?” I glanced anxiously out the window. The two guys had paused a few feet away, looking unsure how to proceed. I didn’t plan on waiting for them to figure it out. “You don’t want to stay parked in this neighborhood. There are gangs. They’ll yank you out of your car to steal it.” It was an exaggeration. That kind of thing didn’t usually happen but I’d say anything to get the car moving.

The man let out a nervous, “Oh,” and reached down to punch a door lock button. “Okay. Well, let’s go then.”

He put the car in gear and then we were driving. I breathed out a sigh of relief.

“So, um,” the man cleared his throat. “What are your rates? To, um, you know. Spend the night?”

I glanced between him and the back of the woman’s head. Apart from the first glance at him, she’d been sitting ramrod straight in the passenger’s seat. I was sitting directly behind her so I couldn’t see more than the back of her head. Her thick brown hair was twisted in some kind of fancy knot. As I looked, though, I caught her watching me in her visor mirror. She quickly averted her eyes.

Okay. So these two didn’t exactly seem experienced with this whole thing. Or were they just playing that way? You never knew what people’s kinks were. That was something else I’d seen far too much of. I might only be eighteen but me and Reece both had some experience. Orgasms were one thing that felt good no matter who you were or what your living situation was. I was just religious about using protection.

“So I’ll be fucking both of you or just one?” I tried to clarify.

“Um,” the guy said, his voice stuttering. “Well, it’s Victoria’s birthday and I told her she could have whatever she wanted. And she’s always had this fantasy, so…”

I looked the guy up and down. The suit looked expensive. And the car certainly wasn’t a cheap ride. These two had dough. And I needed enough for two bus tickets East.

“Five hundred for the whole night.” I tried to make my voice confident even though inside I was kicking myself as soon as it was out of my mouth. Shit. They were going to toss me out on my ass for asking too much. No way would they pay that mu—

“Done,” the woman said, her voice soft and breathy.

Oh. Wow. “Deal,” I said before they could change their mind. “Cash up front.”

“Done.”

I hadn’t had a clue when I smiled in relief and sank back against the seat and ten minutes later followed them up to their penthouse apartment that I was voluntarily walking into hell, or that “Victoria” was the goddamned devil herself.

My eyes jerked open and my breath stuttered to find I wasn't in Victoria's nightmare of a *playroom*, but somewhere small and dark and musty, with a weight on my chest and my hands—

My wrists were tied painfully tight behind my back.

Fuck!

I blinked drowsy, heavy eyes, struggling to figure out what the *fuck* was going on. Everything felt heavy, even as a familiar panic raced through my blood.

How had she found me? The first thing I'd done as soon as I'd gotten free of her was find Reece and then get on a bus and run as far away from San Francisco as I could get—

The weight on my chest moved and I tried to lift my head to look down. Oh fuck, my head was a thousand pounds, I could barely lift it an inch off the ground, barely lift my eyes open.

And what I saw made no sense.

Ruth. Ruth, tied to a chair that had been knocked over sideways on top of me. It was dark, but moonlight came in from a high window. Enough so I could see tape over her mouth. And I could feel her wriggling and hear her inaudible noises as she tried to say something even though the tape muffled her words.

I blinked again, even though each time it felt like lifting a mountain.

Ruth.

I was here with Ruth.

Ruth.

The wedding. We were at the wedding, and I'd proposed to Ruth, and she'd said yes. But then, then something had happened—

I shut my eyes, trying to concentrate and recall.

And then it all hit with a flood. The wedding. Charlie's mom figuring out she was pregnant. Me being an asshole and my brother calling me out on it.

Going after Ruth and finding—

Oh shit!

My eyes popped back open. I'd followed the tracker I'd put on Ruth's phone, because after what had happened to me so long ago, I'd always been hypervigilant. I knew the evil people were capable of, no matter how happy-go-lucky my twin was, how good he wanted to believe humanity was.

I knew better. So I put a tracker on everyone I loved.

