



SET ME  
FREE  
*Cowboy*

R. L. ATKINSON

Set Me Free, Cowboy

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R.L. Atkinson

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*To my husband, for loving me even when I was broken...*

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# Author Note

My romance novels range from clean language with only kissing to mature language with closed door sex scenes. All of them will have tension and a desire to swoon for the characters relationships.

No matter what novel you read by me, none will have any explicit sex scenes.

This novel has mature language, consensual intimate touching, and closed door scenes.

Trigger Warnings: Sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, domestic violence, conversations eluding to rape and sexual assault, stalking, violence, death, nonconsensual drugging, and references to unhealed trauma.



# Chapter 1

Only one thing killed me that day.

And it wasn't how easily he threw the ring back at me. It wasn't the slap across the face, nor the punch to the ribs. It wasn't the yelling and condescending scolding. It wasn't him saying I was at fault for his cheating and abuse. I already knew that my attempt to leave had brought that on.

No, it was the fact that the only person I could blame was myself.

It was all my fault. It had to be, that was the only explanation that would elucidate how easy it had been for him to carve that degrading word into my skin. That was the only thing that helped me make sense of why he'd gotten so angry that I'd found him with her. That was the only thing in my head that would allow me to find some resolve to the image that danced over and over in my mind—watching him walk away.

That foolish choice I'd made to finally try and run left me with a broken down home that he'd destroyed. Straddled me with the debt and the mortgage, all to fend for by myself. Abandoning me with acres upon acres of overgrown pasture since, according to him, a woman's place was inside and a man's was to tend to the fields—although he never once touched them while we'd been married.

He left me completely and utterly alone and destroyed.

He had been the reason I sold my horses, in such hopes that it would help me avoid another bruise-filled week. He was why I no longer had chickens or cattle—hoping it would prevent another drunken night home from work because having those animals added to his responsibilities. Which had been something he constantly told me to take care of, only to receive another beat down by his hands for doing a man's job. He was the reason for all of it. Which only left me to blame for ending up in that situation.

I took another sip of wine, coating my next toe with a pale pink polish. It was two years later to the day, and it still hurt as painfully now as it had then. Divorced by the time I was twenty-three was a look my parents

hadn't wanted to be associated with. So I'd run from that life entirely, vowing I would never go back. Vowing that no matter how long I lived, no matter how much I missed that western lifestyle, I couldn't return.

There was too much pain.

Too much agony clouded any enjoyable memories.

"Thinking about it again, Brexlynn?" A soft voice pierced my thoughts, and I glanced up from my toes. Katie was watching me, blowing on her nails to dry them, her teak wood-colored eyes set beneath thick lashes held sympathy. "It's been two years, you escaped, there is nothing left to fear," she finished, her raven hair draping around her round face as she returned to painting her toes.

I leaned back against the base of the cream-colored couch. "Sometimes I wonder if New York City isn't far enough away." Pushing some dark-brown hair behind my ear, I returned to my toes, ignoring the subtle brow raise from my best friend. The one person still in my life who knew what had driven me to move far from Idaho, far from my childhood town, far from the house I thought one day I'd call home.

"He's in prison for another three years, at least, and you have a protective order against him. No one here knows about who you used to be or that douchebag Matthew." She smiled, her lips thinning. "The longer you turn down dates, the more suspicious people will get. Especially with a face like yours."

I chuckled, ignoring her compliment. "That would mean telling someone that I don't have naturally beautiful, sleek, dark-brown hair. Or that I have freckles covering much of my nose and cheeks."

"Such a travesty." She rolled her eyes, and I offered her a half smile. One that didn't quite reach my forest-green gaze. We continued painting our nails in silence, sipping on wine as she let me sit with my feelings upon the mahogany floors. The TV across from us wasn't even on to lighten the mood.

Finishing my toes, I twisted the polish lid closed and set it back up on the glass coffee table. "Do you really think it's been enough time?" I asked her, and her eyes darted up from her last nail.

She sighed as I tilted my head back onto the couch cushion and stared at the ceiling fan that slowly turned above us. Light streamed in through the two windows to my right, casting a soft shadow across the floor from where we sat. It skewed my body shape, and I couldn't help but run a hand across the strange shadow.

“The company is sending you to Montana first of all, not Idaho. Second, he’s still in prison like I already mentioned. No one will know you there, plus he obviously won’t be there. And it’s just for a few months of research,” she explained. I flopped my head to the left to get a better view of her. She pressed her hands against my cheeks, cupping my thin, round face. “Although, if you just admitted who you were, they wouldn’t need to waste an entire spring and summer on research.”

I shook my head out of her hands. “No.”

Standing up from the couch, I walked toward the left, out of my living room and into the apartment kitchen. Stepping between the island and counters, I reached up into a cupboard and grabbed a glass. Turning around to face the island, I filled the cup up with some water from the sink before leaning against the granite countertop.

“I still think it’s a bad idea to pretend that you don’t know anything about the western world, Miss Rodeo Star. You’ve been *in* the NFR, it’s going to be really hard to hide your skills and knowledge working at a cattle ranch.” Katie rose from her spot on the ground and waddled toward me, doing her best to avoid touching her freshly painted toes to the floor.

I shrugged my shoulders and took a sip of the water. “It’s been a few years since I’ve lived that life. I’ll be rusty, and I’ll just avoid doing anything before any of my other coworkers. Then, I’ll just copy what they do.”

Katie snorted, running a finger under both of her oval eyes, pretending to wipe away tears to mock me. “No matter how much time you’ve had off, those aren’t skills you simply lose. You grew up on a cattle ranch, Brex. You really think you can just hide it forever?”

“I just need to hide it long enough that no one grows suspicious,” I answered, but she set my nerves running on high alert. My team and I were told yesterday that the clothing company we worked for wanted hands-on research as to what would better speak to the country lifestyle. They wanted in-the-field analysis to better our western line. Their idea? Send me and my five other teammates in charge of product design out to a working cattle and dude ranch for the next several months.

Tomorrow. We would leave tomorrow, and I had been unable to relax since getting the news.

This would be my first time back to that world after finally leaving a marriage I had no place being in to begin with. One that started the moment I turned eighteen. One that my parents supported despite the major red flags. It

was only my brother and Katie who'd seen it, who were still there for me after things fell apart.

Katie walked around the counter and sat down on a barstool, my eyes trailing after her and squinting as the sun dipped low, blazing through the window across from me. It lit up the chestnut kitchen table beneath it and shone off of the wooden floors. The pale-blue walls opened the space up and helped me feel light despite the baggage that weighed upon my shoulders.

"Someone will figure it out," she muttered. "But I understand why you want to keep things to yourself."

I nodded and then smiled, this time it reached my rather large almond-shaped eyes. "Are you going to be alright here all alone for the next few months?"

Katie rocked her head back and forth. "I'll manage. Now, I should leave so you can get some sleep before your flight in the morning." She stood from her barstool, and I met her around the island, tightly encircling her body with my arms.

"See you in a few months," I whispered, and she nodded and then was gone.

I stared at the door long after she left. Long after the sun set and the orange glow that streamed through the windows around me disappeared. I was terrified, even though it had been two years since I'd put him in jail. Because of everything I'd managed to escape from, returning to that lifestyle still scared me.

The safety that once came from moving so far away, removing myself from anything to do with that world, was quickly slipping away from my soul. Solace that had once existed within my figure was fleeing at a rapid pace, leaving in its place a hole of fear.

Fear that I was about to walk back into something that would turn my life upside down once more.

I slid my thumb across the raised scar that ran along the inside of my left ring finger. A numbing reminder of the life I'd once escaped. I dreaded this moment, dreaded the minutes that ticked by, closer to dragging me back into a life that had once held all of my dreams, all of my joys. But all of that happiness had quickly been shoved away with harrowing, agonizing experiences, and I wished Katie hadn't left yet.

It only drove home how my future had been ripped from me and destroyed any value I'd had left in myself. All for a singular purpose—

marriage, and one that hadn't lasted. That constant buzz of adrenaline began pumping heavily through my veins as Matthew's final, threatening message now rang even truer—the message that he would find me again one day.

And that terrified me. I had no idea what he would do, but I had spent every waking moment since leaving him praying it would never be possible. Yet, two years later I was returning to the west. Not to Idaho, not to my parents, but it was still close enough to that lifestyle that if something were to happen, this would be the time.

Except Katie was right. He was in jail, with three years left on his sentence. I would only be there for a few months. Taking a deep breath for reassurance, I pushed out the strenuous fear and focused on my task at hand. Or at least tried to.

Making my way past the kitchen, I turned down the small hallway and flicked the light on to my bedroom. Two suitcases lay unopened and empty upon the cedar chest that rested at the foot of my bed. I stared at them, needing to pack but struggling to find the strength to dive into the very back of my closet and break out items I hadn't dared look at in years.

But it was now or never. So I dragged my feet to the right and slid open the closet doors. They folded upon themselves, revealing a very packed rail full of clothing. Shoving the white hangers to the left, I dug around in the back corner, slowly tugging out a massive tote.

Inside were buckles I'd won, belts I'd once worn with pride, pairs and pairs of jeans that I'd once ridden and worked in every day. Peeling off the lid to the box, the familiar smell of denim and leather hit my nose. Gingerly, I moved them neatly from the tote to the suitcase. The belts and buckles were all coiled upon the bottom, next to a smaller box, still in nearly the same pristine condition as they'd been when I stored them away all those years ago.

It was easy to toss the belts into the suitcase, but my hand lingered around the box. The smooth, wooden container that my brother had given me on my sixteenth birthday. One he'd made with my name engraved on the side and a horse chiseled onto the lid. It looked the same as the day I tucked it neatly away. The day I unintentionally chose to give up my dreams and goals.

The lid creaked as I raised it, rusty hinges unused and coated in dust. But the contents were untouched by time. Spurs. Handcrafted by my father himself, another sixteenth birthday present. I was nineteen the last time I'd worn them. Which had also been my last rodeo ever.

I shoved the box lid back down and tossed it into my suitcase. Cursing all of those memories that crashed through. Hating what the intricately detailed metal inside that box reminded me of. It forced that guilt to bubble back up into my throat, cursing me to forever accept that I gave up. That it was all my fault I never continued onward with my goals.

The rest of the packing was mindless. I honestly couldn't remember half of what I tossed into the suitcase—some of which seemed useless, but I knew not to go anywhere without a dress or two and some nicer heels and shoes. I sat down on the final stuffed luggage, jamming the zipper closed before finally crashing in my bed.

I looked around and stared at my room. At the nearly empty walls of boring beige. At the dark-blue curtains drawn over the window to my left. At the white closet doors directly across from me. At the light-brown wooden dresser to my right. At everything around me, praying that it would keep me distracted from the swirling thoughts of anxiety that flashed through my mind.

Eventually, as the sky outside began to lighten, I finally nodded off—only to be quickly woken once more by the beeping of my alarm. Today was the day.

## Chapter 2

Everyone else was excited, giddy as we filed slowly off of the plane, yet I couldn't help but feel everything else. While I was quiet, my head was anything but. Too much swirled around inside, reminding me of the pain and exhaustion I left two years ago. Glances of confusion and slight disgust kept coming my way from my teammates. They knew nothing of what had occurred, which I had kept a secret on purpose, so I couldn't blame them for their behavior.

Once in a while, hope that things would be different dashed through me. It was fleeting, and left quicker than it arrived. My coworkers knew nothing about the work we were about to be thrown into, nothing about how male-dominated the industry was, and nothing about how much apprehension all of that gave me.

I stood between Eva and Melody, who were gibbering about the excitement that encased them, waiting for our suitcases. Fiddling with the hem of my long-sleeved cropped T-shirt, I fought with my own mind, praying that I could keep up my disguise amidst my coworkers gossiping about how exciting this adventure was. High-waisted skinny jeans and simple sneakers should throw everyone off, right? My outfit wasn't warm enough for early spring in Montana, since there would still likely be snow on the ground at the ranch that was tucked away in higher mountain country, but it would divert any suspicion.

No one could know.

I swung my second heavy suitcase, filled with a few different pairs of boots and two cowgirl hats, from the luggage return carousel and backed quietly away, standing off to the side, as my coworkers waited for Eva to grab her final suitcase. She was extremely tall and thin, with long, blonde hair and eye-catching facial features. Symmetrical and oval, with pouty lips and large round blue orbs. Modelesque, and I couldn't help but find her overall a sweet and endearing young woman.

She was my age, and we had both started working at the company around the same time. I was probably the closest with her, but that didn't mean I was truly that close with anyone. Life had taught me to keep people at arm's length.

Once everyone had snagged their luggage, we meandered out through the entrance of the airport and plopped ourselves down to wait for the van to arrive that would tote us to the Pierce Cattle and Dude Ranch

Melody whipped a hat out of her carry-on. "I've been saving this for when we arrived!" she exclaimed, her voice ringing chords with every word she spoke, just as her name sounded. She rocked back and forth, excitement coursing through her as she shoved the twenty-dollar cowgirl hat over her thick straight auburn hair that fell nearly to her waist. The hat was straw, thin, flimsy, and definitely not suited for the kind of work we were about to be entangled in.

"Look at you!" Aubrey squealed, her tight black curls bouncing up and down. "A real cowgirl! I should've bought one too!" Her grin spread across her dark complexioned face. Beautiful flawlesseness that shone with joy. She was absolutely gorgeous, bright eyes, plump lips, and beautiful cheekbones, all set upon dark, ebony skin.

Melody twirled in place, showing off her hat and boots. Boots that were going to give her blisters sooner than help her in the way that they were meant to. They were snip-toe, and fancy with a higher heel, not work boots. "It was only twenty bucks at the store, such a steal." She grinned, and her brown doe eyes sparkled. Twirling again, she giggled while everyone except for me clapped their hands in glee.

A couple dark glares shot my way, noticing my absent attention, and drew Melody's gaze. She stopped spinning to stare directly at me. "Are you judging?" she hissed. I shook my head no. "Well good, because we all at least wore the appropriate footwear, you've only got sneakers on."

I didn't respond, my mind reeling with what to say that would keep them off of my tail yet not make me look dumb. They could not know.

"I can change at the ranch," I finally mumbled after Melody returned to strutting down the sidewalk we were waiting on. Cars had come and gone, picking up travelers while we were still waiting.

Five pairs of blinking eyes froze in my direction. "What?" Eva said, startled.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I was just saying I can change at the



ranch.” My voice was small, quiet, feigning intimidation. Although, I wondered how much of it was actually fake, seeing as I was truly terrified to step foot in this world once more.

“She speaks!” Gemma teased, a soft smile caressing her plump face. She smoothed a few wrinkles out on her tight fitting sweatshirt that hugged her curvy body and scooted a little closer to our only male coworker, and her secret boyfriend, Anthony. I chuckled nervously.

“Look, we are here to do research on how to improve our western line, so if you have an opinion on something, just say it.” Melody squinted at me, trying to pry out my true thoughts. Maybe I should just tell her, maybe I should let her know that her twenty dollar hat would get destroyed in a heartbeat at the ranch. That right now was also still felt season, or wearing some warm wool cap with ear flaps if it got really bad was more appropriate, because snow was still a thing.

Her hands shoved onto her hips as everyone else’s eyes reached mine once more. The longer they stared, the more my stomach churned.

“It’s still cold here, with possible snow. I just think that your flimsy hat isn’t going to do much in this weather,” I finally stuttered out, my voice low, and I turned my eyes to the ground. “There’s a reason a quality hat costs several hundred dollars and why there’s certain seasons for felt or straw.”