And I loved Ruth.

The second I'd stepped in the door and seen her tied up, my heart had sunk through the floor, but like a fucking idiot, I hadn't gone on alert fast enough and someone had gotten the drop on me.

Judging by how goddamned drowsy I felt, they'd used some powerful shit too.

It felt like it took every ounce of strength to move my head from side to side to check out the room and evaluate the situation.

A shed, we were in a small shed. More memories hit. Me walking toward the shed. The small, out of the way swimming hole at the little dam.

And how I hadn't told a fucking soul where I was going.

Like a total goddamned idiot. Of course I hadn't expected this, but hikers never expected to get lost either. They still told people where they were going. It was a basic of going into a situation where unexpected things could happen. Reece and I always had a hard and fast rule that we never went anywhere without letting the other know. Especially after Victoria. I was worse than ever.

But that had been back when we were street kids and over the years, my brother had used the line about being tired of having his brother as his keeper too many times over the years so I'd eased up.

This was bad.

Very bad.

I had to get us out of here.

Because after being handcuffed to Victoria's bed for two months straight, only allowed out on a leash to use the bathroom and for "walks" on a treadmill, also while leashed, I'd finally escaped, and swore I'd never, ever allow myself to be so powerless again.

I pulled at my wrists and felt the tug. Not cuffs. I looked at how Ruth was tied to the chair.

Duct tape.

Buck had likely used the same thing to tie me up.

A glance down at my ankles confirmed it.

His first mistake.

I looked around. Speaking of, where was the fuckwad? I opened my mouth, which tasted as dry as if it had been stuffed with cotton balls. Swallowing didn't help, but I did it several times anyway and then tried again, croaking out a low, "Where?"

Moonlight glinted off Ruth's wide, tear-reddened eyes as she looked

toward the door and shrugged.

Did that mean she didn't know? Or that he could be returning any minute? Fuck. Neither was good news.

I tried to roll my body to the side but barely shifted. Goddammit, *no*. If Buck was psycho enough to lock us up here like this, he'd probably do much worse when he got back from wherever the hell he'd run off to. He'd brought Ruth to a secondary location and that was always bad news. I'd had reason and opportunity to study this shit extensively. It rarely turned out well.

I sucked in several quick short breaths and huffed them out just as fast. I forced myself to think of just how much danger we were in.

And then I did the one thing I knew would throw my body into a panic and adrenaline response. The one thing I usually fought at all costs.

I intentionally thought about Victoria.

I thought about how her "husband"—really just a favorite slave of the moment—had held me face down on the bed while Victoria put the handcuffs on.

I relived how Victoria took her time with me that first night, introducing me to a kind of pain I'd never known before, and also forcing me to pleasure, over and over.

Over the next weeks, she'd use me in every way imaginable—a toy for her pleasure and a toy to torment because she was a sadist in every sense of the word.

By the middle of the second month, I was half convinced I loved her. Just like the other slaves she brought in and out.

Except that they all consented to be there.

I didn't.

Which was why I was her favorite to play with. The more I begged for her to let me go, the more she loved to play with me.

By the end, I just wanted to die. I barely remembered who I was.

But Reece.

I never forgot my brother. Flesh of my flesh. The brother with my face.

She broke me down so far that I lost my sense of self, that I could almost forget my life... but I could never forget him.

Every time I looked in a mirror, I saw him. He was the one thing she couldn't steal.

I grunted in fury, adrenaline bursting in every cell as I rocked my body again. I expected to rocket to a sitting position with the energy of my anger.

The fury and rage at what Victoria had done to me, the way she'd made me doubt my own sanity, sexuality, *everything*—

But I only rolled a little. Still, it was enough to dislodge Ruth from my chest.

Fuck, it *hurt* to move. It was so fucking difficult. My body felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. Two thousand pounds even.