Mouths dropped open as I finished my statement. But luckily, before anyone was able to do more than click their tongues, our big passenger van pulled up. We quickly tucked our hoard of suitcases neatly below in the storage compartment and climbed on board. It smelled overwhelmingly of fabric cleanser and our musty bodies as we all picked a seat.

Leaning back against the headrest, I put some headphones on and closed my eyes. I wanted to block out the sights of the deep purple swirling with bright pinks and greens and blues. I wanted to block out the changing scenery of darkening pine trees and white that littered the brown grassy fields outside. I wanted to drown out the roar of the engine as we chugged along the road.

Part of me wondered what my parents thought was happening to me over the past two years of no contact. They hadn’t once attempted to hear my side of the story since everything went down; instead, they’d chosen to save face with the town and believe that I wrongfully accused their beloved son-in-law.

We turned left, and the change from smooth asphalt to a gravel road

jolted me from the dissociative state that I had found myself in. The trees were tall, thick, luscious deep greens. Snow still lay upon the ground, holding on despite the sun that shone high above today.

Continuing winding through the most gorgeous forest, I couldn't help but feel a small amount of warmth and comfort. I hadn't realized how much I actually missed all of this despite the fear that accompanied it. Then we weaved around a corner, heading even farther from the road, and a massive gate towered above us, letting us know we'd arrived.

Audible gasps resounded as everyone leaned forward in their seats, including me. The road continued straight, spitting us out of the trees and into a wide open basin. A massive valley surrounded by luscious forest greens and browns and hills of snow. To the left was a parking area that had two vehicles in it, then farther down was a massive lot with the sign "employees only." At least a dozen farm trucks were randomly sitting around the empty dirt space.

To the right was a large, two-story building with a sign that read "lodge." It was designed like an old-fashioned cabin and towered above most of the other buildings. Continuing past the beautiful lodge was a small walkway that snaked back and forth with cute, individual and cozy little miniature cabin-like structures.

I assumed that was where the guests stayed when they came, and I couldn't help but be surprised with how many there were. Further beyond the parking lot was a line of trees and then a small road that had a sign labeled bunkhouses. Three white homes, side by side, stretched down that road with a Razor parked beside each.

As we continued chugging along past the cabins, another little path labeled "gun range" stretched out and disappeared into the winding tree line. Beautiful red and white barns rose to my left, and then I covered my mouth with my hand as we came to a stop.

Glittering, well-maintained sorting pens, round pens, and arenas spanned the area in front of me, all bordering pastures riddled with cattle and horses. Everything on display for anyone who came to stay at the ranch. And my heart melted.

In the distance you could see small dirt paths skirting off from the many different fence lines that faded into the forest, which I assumed were used for riding trails. It all reminded me so much of home and what I'd grown up with, although my family definitely didn't have quite as nice facilities as this ranch did. We didn't have the money for the upkeep of those

beautiful crimson barns, let alone to build them in general. Or for more than one round pen, or sorting pens as fancy as these. Despite the terror that had previously held me captive, I found myself smiling wide in excitement.

The van door swung open and pulled me from the captivating view of snow and mud-soaked hills. A chill swept through the vehicle as we all turned our gazes toward the stranger who stepped inside the van.

He was tall and burly, with short hair tucked beneath a semi-wide-brimmed brown cowboy hat. He had on a thick, beige Carhartt, and a coffee-colored wild rag was tucked tightly beneath his chin that hadn't seen a razor in quite some time. A dark, brunette beard coated his rather handsome face. His eyes sparkled, a deep shade of amber that danced beneath the hat that was pulled low over his face.

A cigarette hung from his lips as he tucked the thumbs of his gloved hands into his pockets. Light gleamed off of his massive buckle as he crossed one leg in front of the other, his spurs ringing with the movement. Now that was a cowboy.

The tarnished, weathered leather on his square-toed boots was tucked beneath worn wranglers. He smiled. "Welcome to Pierce Ranch! I'm Jake Smith, the foreman here, and I'll be teachin' ya the ropes to everything." His voice was powerful, yet light, and had that country twang to it.

Man, it was surprisingly nice to be home.

"We're gonna have the driver drop y'all off right in front of your bunkhouses where you can take twenty minutes to choose a bed and make sure you're ready for some work." His eyes stopped directly at me, sweeping down toward my sneakers with a disapproving glance.

I bit back a smile as he plopped himself in the front seat and the driver made a U-turn, lugging us back to the road we'd passed on our tour. Guiding us to the right, the tires crunched across the gravel and came to a halt. The door swung open and Jake nodded a thanks at the driver before climbing out.

We quickly followed, with all of the girls except for Gemma giggling about how cute Jake was. Excitement danced from their words over the novelty of a real cowboy. My feet found the ground, and I inhaled the deeply refreshing scent of open air. This was a smell that I hadn't realized I longed for, no matter how terrified I was after Matthew.

Home.

Jake gestured toward the first bunkhouse. "This'll be where the men will sleep. A couple already arrived earlier than y'all, and we got more hands

coming later. So you, sir, grab your stuff and go snag a bed before your options become even more limited.” He nodded toward Anthony who ran a lean, nervous hand over his straight, caramel hair. He shot one last glance at Gemma, and then dragged his two suitcases into the building, disappearing.

The foreman waved toward the next one down the road. “That’s for you ladies. The other girl that comes every year is already here, so the last five beds that are left are up for y’all. Like I said before, you’ve got twenty minutes, and then it’s dinner time, so come to the lodge, which is the big building that you passed earlier.”

I gripped the handles of both of my suitcases, adjusted the straps of my carry-on, and was the last to follow my coworkers toward the bunkhouse. As I heaved my luggage up the three steps that led to the front door, my eyes caught Jake’s.

He was squinting at me, studying me. “Is something wrong?” I asked hesitantly.

He slowly shook his head as his eyes scanned my outfit once more. “You just look oddly familiar,” Jake muttered, and my heart stopped.

Despite dying my hair and always covering my freckles, maybe I still looked like her. Maybe I still looked like the young girl who’d taken fifth at the NFR in barrels at nineteen and then was subsequently beaten because it wasn’t first. Maybe he recognized that redhead that I constantly tried to hide.

Quickly regaining my composure, I timidly smiled. “I probably just have one of those faces.”

“What’s your name?” he asked, nodding in agreement, more so to reassure himself.

“Brexlynn.”

He tipped his hat. “Nice to meet you. Now might be a good time to change your—”

“I was planning on it,” I cut him off accidentally, and he smiled politely. “This place is absolutely stunning, who owns it?” I continued, trying to make up for my slightly rude interruption.

“It’s been in the Pierce family for generations, but the current owner, Tate, turned it into what you see.” He spun in a circle, his hand wide and proud. “Best place to live and be.”

I nodded in awe. He wasn’t wrong, this was a life. “How’d you come to be here?”

“I grew up here. My father was a hand for a while before he skipped

town and left me behind when I was a kid.” He chuckled as my eyes widened. “Eh, it was the best thing ever. Wouldn’t want to be anywhere else, plus they raised me like family.”

My shock turned to a smile. He seemed kind, gentle, yet had a humor about him that hadn’t quite peeked through yet. “You seem very happy. Where do you live?”

He pointed up toward the lodge, and I saw a building off to the far side of it. “Tate gave me that house.” It looked like a miniature version of the lodge, only one story, quaint but beautiful. Jake had really been treated like family to be given one of the four houses beside the lodge.

Before I had a chance to ask who lived in the other three, Jake spoke again. “I don’t want to waste anymore of your time. We’ve got a quick rundown tonight after we eat to help you get your bearings, so hurry and unpack and I’ll see you for dinner.” He tipped the brim of his hat once more and then turned around and walked away.

My first solo interaction with a cowboy since Matthew and it hadn’t been as scary as I thought it would be. So I turned and opened the door to the square, white bunkhouse.

## Chapter 3

Upon entering, my roommates were already hanging clothes on a large, open stretch of railing to my right. Three small steps on the far side of the rectangular room led up to a makeshift closet, planted next to two dressers. This allowed for everyone to have a column of three drawers.

Directly in front of me was the first set of bunks, occupied by Aubrey and Melody. To my left was a mat, with a pair of nearly untouched boots for each of the girls already resting upon it right next to a second bunk bed. The final set of bunks were against the far wall, near a hallway that I assumed led into the bathroom. The girl that was already here had taken the top bunk to my left, and Gemma quickly climbed onto the bottom, leaving the back bunk for Eva and me.

She hurried up to the top and claimed it rapidly as my eyes connected with her. I smiled and casually walked toward the bottom bunk, dragging my suitcases behind me. The bottom of the mattress was raised enough from the ground that I was able to slide both of them beneath the bed while Eva tucked hers between the wall and the foot of the bunk.

I said nothing as I sat down on the edge of the bed and sighed. That small flame of hope Katie had continually tried to ignite in me was flickering once more. My coworkers continued bustling about, hanging up more clothes and unpacking as I slid out my suitcases. Unzipping the first one, I pulled out a pair of high-waisted wranglers. The last time I'd worn these was also the last time I'd ridden my horse, before Matthew sold her without my permission for coming in fifth at the NFR.

Time to suck it up and get going, I told myself and stood up. Snagging some socks, a grungier long-sleeved T-shirt, and a vest, I ducked around the hallway toward the bathroom, following the curve of the light sea-green walls. Around the corner was a row of three individual sinks, mirrors hanging above each unit. Between the washing bins were rows of drawers, many of which already held makeup and hair products from the girls I was

now living with.

Slipping past the cupboards on the opposite side of the sinks, I reached a door. Turning the dingy, golden knob I entered the small room and chuckled. One small shower across from the foot of a single, porcelain toilet. That was it. One for six girls. I knew that the moment my coworkers saw this, there were going to be some complaints. Quickly shutting the door, I flipped the light on and changed into my more western outfit.

It felt strange being dressed back in such clothing, but I didn't spend much time inside the bathroom before relieving myself and exiting to wash my hands. I returned to my suitcase and strung a belt through my pant loops as all four other girls paused in what they were doing.

"Wow." Aubrey whistled. "Look at you." I quickly buckled my belt and hid the shiny, massive object with my shirt before spinning around so they at least didn't see that.

"Huh?" I questioned, realizing all eyes were on me.

"It's just, we've never seen you in something like that," she continued, and all heads nodded.

I glanced down at my outfit, zipping the black vest over the white turtleneck shirt. "There's never been a need for an outfit like this in New York."

Gemma gestured up and down at my newly acquired outfit. "But you look like you've stepped out of a western magazine. Like you've done this before and we don't actually need to be here."

My body froze, worried I'd just been caught. But there had to be some way out of this, some way that would keep them from knowing. At least for now. "I googled stuff," I quickly said, and they all nodded, accepting my lie.

"Why do you think the company wanted us to come out and do this since google exists in the first place?" Gemma continued, returning to her bed as we all finished getting ready to head out.

Eva snorted. "The company motto: all about that hands-on experience. Besides, none of us have ever actually been out at a ranch and ridden horses all day long. Or worked with cows before. Maybe there are things that even google can't tell us that will help us better design clothing and such for those in this world."

Mumbled agreements left our mouths, mine a little quieter than my exuberance behind the statement. I couldn't blow my cover, not on the first day. I didn't want questions, wasn't ready for them, and definitely wouldn't

be able to provide answers that would satisfy anyone.

We left as a group and sauntered up toward the lodge, low chatter filling my ears along with the stiff breeze. I slung a thick, winter Carhartt coat over my arm in preparation for whatever job Jake was going to give us after dinner and turned my eyes toward the fields.

It was as breathtaking now as it had been when I first saw it, and I doubted it would ever not be so stunning.

My feet paused, mindlessly sucking me into more memories that felt so painful. Just off to the right, movement caught my eye, tearing my thoughts back to the present. My coworkers all stopped walking a few steps after me as a cowboy in a black hat, sitting atop a palomino, loped down the side of the field, just outside of the fence line where some horses were picking through the snowy pasture-covered grass.

The sun dipped low, and with each beat of his hooves pounding over the ground, steam curled from the creature's nostrils, visible from even here. A sight as if from the movies as the orange glow spread across the scene and the cowboy pulled his horse back into a trot. Smooth transition, no fighting from the horse and barely any movement from the rider.

Several sighs of admiration reached my ears from my coworkers, and I smiled along with them. That I wanted to see again.

Finally turning back around, we finished the walk to the lodge and threw open the front door. A desk sat to the right upon entrance, and a fireplace blazed a warm golden hue to my left, surrounded by two brown leather couches. Even the interior was that deep chestnut wooden theme. A red rug spread beneath the two couches adding a warm homey feel. We silently headed toward the hallway in front of us, passing between portraits and paintings of cattle, horses, cowboys, and cowgirls.

For a brief second, I thought that if I died here, if everything went up in flames because of my past, I would have no regrets.

We filed around to the left and it opened up into what looked like a dining area with a staircase leading up to the right. There were two long picnic-like tables, hand crafted from massive tree trunks with matching benches on each side.

Along the far wall was an open doorway with another log table stretching across the rest of the open space. It wasn't completely filled with food, but I knew when summer went into full swing, it would be covered in a variety of dishes. Jake was chatting with two other men and a woman, all of



them with cowboy hats pulled over their heads.

The girl had a long braid of a luscious sandy blonde color stretching down her back. She faced away from us, but she looked quite athletic and beautiful in her well-fitting jeans with her shirt tucked in to show off a sparkling, adorned belt.

Both boys looked similar to each other with jet black hair that poked out in strange angles underneath their hats. One had a gray hat on, the other had a black one, and I paused, wondering if the cowboy with the black hat was the same one I'd seen riding down the hillside. But the crown was different from the short brick style on the hat the mysterious rider wore, so it wasn't him. Both of these boys had on plaid shirts and jeans, green and blue in color. Even their eyes were similar, both down-turned and smaller in size, but a beautiful piercing light green in color. The one with the gray hat had some facial hair, while the one with the black hat was clean shaven.

Jake glanced up from his conversation and smiled at us. "Perfect! We can eat and then we are going to show you around before morning comes and y'all will be fixing fences." The three strangers turned around and eyed us, making me feel a little uncomfortable, and I slid my thumb across that scar once more.

Jake's brown eyes lingered on me, scrutinizing my outfit change, and his gaze paused at my boots. While my coworkers hadn't noticed yet since I'd slipped them on at the last minute, he did. He saw that they were worn from use, broken in. A flash of confusion sparked through his face before he looked away without mentioning his observation.

Dinner was quick, just sandwiches, but non-airport food was mouthwatering by this point. The two brothers were named Chance and Cole, the one with the gray hat and facial hair was Chance and he explained that the two of them had worked here every summer for the past six years. The girl was named Oakley and had been working here for five years. Her face was as beautiful as I'd thought. Flawless, heart-shaped, and wild with bold blue eyes.

Once we finished dinner, we followed Jake around as he explained where stuff was, what the ranch life was like, and what to expect. In about three weeks or so, we would have more ranch hands arrive and start the vaccination, branding, and castration of the calves, as well as the sorting to push them into specific pastures and herds.

The dude ranch portion would open up at that point as well, and we

had better be at least confident enough in our riding to take guests out on trail rides. Which, Jake explained, he would show us the trails gradually over the next few weeks.