But I thought of my rage at Victoria, of how helpless I'd felt those months of nights, knowing she'd come home and torment me into the long hours of morning. And I roared inside my head and forced my muscles to contract and move again.

This time I managed to heave myself up onto my knees. I swayed drunkenly, but at least my body was upright, my arms tight behind my back.

I breathed out and fought to stay upright. I knew what I needed to do, I just needed to stay conscious to do it. But fuck, the idea of getting all the way to my feet seemed nigh impossible at the moment.

I looked down at Ruth, though, and realized I didn't have only anger to fuel me.

Like back then, it wasn't just anger that had kept that last wall of sanity up, safe from Victoria's total influence and control.

It was love, goddammit.

Love for my brother, and now this new love. Love for Ruth. The woman I wanted to make mine forever.

But I could only do that if I saved her from this hell hole.

I roared again and leaning one shoulder against the side of the shed for balance, heaved myself up on one knee, and then, without letting myself stop this time, continued pushing until I was on my feet.

Ruth made encouraging noises from where she laid sideways in her chair on the floor. I didn't dare look down. I was barely keeping steady. My head swam crazily and the world tilted even as I got my second foot underneath me. I leaned my whole body against the wall when my knees buckled and threatened to dump me back on the floor. No, goddammit, *NO*.

I gritted my teeth and forced my knees to lock, keeping me up.

But getting up was only the first part of this trial. I sucked in a deep breath, and before I lost focus, lifted my arms as high as I could behind my back, then brought them down hard against my tailbone.

Nothing happened.

I hadn't been able to produce enough force. While in my mind the

movement had been dramatic, in reality, I'd done little more than lift and drop my arms a few inches or so. That wouldn't do jack shit, though. For this to work, I needed momentum and *force*. I'd watched enough YouTube videos on escape techniques to know that.

So I bent over, leaning my shoulder against the wall so I didn't fall, and lifted my arms again until it was painful—this one needed to count—and then I yanked my arms back down as hard as I could, imagining I was smashing Buck's face in.

The duct tape around my wrists split down the center, right along the seam in the tape like when you ripped a piece off—a critical weakness that few would-be abductors realized. You could do the same with zip-ties. Enough force and they'd snap the same way, at the seam.

And then I crumpled to the floor, all my energy momentarily spent.

Ruth cried out in alarm. I didn't have much energy to tell her I was okay, but when I brought my arms out from around my back and crawled over to her, her eyes were wide and excited. I pulled the tape off her mouth first.

“Get my hands,” she said. “Then I can help you with the rest.”

I didn't bother wasting the energy to nod, I just got to work heaving my million-pound arms around to tug at the tape binding her. It took longer than I would have preferred, but finally I'd gotten her wrists free and together, we pulled her hands and arms free of the tape.

I fell back and rested, breathing hard as she made quick work of the tape around her ankles and then mine.

“Okay, that was badass,” she said. “And now it's time to get the hell out of here. Come on.”

She held a hand down to me, and then, quickly realizing that wasn't enough, she leaned down and put her shoulder underneath my arm. Which was a ridiculous idea considering how small she was.

I wasn't a skinny street kid anymore. I'd bulked up to be twice the size I was as an eighteen-year-old, and there was no way Ruth was dragging me out of here without assistance.

So, as exhausted as I was, I pushed for a little bit more adrenaline and got to my knees, then stumbled to my feet, Ruth attempting in vain to steady me.

I'd just reached out for the wall when we heard the sound of a truck engine pulling to a stop nearby.

Ruth's head snapped my way, eyes wide and terrified. “It's him. He's back.”

Well, shit.

Chapter Twenty-One

RUTH

“Get behind me,” Jeremiah whispered fervently.

Hilarious. He could barely stand on his own two feet.

But there was no time to argue. Or make a plan. Or do much of anything. I looked around the shed that was frustratingly empty other than the chair.

Buck had a *gun*. And he was crazy.

All we had on our side was surprise. If only Jer had woken fifteen minutes earlier we might have gotten the hell *out* of here.