Tomorrow would start out with us driving a fence in Razors to check for places to fix. Then, it would be lunch and our first horseback riding lessons. By the evening, we would be shown how much hay to throw to the animals and then our jobs in the morning and evening would be split between checking fences and throwing hay.

For now.

I couldn't help but smile at the familiarity of it all. Riding, cattle check, fence check, feeding, the whole nine yards were about to begin, and I felt more ready than nervous now.

By the time our tour was over, everyone was exhausted, including me, and we stumbled back into our bunkhouses. This was confirmation that I had grown a little soft and out of shape over the past two years, but nothing a few days of hard steady work couldn't fix.

Before anyone else could beat me to it, I scrambled to the shower and was in and out within four or so minutes. That was something I'd learned to do back being married to Matthew and hoping to avoid a beating of taking too much of the hot water from him.

None of the others seemed to even notice that I was in bed, washed, and in a pair of shorty shorts and T-shirt with brushed teeth before someone else was even ready to shower. My head hit the pillow and I was out before even Oakley returned for the evening.



Blinking my eyes open, I groaned and rolled over on the hard mattress, nearly falling out of the bunk and onto the floor. I caught myself and paused. Soft snores reached my ears, only broken by Oakley sneaking down from her bunk. She and I were the only ones awake.

She silently crept across the white tile floor and up the steps to grab some clothes for the day. I tracked her with my eyes for a moment before finally sitting up. Her hair was free from the braid, and I couldn't help but

become even more envious of her as she looked just as beautiful in the morning as she had last night.

Her eyes locked onto mine for a moment and she paused, before finally grimacing and nodding toward the other bunks. I chuckled softly to myself and stood from the mattress. She was right, if they didn't wake soon, they'd be late. As she changed into her clothes in the bathroom, I gathered the same light-blue jeans from last night and quickly pulled on some warmer leggings beneath them before buckling them tight around my waist.

Layering my top again, I donned the same outfit, vest and all, except added a ball cap instead of cowboy hat like Oakley did. Her pale cream-colored felt one with the tall cattleman top made her look even more slender and fit than before. But my hat would remain tucked away. I wasn't ready to pull all the stops out yet.

Just as we both exited into the cold wind, the girls behind me began to stir, and suddenly shouts reached our ears as they scrambled from bed. But neither Oakley nor I stuck around to see the chaos.

The door shut tightly behind her, and we walked in silence. A soft, rose glow brushed across the sparkling fields covered in a crisp frost from the early morning. Low mooing reached my ears, and a couple horses whinnied, their beautiful calls dancing through the air.

And just as we went to turn toward the lodge, there came that same cowboy loping out from the trees. Except today he was headed away from us toward one of the trails. His palomino snorted once more with its ears forward, enjoying the stretch and open run.

I stared, absolutely entranced by the magical scene. "Does that ever get old?" I muttered, and Oakley shook her head beside me.

"Once you have a few lessons, maybe you'll be the one riding out at six in the morning," she said, and I glanced her way. A soft smile caressed her lips and we finished our walk toward the lodge.

Fresh smells of bacon and eggs crashed against my nostrils as we rounded the corner into the dining room. Jake and the boys were already there, munching away and barely glanced from their food before shoveling another bite into their mouths. I piled a few things on my plate, grabbed a cup of coffee after Oakley, and joined them at the table.

Chance was the first one to look at me, studying me for a moment before speaking. "So, how does it feel for a city slicker to be up this early in the morning?"

I couldn't help but smile.

"Now, there's the sarcasm that I've been waiting for. Everyone's been way too nice to us New York City folks for me to believe we'd really crashed your little western bubble," I snarkily replied.

Jake snorted, his coffee flying back into his mug before he wiped some of the liquid from his face. Chance raised an eyebrow, adjusted his black hat, and then a goofy grin spread wide across his lips. "At least this New Yorker knows her place."

Loud giggling and chatting pulled our attention toward the hallway, and in shuffled the other four girls with Anthony. They paused for a moment before quickly grabbing some food and joining us.

Chance, Cole, and Oakley stood from the table and nodded before heading out to do whatever chores they typically attended to, while I tossed my paper plate into the trash. Jake leaned back and rubbed his belly, waiting for everyone else to finish.

My eyes wandered across each of my teammates. They looked exactly like I had pictured, not that it was wrong, but it explained why the hands-on work was necessary. None of them had more than a single layer of clothing on, a couple had those cheap straw hats, and poor Aubrey hadn't even brought a coat with her.

When they were finally done, Jake led the way out of the lodge and over toward the employee parked vehicles. "We are going to take two side-by-sides, so decide who's going in which ones." He gestured toward two Razors that each sat four people. I waited, wondering how to keep myself in the background of all of this.

Anthony jumped into the driver's seat of one of them and Gemma quickly joined him. Aubrey, Melody, and Eva fought for a minute about who would get to sit beside Jake before Aubrey and Melody climbed into the backseat of Anthony's Razor, defeated. Which left me to join Jake and Eva in his, alone.

I swung myself into the backseat and glanced at the contents. In the bed behind me was all the fencing equipment you might need. A post digger, some wires, rolls of fencing, pliers, everything. This was more like it. Jake explained what to look for in the fence if it needed to be fixed, turned the engine over, and then we were off.

He cruised down the road and headed over toward the cattle side of the pastures. Once we reached the beginning of our intended route, he slowed

the little vehicle to a crawl and tooled along. My eyes began to burn as I stared at the fence, wishing I was doing this by horse instead of in a vehicle if we were going to go at such a tedious pace.

A couple miles up and in, the cattle were no longer in sight, and we were tucked back in the woods when I spotted it.

Near the bottom of the fence, it looked like a critter had pushed its way under the wiring and ripped the bottom hold off. My instincts kicked in and I jumped down gracefully from the side-by-side while it still chugged along, snagged some pliers and a small wire. Jogging toward the hole in the fence, I began patching it up, thinking nothing of what was going on until I heard a scream.

“Jake! Jake!” Eva cried out, and he slammed on the brakes. Anthony screeched his Razor to a halt, coming to a sudden stop in front of ours, just as I finished patching the fence and turned around to hop back on in. All eyes were glued on me, my coworkers in sheer panic while Jake stared at me in curiosity.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“You just jumped out of the Razor like it was nothing! How is that even something that you thought was smart to do?” Gemma scolded.

“There was a hole in the fence,” I countered, gesturing to what I just fixed.

Jake tilted his head. “How’d you know how to fix it?” he asked.

There it was. His curiosity was warranted, because I did something I shouldn’t have known how to do. Stupid brain. This was going to be harder than I thought.

“Oh. Um, I googled it,” I quickly said again, to which he didn’t seem as convinced as I hoped he would be, but there was nothing we could do.

I climbed back in as quickly and quietly as I could, refusing to make eye contact with Jake as we continued along. For the rest of the fence line we drove, I didn’t say or do anything. He stopped us at the next hole and taught the others how to patch things up, then rolled forward again. Eventually, we slowly turned around and headed back down the hillside.

“As we move into the summer, we will eventually herd the cattle higher up to summer pasture and will have to check new fencing. But until then, when you’re assigned fence duty, this is where you will ride.” Jake smiled as we emerged from the tree line and back into the open valley, away from the colder and snowier high country we had been creeping toward. But

someone had ridden up there recently—I'd noticed the hoof prints in the snow and wondered if it was that mysterious cowboy on his golden palomino.

What shouldn't have taken more than an hour or two to check and fix lasted until lunch time due to how slow we'd gone, and my stomach grumbled in a reminder that it was time for some food. Jake guided us back to the parking lot, cut the engine to the Razor and then led us toward the lodge.

I hustled up to his side, curious about something. "How come you're not more annoyed by all of this?" I subtly nodded between my coworkers and myself.

He glanced at me, lifted his hat and scratched his head before replacing it and answering. "Maybe the more exposure my lifestyle gets, the more people will come to understand we aren't just some idiot hicks that don't know what we are doing. Take the owner for example. He is one of the wealthiest men you'll ever meet, and he was raised on this ranch. He's extremely intelligent, invested well, a partner in several outside businesses, and then turned this place around in a couple years once he took over, all because of his reputation he created with others." Jake stopped walking, tipped his head, and studied me.

"I get it," I whispered, pausing in front of him. I really did, but I knew Jake didn't quite believe me—or maybe he did. His brown eyes slid across me as I smiled softly at him. Being this close to him was a little scary, and images of Matthew kept flashing through my mind, but all I had to do was count to three—a trick I'd learned over the past two years—and Matthew was gone. His blonde hair was gone, his thin lipped, square face was gone. His deceivingly charming smile was gone. Those baby blue, hollow eyes were gone.

Jake took a deep breath and resumed walking, I followed along, intrigued by him, and he pushed the door open. "Do you though? In your world in New York City you come across wealthy businessmen all the time, but how many could you trust to invest with simply based on who they are? That's this world, that's this life, but people outside of it never see that part of it."

"There's bad people in every industry and good people in every industry," I responded, and he sighed.

"You are not wrong, but how often do you find something like that in your world?"

“I guess everyone’s experience is a little different,” I countered. My experience in his world hadn’t been quite as honest and kind as he felt it was. He closed his mouth not responding, but I could see that same curiosity from earlier fill his face as we entered the dining room.

## Chapter 4

Oh, how the sweet smell of sweaty horses and sandy footing inside of a massive indoor arena filled my soul. Jake stood in the middle of the arena with a chestnut gelding saddled beside him. I was sitting on the railing beside my coworkers, the cold metal biting through my jeans, but I remained still, fighting the flashbacks that were crashing through me.

Some were good. Some were sweet memories of running a barrel pattern and winning my first buckle. Some were memories of starting my barrel horse, Becky, on cows to transition her into cutting and more all-around ranch work. But most of the memories that flashed through my head were ones of me bleeding from some new cut Matthew caused.

Or my bones aching from the bruises that occurred after he jerked me down from the saddle one too many times and I crashed onto the ground. I'd fallen from a horse learning to ride frequently, but being pulled down by someone else, being kicked by them once on the ground, was something different.

One time, my sweet buckskin mare Becky had kicked Matthew when he'd pulled me down. Which pissed him off, and when we arrived home, I was "dealt with" as he put it. As Jake now stood, explaining to us the basics of riding, I couldn't help but hear that gravelly tone of my ex's voice.

Despite the fact that the walls in this arena were bright, I felt anything but calm. The mirrors lining the edges so you could see yourself as you rode only drove home the fear that was reflecting in my face. Even with the calming whir of the hotwalker spinning to the far right of the indoor facility, my heart raced. I wanted to disappear beneath the silver bleachers that rose behind me.

If I was alone, maybe this would feel different. But standing in the middle of the arena was a man.

"Alright," Jake said, his voice cutting through my thoughts. "Chance, Cole, and Oakley are out grabbing some horses for you to start riding today.



Over the next couple weeks, you'll learn how to properly brush and tack up a horse, all the way up to where you should be able to ride independently at the walk, trot, and lope. We don't have time for you to learn everything, so there will be certain horses that will be off limits for your safety. Like those four in there." He pointed at the horses in the walker. "That doesn't make you bad riders, just that you don't have the experience to handle them appropriately." He returned his attention to us. "Listen to my instructions, follow the rules, and you'll be just fine."

The garage to the right clanked, drawing our attention away from Jake, and slowly began rising. The gears grinded open to reveal the three other ranch hands standing in the frame. They each held two lead ropes, guiding in six horses for us to ride. My jaw fell to the ground as they opened the gate to the arena and stepped inside.

There was no way.

"Boss, the rest are still turned out on winter pasture and too far away to catch," Cole said as they approached, and Jake groaned.

"Shit, I totally forgot," he muttered.

"We figured since at least all of these guys are nice on the ground, they can practice saddling up. Though you know one person won't be able to ride and will have to take turns with someone else," Cole continued as they halted in front of Jake.

"Why won't one of us get to ride today?" Melody sang out loud, and Jake turned to face us as the horses were led to the rail on my right and tied onto the metal bar. The hands removed the saddles that had been lightly cinched upon the horses backs and slung them over the rack in preparation for us. Like Jake had said, we were learning from the very beginning.

Jake sighed. "One of these horses is unrideable. No one, not even the boss himself who trains colts and wins money off of them regularly, has been able to ride her since she was bought five years ago."

Her.

Was this really happening? I wasn't just making this up, was I?

I glanced at the horses, my eyes skimming across all six of them and then back to the middle. Including Jake's horse that still stood next to him, there was only one mare. Only one female horse.

"She even earned a nickname because the moment anyone tries to swing a leg over her back ,she goes off a-bucking," Jake continued, and the three other ranch hands chuckled.

“Too bad Morigan never got a chance to ride her. Maybe it would’ve been different,” Colt said.

“Which one can’t be ridden?” Aubrey shouted, and I pointed to the buckskin who looked way too familiar. So familiar like one I’d seen before. One I once loved.

One I once owned.

“The only mare, the buckskin,” I said and all eyes flashed to me, once more confused and curious.

“How the hell did you know that?” Jake asked, stepping a little closer to me, and his horse followed.

“Google,” I said at the exact same time he did. I bit my bottom lip as he shook his head, not believing me, and turned to the rest of the group knowing I wasn’t going to say anything else. He began to explain the procedure of saddling, but my heart raced, locked onto a beast that I never thought I’d see again. I still wasn’t even sure if my mind was playing tricks with me or not.

Three seconds. Shutting my eyes, I kept them closed tight and counted to three.

One.

Two.

Three.

Glancing hesitantly back to the horses, I took a deep breath. She was still there.

“Is there someone who would be willing to volunteer to not ride today? You’ll get to tomorrow, we will rotate—” Jake began, but I didn’t let him finish as I shot my hand into the air. I didn’t need lessons, I knew how to ride, and I wanted to be with her anyway.

My eyes couldn’t leave that horse.

My horse.

My Becky.

The others were beautiful horses, obviously, and well taken care of, but there she was. Dunitgood Beckinwest patiently swishing her tail. My dad helped me pick her registered name based off of her sire and dam. I simply called her Becky.

It was as if my feet pulled me from the fence and I dropped down onto the arena dirt floor. Luckily, Jake called for all of us to enter the arena at the same time and head toward our assigned horses, hiding my involuntary

movement.

I forced myself to slow down, getting lost near the back of the group to try and hide myself from the center of attention.

Suddenly, Becky reared.

Her hooves slammed into the dirt as she neighed loudly. Her ears snapped back, pinning against her head, and she snorted before rearing again and kicking out. Bucking and spinning, her back hooves slammed against the side of the arena. Dust filled the air, blurring the light that streamed hazy around the arena. I inhaled sharply.

My coworkers shrieked, dashing backwards out of her way as quickly as they could.

I wanted to rush in there, but I had to pretend like I didn't know anything.

She continued to thrash about, screeching loudly and slamming her hooves into the ground. Kicking and rearing, she tossed her head, ripping against her halter.

Gemma latched onto Anthony, and my thumb found my finger, rubbing the scar as she continued to fight against her restraints, Cole jumped in as quickly as he could and pulled the quick release knot to let her go.

She reared one more time, threw her head, and then bolted. The girls screamed as Becky darted away like a rabid animal. I watched her go, fighting back tears of unidentifiable emotions. In the fury and fear, I found beauty watching her well-maintained muscling contract and expand. Despite her being unsafe to ride, someone had spent the time taking good care of her.

She thundered around the edge of the arena, snorting. Spinning in a circle she suddenly bucked once and then paused. Her ribcage flared rapidly, sweat coating her beautiful golden hue.