But I knew well enough that wishes never did anyone good. And my heart raced as I gave another panicked look up at Jer when we heard footsteps approaching.

Fuck.

So I didn't stop to think.

I separated myself from Jeremiah and he tried to move between me and the door, as if he thought I was actually giving into his suggestion of letting him take on Buck by himself.

Men.

I shook my head and hurried to grab the chair from the floor, quietly so as to not ruin our one advantage.

And then when the door rattled and finally opened, I flipped the chair so

that I held the legs, the back out like a battering ram. And then I screamed like a banshee, surprising the hell out of both Jeremiah and Buck, and ran straight at Buck, straight through the door, ramming the chair into him and plowing into him just as he reached for his gun.

The ringing of a gunshot exploded through the air.

Chapter Twenty-Two

JEREMIAH

I wasn't quick enough to save her. Oh God. Oh God oh God.
I've failed her just like I was always so terrified I'd fail my little brother. We were always so cold and wet, huddling against buildings and over vents in the sidewalks where hot air would pipe out of the San Francisco streets. But you had to fight for those spots and it didn't matter anyway during the long, interminably rainy days some winters, temperatures just above freezing.

And here I was in the dark and the cold again.

And Ruth—

Ruth!

I struggled to get up, to go to her—

But it was dark. So dark. And I couldn't move. Why couldn't I move?

I tried to call out to her. I tried to scream. But the darkness only closed in deeper, taking me back.

Swallowing me down the throat of the night and into its belly. I choked and screamed as I tried to open my eyes, to claw my way out. But I couldn't move. Couldn't move because she had me trapped.

And then I was afraid that I'd never left. I'd never left that fifteen by fifteen foot room dungeon. I'd never escaped to Texas with my brother. I'd never met Xavier, or made it to Mel's ranch.

I'd never met Ruth, who challenged me and frustrated me and made me feel more alive than I'd ever known was possible.

That had all been the mirage. The dream.

I'd been in the dungeon all this time, only escaping where my mind would take me. Dreaming up a whole life.

And now it had come to an end.

Ruth was gone. The ranch I'd fought so hard to make solvent with my brother—gone. None of it had ever been real.

And now I didn't want to open my eyes because I knew I'd only see her horrible, taunting face, and she'd break me down until I begged, and beg I would. I'd beg and snivel and be less than a man, less than a beast under her whip—

Are you going to be a good dog today? Victoria would always ask when she came in. And I would hurriedly crawl as far as my leash would allow so I could lick her boots and show that yes, yes I would be very a good dog that day. So that maybe, just maybe, I would get fed.

Ruth! I screamed, even though I knew it would earn me a beating, even though I knew another woman's name on my tongue would infuriate her.

Predictably, I felt the tug on my leash.

And then I frowned.

The tug wasn't coming from the leash around my neck.

The tug was at my hand.

And more than a tug it was a squeeze. But the squeeze was so tight. So tight, a hand holding mine.

Victoria had never once held my hand.

Why couldn't I open my eyes? Had she blindfolded me? She did sometimes, but usually only during what she called 'scenes.'

I struggled again to open my eyes. And realized I couldn't open them because they weighed a thousand pounds. My whole body wasn't right.

What was going on?

Nothing made sense.

Where was I? It didn't smell right. Nothing was right, nothing was—

I cracked my eyes the tiniest bit and glaring bright light flooded in, causing me to immediately close them again.

And God, my side hurt. Fuck, it fucking *hurt*. How had I only just now registered it?

Noise too, there was noise all around me, though it sounded like it was

coming through a long tunnel, distorted. Like a bunch of voices were all talking over one another.

And then someone yanked my eyelid open and shined a light in it.

I winced back and the voices got louder. What fresh hell was this? Some sort of medical play Victoria had cooked up with her twisted followers?

“Mr. Walker? Mr. Walker? Can you hear me? Do you know what day it is?”