Everyone turned toward her, putting me at the front of the group, and my eyes locked directly onto Becky's.

She pawed at the ground as Jake took a singular step in her direction. And she shot off again. Swinging her hips around, she faced me and bolted—locked squarely onto me. Jake lunged out of the way right before she ran him over, because she wasn't stopping.

Yet, I stood still. I was not afraid.

“Becky,” I said, not as a whisper, but as a call to her. A call to the girl I'd lost so many years ago. A beckoning to the horse that had attempted to protect me from my abuser. She sunk her hind legs into the dirt and slid to a

stop just in front of me.

Warm breath washed over me, breezing across my hair, and I grabbed the lead rope that dangled as her chest expanded and collapsed.

My hand was trembling, my body shaking, mirroring hers as she stood still in front of me. I hoped that others saw my shaking as fear, but for me, it was disbelief. I heard muffled voices; I heard a door open and close. I heard the clanking of spurs, then silence.

But I didn't look away from Becky, her nostrils flaring as she stepped forward and placed her muzzle into my outstretched hand.

It was her.

It was her.

I scratched my fingers across her face, running them gently over her eyes as she dropped her head lower, finally relaxing. I tickled her mouth and her lip flapped back and forth. Disbelief coursed through me as I bit back tears. I never thought I'd see this girl again. I never thought that we would be reunited.

And I stepped under her neck. Wrapping my arms around her, I buried my face into her soft mane. The smell was home, comforting, so familiar, and a tear slid out against her.

I'd been searching for safety, for peace for so long that I couldn't believe she was it. How was this even possible after all this time? Five years and somehow, here we were.

She stomped a couple times, and I pulled away, quickly wiping the moisture from my face and grinned.

"Hi girl," I whispered and tickled her mouth again. She lapped at my fingers like always and then I tossed the rope over her neck, and she danced in a circle around me.

Jake jogged to me, breaking the spell, and Becky suddenly took off once more.

I reached for her. "No," I whispered. She couldn't leave me again. She couldn't leave too.

"I don't know what just happened, but it looks like Becky is being a bit wild today which isn't safe for beginners," he said, stopping beside me.

I quickly stepped away from him and turned to face her. She halted and studied me for a moment. Snorting in defiance, she finally trotted my way.

I grabbed the lead rope again and ran my hand through her mane,

giggling to myself. She's always been sassy, and I loved that about her. Though, maybe she was even traumatized from men because of Matthew. The giggle wisped away, and my shoulders sagged. Maybe she needed me as much as I apparently needed her.

"I can take her and brush her somewhere else, return her tack, and turn her back out into the pasture if you'd like," I offered to Jake.

He furrowed his brows and glanced over my shoulder. I turned to follow his gaze to see the back of that same cowboy who'd ridden down the mountainside walking away. His steel figure slipped into the shadows, foreboding and haunting with broad shoulders that filled the doorway he passed through.

"I'll show you the way," Jake said, drawing my attention back to him, and turned around. "If you guys will start the lesson for these five, I'll be back." He addressed the three other ranch hands and then headed toward the gate to exit the arena.

I led Becky over to the rail, slung her lead rope around twice, threw the saddle pad and saddle back onto her, and loosely did up the cinch before following Jake out of the arena.

We silently passed through the garage that was opening and wandered to the red barn next door. It was about half the size of the arena but just as spectacular in quality. He slid open the massive barn doors, and I led Becky into the building that was filled to the brim with tack.

My mouth dropped open as we passed rows of saddles neatly labeled with specific horses' names upon the walls. Some horses had more than one saddle, roping saddles, barrel saddles, cutting and reining saddles, some saddles even looked to be untouched in a while. Then, the saddles gave way to bridles, headstalls, hackamores, and bits. One caught my eye and I stopped, nearly jumping out of my skin in excitement.

"This can't be!" I exclaimed, and hanging the lead rope over my shoulder casually, I rocked forward on my toes to pull down the most intricately designed bit I'd ever seen. The metal was cool in my hands, clean and smooth.

"Weren't there only four of these ever made in the world? And each one had a different unique pattern hand designed on it by Beau Marks himself?" I wasn't sure who I was asking, but I couldn't help voicing my disbelief out loud.

"How'd you know that?" Jake asked, and I jumped at the sound of his

voice.

I wasn't alone. Lifting my gaze hesitantly to him, I ran a nervous thumb over my scar.

He narrowed his gaze and tilted his head. "And don't say 'Google', 'cause that's a really specific fact that you just happen to know."

I stiffly swallowed, giving myself another second of time to come up with something and shrugged my shoulders. "I like doing research. Which I'm good at," I replied, my voice cracking a little. Please let him believe that.

He crossed his arms. "Right," he scoffed, not believing me, and glanced between me and Becky. Jake remained still, burrowing his amber gaze into me, studying every little detail about me.

I dug the toe of my boot into the floor and twisted, avoiding his gaze. A chill ran down my spine as worry filled my system. If he figured out who I was and told someone, I might not be as safe as I hoped I was.

He sighed, breaking the spell, and then continued walking. I quickly rehung the bit and kept my eyes from looking at anything else, hoping to prevent any more mistakes.

"Everything is labeled. So Becky has her own row of saddles, bridles, and grooming equipment." He pointed to his left, and I glanced in that direction. Shelves of brushes and hoof picks lined the wall. "Cross ties are over here." He pointed to the right and then looked at me once more but didn't speak. I stared back, waiting for more accusations that were becoming harder and harder to deny and it had only been one day.

His bright amber eyes bore into mine, searching for something I don't think he found.

Then he was gone.

I hooked Becky's halter to the cross ties, stuck some AirPods into my ears, turned some music on, and began working.

By the time I was done, by the time my head was empty of the stressful thoughts and worries that hung heavily upon my shoulders, the sun had disappeared, leaving the sky painted black. Luck had been on my side today, giving me an easy out from riding. But tomorrow was a different story. I wondered how easy it would be to convince Jake that I wasn't feeling well, or that Becky had accidentally trampled over me and I couldn't ride.

Unhooking my buckskin from the cross ties, I ran my hand over her whiskers. "I missed you," I whispered into her mane, and she nickered at me before we walked out of the most amazing barn I'd ever been in. The smell of

worn leather and horsehair was warm on my heart no matter how terrifying the memories were that came with it.

My feet shuffled softly across the grass leading toward the pasture. A few whinnies danced in my ears as her friends came to the gate to meet Becky. She waited a moment as I undid her halter, watching for my signal of release, and then she ran.

It was such a beautiful sight, and I was relieved to know that she had been well taken care of all these years.

Sighing, I stared out at the open wonder before me. Maybe I had waited too long to return to this life. Matthew was still in prison, and this fresh open air, these horses, the smell of hay was calming. It was almost like the pieces that had been missing in my soul were slowly being taped together.

I felt a sense of relief that hadn't been a part of my life in years.

Humming along with the music that still played in my ears, I leaned against the fence and watched the horses prance beneath the starry sky for a moment before dipping their heads and grazing. Steamy breath escaped my lips as I removed my headphones and the roar of an engine met my ears. An old farm truck bounced through the field tossing hay off the back.

I could survive this. Maybe even enjoy it a little.

Glancing at the time on my phone, I yelped. It was late and I had missed dinner. But I was hungry so I raced to the lodge. The dining room was empty by the time I entered, so I crept into the kitchen and raided the fridge, hoping no one minded. Helping myself to some potatoes and chicken that had been stored away, I microwaved the food, shoveled it into my mouth and quickly fled the scene.

Exhaustion hit me like a brick as I walked silently and alone toward the bunkhouse. Just as the moon peeked over the ridge and illuminated the valley in front of me, I heard a whiny. There she was, standing at the gate.