I blinked or tried to, my eyes crusty, and finally opened them against the light again. Where I was met by a man in a lab coat looking down at me very seriously.

“Mr. Walker, you’ve been involved in an incident. I’m going to check out your vitals quickly.”

I shook my head, still struggling to understand what was happening.

I opened my mouth and tried to ask, but only a croak came out of my desert dry throat.

“Shh, don’t try to talk,” said the man dressed as a doctor. He looked toward the side of the room. “Nurse, can you get him some water. And then let the family know he’s awake?”

Family? Was this really a hospital and not some twisted setup of Victoria’s?

The nurse he’d spoken to, a round woman in her late fifties, came forward with a cup and helped fit the straw in my mouth while the doctor kept talking.

“A bullet was lodged in your abdomen, causing a severe intraperitoneal hemorrhage as well as damage to your liver and intestines. We managed to stop the bleeding just in time and did surgery to repair your damaged liver, and then put you in an induced coma to heal. But two days later you developed peritonitis and we thought we might lose you all over again. In short, you’re a very lucky young man.”

A bullet? What the hell was he talking about?

I awkwardly sucked on the straw, dribbling some down my chin, which the nurse wiped away. I felt like a damn child. I struggled to clear my throat. “Ruth?”

Then I blinked. Reece. I’d meant to ask for Reece, my brother.

But as soon as her name came out of my mouth, I remembered. Not everything—but I remembered I’d gone after her. And then something... something bad had happened.

“Ruth?” I asked again, more urgently, frantic almost. I tried to sit up but

was barely able to, my energy was so drained. And the pain in my abdomen roared at the attempt.

“No, no, sit back,” the doctor urged, grabbing my shoulder and pushing me back down. “Nurse, go get his brother.”

I watched the nurse hurry out of the room helplessly. “Ruth,” I managed again before my head collapsed back on the pillow.

I felt woozy, like I was about to pass out again, when I heard voices.

The door opened. “I told you, I’m his fiancée, goddammit. I don’t care if visiting hours are over. He was shot because of me and you are letting me in there. Reece, *tell her.*”

I knew that voice. A rush of relief so hard hit me that I didn’t fight the goddamn tears that suddenly filled my eyes. She was here. She was safe. Nothing else mattered. I didn’t care how the fuck we’d gotten here.

I heard the harsh slapping of bootheels against linoleum, a quick *bang bang bang*, and then her scent was surrounding me.

Ruth. She hugged my neck and I inhaled her.

Oh my God. Oh fuck. It had all been real.

She was real and she was here and we were safe.

She pulled back long enough to look me in the eyes, our foreheads touching. I met her hazel eyes, still blurry and confused about all that brought us here. But I knew what I wanted, forever and ever.

So I got it across in as few words as possible to spare my still sore throat: “Let’s elope.”

Her worry turned to laughter as she covered my face with kisses.

Epilogue

RUTH

“So we just did that,” I giggled, throwing my arms around my husband’s neck as he backed me into our Vegas hotel room two and a half months later.

“You bet your ass we just did, Mrs. Walker,” Jeremiah said as he shoved me up against the wall, kicking the door shut with his foot and bracing his hands on the wall on either side of my head. “And now I intend to consummate the vows we just made before Elvis so you know I damn well mean it.”

He plucked the cheap little tiara with attached veil out of my hair and then dug his fingers in, dragging my head back. He followed with his mouth, missing my lips and latching onto my throat instead.

Oh God, yes.

The past two months had been incredible. Maybe that was mean to say, because the physical therapy and rehab Jer had gone through hadn’t always been easy. It was only last week he’d been able to get on a horse again and walk more than a couple blocks without getting winded.

It hadn’t mattered, or maybe it had allowed us to connect on an even deeper level intimacy wise.

He’d finally let me in. He told me things he’d never told anyone else, not even Reece. He told me about what happened to him when he was desperate

on the streets, how he was essentially kidnapped and held captive by that evil bitch, how he barely escaped. How when kids like him disappeared, no one ever went looking.

No wonder he had a hard time letting anyone close, or ever letting down his walls. At first he was monotone as he told it all to me, but by the end, he'd broken down weeping, burying his face in my breasts. Like a child in need of comfort from the mother who had never been there for him.

And I'd held him so close and whispered to him that I had him, that I loved him, and that I'd never let anything bad happen to him ever again. A foolish promise to make but one I was still determined to bring true. This precious man was everything to me. He'd been so strong for so long and I wanted him to know that now he could put down that heavy burden. He could lay it down now and rest in my arms.

But Jeremiah never was one to rest for long, or to allow himself to be out of control. And I understood better than ever after he gave me his deepest secrets.

So I gave myself to him with a trust *I'd* never been able to give to anyone before. Because Buck's revelations about my father had freed me from the man's legacy. I wouldn't allow that man or his opinions of me to torture me any longer. He no longer had any control over me.

Look what his mind games had done to his other child.

Buck was in prison now and would be for a long time. The Winston's lawyers would see to that. They hadn't taken kindly to being kidnapped and extorted. Plus the attempted murder charge for Jeremiah. No, he wouldn't see the light of day for a long, long time. Good fucking riddance. He might be my half-brother but he'd effectively squashed any sisterly sentiment I might have ever felt. In the end all he'd ever proved was that yes, he was his father's son.

And now Jeremiah and I were free.

I kissed him back just as vigorously as his leg slid between mine. He angled himself in such a way that I could feel his hard cock through his slacks, right at my center. I groaned, already so turned on from seeing his love-filled eyes during the cheesy ceremony down-stairs. It hadn't mattered that I was holding plastic flowers or that the chapel smelled like hairspray and cheap perfume.

It was perfect. I was finally uniting with the man of my dreams. The man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. Ours would never be a

conventional life. We fell in love during someone else's wedding celebrations, cemented our affair while stranded in a storm, to this day had sex more often out of bed than in it—being married by an Elvis impersonator felt just about right.

“I want you wet,” Jeremiah growled to me as he reached up underneath my simple skirt, shoved my panties aside, and palmed my pussy.

I shuddered against his hand, my forehead falling against his chest as I began to shudder. I was so ready for him. So *beyond* ready for him—

“I'm wet,” I whispered, unnecessarily, since he could feel just how wet I was.

But he shook his head, still strumming a spot that had me almost sputtering, it was so goddamn good.

With his other hand he began tugging at my shirt. I got the idea and helped him pull it off over my head.

I wasn't wearing a bra. I figured when in Vegas...

His dark eyes flashed when he saw my tits spring out. My pussy throbbed at the look on his face and I whined in need.

He grinned then, a wolf's grin. Dear God, how was I ever going to survive the night?

Because apparently my new husband had plans for me. Plans that began with getting me in the shower. Since that's where he led me next, one hand buried in my pussy the whole way.

The second he flipped on the light in the bathroom, I gasped. He'd obviously splurged on the room because the shower was *huge*. It had several rain showerheads, along with a built-in bench. All in a rich marble.

He let go of me briefly to set the water to steaming and I whined with the loss of contact. He already had me in a sort of trance and we'd barely begun. But as soon as he'd gotten the water going, he began stripping down.

My mouth dropped open as I watched him reveal inch after inch of hard muscle. Working the ranch morning to night day after day had sculpted him into a god.

I reached out, longing to run my fingers down his six-pack abs. He was naked all except for his black boxers that were stretched obscenely in the front from his hard cock.

He caught my wrists before I could reach out and make contact, though. “Ah ah ah,” he warned. “Only good girls get rewarded. Are you going to be a good girl tonight, Mrs. Walker?”

I looked up into his eyes and nodded fervently, biting my lip in the way I knew drove him crazy. “I’ll be such a good girl,” I whispered, batting my eyes at him.

He groaned in the low way I knew meant I was driving him to the brink and my sex pulsed again. He yanked me close, shoving down my skirt and panties and all but hauling me into the shower with him.

The hot water was a shocking sensation that, with my body already primed, had me spasming and clutching onto Jeremiah.

But he was so keyed into my every emotion and reaction, he was ready for me, and again grasped my wrists before I could close around him.

He held my right wrist in a firm, commanding grip that had me shuddering in front of him as the steamy water soaked me from behind. He lifted my arm up and placed my palm on the wall, pressing it lightly there in a way I knew meant I was to leave it there. When he released my wrist, I kept my arm raised and palm to the wall.

He did the same with the other wrist, so that I was grasping the top of the frame for the opaque glass shower door, spreading me so that I might as well be tied to an invisible St. Andrews Cross. As if he had the same image in mind, he nudged my feet open wider so that I was completely exposed to him. Completely vulnerable to whatever he might want to do to me.

All the while the water steamed the air around us and dripped down my body, lighting up every nerve ending in ways I’d never realized they could be awakened.

“Close your eyes and feel me,” he whispered.

I obeyed. I’d learned when he wanted to be in control, it was best to give in and go for the ride. I trusted him to never let me drop. I *trusted* him, something I never thought I’d be able to say of any man. But he had earned it, over and over again.

So I closed my eyes and when his fingertip began tracing the hot, wet skin at my wrist, slowly working his way to my inner elbow, and then down further to my bicep, to my underarm, sloping around to my breasts—

“Oh!” I gasped when he came to my nipple. He didn’t grasp it or suck it... No, he just began to lightly flick it and tease it with his big, calloused fingers. Back and forth and then forth and back again. Just that one point of contact on my body.

I squirmed where I stood as an orgasm built. Jesus Christ. Was he really going to make me come from simply flicking my nipple?

But the more he teased, gently and then harder and harder, and then soft again so I was whining and twisting where I stood, ready to beg, arching my chest out toward him and squirming until finally, *finally*, he gave in and dipped his head to clamp his lips on me and sucked.

I cried out in relief and the pleasure that stroked through my sternum and down to my pussy at the pressure of his tongue on my nipple. Jesus Christ, when he did it like that, it felt like my nipple was a second clit. Yes, yes, just like that. Right there, oh, oh God—

I arched my back, thrusting my breast harder into his face and just then I felt his teeth against my nipple, biting—

I screamed, not caring who heard, not caring about anything but the insane connection between me and the man ministering so perfectly at my nipple.

And yet, as perfect as that felt—

“I need you,” I whined, even as I still rode the high he’d just taken me on. “Please. Please, fuck me. I need you inside me. I want you so deep inside—”

I barely got the words out of my mouth before he had me hefted against the wall again, just like he had when we’d first walked in the door.

Except this time there was no fabric between us. And when he reached down and positioned his cock at my center, all I felt was thrilled anticipation for what was to come. I couldn’t get him inside me fast enough.

“I’m gonna put my arms around you,” I said breathlessly.

Still, I waited until he gave a little harsh nod before dropping my hands from where he’d placed them earlier.

This was our compromise when it came to sex. He’d begun to allow me to touch him; he just asked me to warn him so it didn’t hit him out of the blue and he could give himself a second to prepare for it. I knew it was so huge and just another step in the magic that was us. I suspected I wasn’t the only feeling some healing from our union and I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed it. Just last week Reece had stopped me, kind of amazed at the change he’d seen in his brother.

Still, I didn’t take anything for granted and I was slow and careful as I placed my arms around my new husband’s neck, watching his face to make sure the sensation didn’t take him anywhere bad in his head.

But his eyes were locked on mine and he seemed fully present as he shifted us so that the steaming water fell between our chests, creating a pool there. And then he leaned me against the marbled wall of the shower and

reached down for my leg, lingering to palm and squeeze my ass before hiking my leg up around his waist.

Which had the added benefit of notching his cock perfectly into position. I couldn't help the whining noise that came from my throat as I wiggled against his cock. It felt like torture not to have him inside me. Like I could feel the emptiness, the memory of his fullness like a ghost. I couldn't be truly satiated until—

Just the tip of him began to breach my pussy and already I began shuddering. He was so thick that as he pushed in, he strummed several spots that had me squirming for friction already. And he was only in maybe half an inch.

“Don't tease me,” I said throatily. “I'm not above begging. Please, please, Jer, fuck me. Oh God, please fuck me—”

One of his thick hands landed roughly on my hip as he pulled out a little, then thrust back in, creating the most amazing friction.

I did a full body roll at the action and then he was filling me. Oh God he was filling me. So deep. Then deeper still. I opened to him and clenched around his cock for dear life.

“I can feel every inch of you,” I gasped.

“Fuck, honey,” he said, teeth clenched, “so can I. You feel like fucking silk.”

He pulled out and then thrust back in. “Like a fucking silk vice. This is where I've wanted to be all day. But I wanted you as my wife first. I wanted to fuck you as your husband. I wanted to claim you,” he thrust in, then pulled out again, “and fill you,” he thrust back in, all the way, all the way deep, hitting a spot so deep I spasmed and clenched my legs around his ass, arching my chest into his.

He leaned in and slurped the shower-water off of my collarbone. And then he kept sucking, and sucking, and there was so much sensation all at once—him so thick and deep inside me, the body-shuddering melt of his lips suckling my neck, and steam and water on my skin.

My head fell back as I came, quaking and clenching around his cock.

“Fuck,” he broke from my neck to hiss, and then he stood up straighter, cementing his body against mine and the wall as he began to fuck me in earnest. I was shuddering putty beneath him, coming harder and longer with his every thrust.

The more I clenched on him, the more intense my orgasm, and I could see

from the look of agonized pleasure on his face that it felt good to him, too, so good.

“Honey,” he gritted out. “Oh fuck, *honey*.”

“Yes,” was all I could get out, surprised I could manage actual human words at all. “Yes, yes, *yessssssssss*.”

He came with a roar, his hands palming my cheeks and pressing his forehead to mine, a communion deeper even than kissing.

And as we both stood there huffing for breath in the steamy aftermath he whispered a single word, “Mine.”

Nothing would ever wipe the smile off my face that word elicited. “Yours,” I whispered back. “Forever.”

His eyes flashed open, dark and possessive. “You better fucking believe it, *wife*,” he said before devouring me in a long kiss.

And I felt a rupture of joy in my chest, because this was only the beginning.

* * *

If you enjoyed these books, don't miss Stasia's latest release, [MONSTER'S BRIDE](#).

I went in search of miracles... and stumbled upon a monster instead. In return for the healing I was so desperate for, I just had to make one teensy weensie promise...

To be his consort for, uh...forever.

To say I wasn't exactly thinking things through when I said yes was an understatement.

And now I've been whisked away to a castle in a wintry wonderland with a ginormous, ferocious chimera. You know, lion-like head, goat horns, big freaking wings. Yeah.

And he's just deposited me on his bed, ready to start making good on that whole consort promise. Apparently forever starts NOW.

Gulp.

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About Stasia Black

Stasia is a USA Today Bestselling Author of dark contemporary romance and sci-fi romance novels.

Stasia grew up in Texas, recently spent a freezing five-year stint in Minnesota, and now is happily planted in sunny California, which she will never, ever leave. She loves writing, reading, listening to podcasts, and going to concerts any time she can manage.

Stasia's drawn to romantic stories that don't take the easy way out. She wants to see beneath people's veneer and poke into their dark places, their twisted motives, and their deepest desires. Basically, she wants to create characters that make readers alternately laugh, cry ugly tears, want to toss their kindles across the room, and then declare they have a new FBB (forever book boyfriend).