Becky was waiting for me like she had once always done. "Tomorrow I will ride you," I whispered to her. There was no way she heard me, but it didn't matter, as she tossed her head and then trotted away. Trotted past a lone figure riding into the tree line to my right, just beyond the horse pastures.

I paused and stared until he disappeared beneath the trees. That same cowboy that seemed to always be there, but never actually around. Riding effortlessly on a beautiful palomino.

Wandering back to the bunkhouse, I sent a text to Katie, letting her

know that I was alright but I needed to call her soon to tell her a crazy story.  
A story about how in one day, my life had already turned upside down.



## Chapter 5

Morning arrived faster than I liked, but the sun was up and so was Oakley. Just as she and I were pulling on our boots, the rest of the girls stirred, a little earlier this time. Excited chatter filled the air, and I smiled. Even though I wasn't one to talk much with them, their energy was admittedly infectious.

"Another day to ride horses! And then did you hear? Jake said that since tomorrow is Saturday, we will be heading into town to a bar for some dinner and dancing! This is the best company research trip ever," Melody squealed, twirling on her feet.

I pulled the cap onto my head, pushed the braid behind my back, and buttoned up the denim jacket I donned over my sweatshirt this morning. "How'd the first lesson go?" I asked, quietly interjecting, which was a little unusual for me, and the four girls stopped moving.

It took a moment before anyone spoke. "It was amazing. If you'd like to use my horse today, I'd be alright just watching instead." Eva finally broke the crickets that chirped between us.

"No, it's totally fine. You keep at it. I volunteered. Besides, he said three weeks until we really need to know how to ride, so there's plenty of time for me still," I countered and quickly followed Oakley out of the bunkhouse into the cold outdoors, leaving her no room to protest as she tugged her pants on.

Frost bit across what little grass was poking through the snow this morning and nipped at my exposed skin. "How'd you know that horse's name yesterday?" Oakley asked, as we stepped along the gravel toward breakfast.

"Someone said it. I think Jake did when he was explaining why she wasn't rideable or something like that," I quickly said, glancing toward the pastures to find Becky standing at the gate. Waiting.

"I'm pretty sure none of us mentioned the name Bucky Becky once," Oakley stated, but I stopped moving, stopped listening as my eyes caught a hint of movement.

There he was again. Riding majestically out of the trees, then turning to head down the pasture fence line. The same black hat, same gray Carhartt coat tucked around his shoulders, except he was on a different horse. This one was a smaller bay, not quite as stocky and didn't seem quite as sure footed.

Yet, the rider looked unphased.

"Jake seems particularly interested in you," Oakley said, snapping my attention back to her. I blinked rapidly and then started walking again.

"He seems really nice. Doesn't judge any of us simply because our life is in a city and not out here," I replied as we ascended the steps into the lodge.

"That's not why he's interested." She threw an arm across the door frame, blocking my entry. "I don't know what's going on, but something about you seems fishy. You've been here for two days and things already don't add up."

I stopped and glared at her, my walls shooting up. "Don't ask questions you aren't prepared to hear answers for. Answers that you may not like," I snarled, and she blinked a couple times before clicking her tongue and strutting quickly away from me. Two days and I somehow made an enemy. Not on purpose. I knew the lying would get in the way of certain things, maybe cause some small issues, but I didn't think it would happen this fast or like this.

Jake needed to give me daily chores and give them to me quickly so I could quietly disappear, or I would most certainly be exposed.

Entering the dining room, Oakley sat down a little aggressively at the table, drawing eyes away from their food. Jake's gaze slid across the room and then tracked me as I filled my plate and joined the small group—although I sat on the opposite side, as far away from Oakley as I could.

"Am I checking fences or feeding this morning?" I asked Jake, and he glanced toward me.

"Fences. Then this afternoon you can ride instead of one of the others."

"No, I'll just watch since I wasn't able to yesterday. It'll help catch me up," I responded and took another bite of food as Oakley stared me down. Jake continued to study me quietly, and I could see the wheels spinning in his head, wondering.

Lying wasn't my strongest suit, wasn't something I had ever been

good at, and maybe that's what had made me such an easy target for Matthew. But I prayed with every fiber of my being that no one discovered my past until I was at least ready.

If I was ever ready.

Eva and Melody joined me checking fences, making small talk as we checked a new section of fencing that Jake had decided to assign us at the last minute. I couldn't help but find a little bit of happiness in their joy. Even if I was constantly glancing over my shoulder thinking Matthew was there. Worrying that his fist was about to connect with my jaw because I was doing something wrong in his mind.

We were late for lunch and dashed from the dining room with sandwiches in our hands, heading toward the arena for riding lessons. And I froze. There he was again—loping down through the cattle pasture. Eva and Melody didn't notice that I wasn't with them and kept jogging as I stared at the cowboy in the black hat and gray Carhartt coat. He rode like he spent more time on a horse than on the ground. Always far enough away that I would've considered him a ghost if I hadn't caught a small glimpse of him in the arena yesterday. Just disappearing within shadows.

"Brexlynn!" a voice shouted, piercing the haze of the cowboy gliding across the field.

"Hello!" a different voice yelled, and I blinked, glancing to my left.

Eva and Melody both stood by the arena door, waving frantically at me. Snapping out of my stupor, I sprinted toward them and crashed inside.

The door creaked on its hinges, slamming shut behind us as we stomped a little bit of snow off of our boots. Eva and Melody both winced from the blisters forming on their feet, but didn't say a word as they shoved the last bite of their sandwiches into their mouths and dashed into the middle of the arena. I quietly made my way over to the left and sat down on an icy bleacher.

I watched as the girls rode, listening to Jake, and the other ranch hands being unusually patient with them despite the consistent errors of their ways. Their boss, Tate, better be paying them well, because I understood the exhausting effort it was to teach new people how to ride.

They were walking in a simple circle around Jake, and I couldn't help but bite back a smile. Gemma's hands constantly floated upwards and, because of the bit in the horse's mouth and her lack of leg contact, they kept stopping over and over. She bumped him forward, let her hands drift upwards

and the same thing would happen. Again and again.

However, she wasn't receiving a lot of attention at the moment since Aubrey and Anthony were confusing squeezing with bumping and their horses were wandering around the arena faster than they were ready for and in all sorts of uncontrollable directions. I slid off of the bleacher and bounded down the steps before swinging myself onto the railing near where Gemma had once again unintentionally halted.

"Lower your hands, and place your calves gently against the horse's side. Pretend like you have a dollar bill stuck between your leg and the horse's belly, and if you lose that bill, I get to keep it, but you also don't want to wrinkle it," I said, watching her. Gemma glanced up from between her horse's ears and stared at me.

"What?" she asked, desperation coating her voice. I repeated my directions a little louder than before, and she slowly lowered her hands but refused to press her legs into the sides of the horse. "He will take off if I do that," she squeaked in fear.

"If you bump him, yes. Bump for speed, squeeze for collection." I simplified a slightly more complicated process. She paused and stared at me and then aggressively shook her head. Swinging her leg over the back of the horse, she scrambled down.

Gemma grabbed the reins and led the horse over to me. "You do it," she commanded and then dumped the reins into my lap before climbing onto the railing. I stared at the thin strap of leather that rested across my legs. It had been years since I'd felt reins between my fingers, years since I'd applied any sort of pressure upon a horse's back.

But I had to do this, didn't I?

Slowly sliding off of the railing, my boots dropped into the sandy footing below as my heart leapt out of my chest. I crept hesitantly to the horse's left side, my skin roaring with anxiety and nerves. The gelding watched me but remained calm while my entire body was pumping with adrenaline. I could feel the small pin pricks beneath my skin as the anticipation pulsed through my veins.

A flash of Matthew's angry scowl crashed through my mind as I paused beside the saddle.

My left hand gripped both split reins and some mane as his mad hiss flooded my ears. Raising my left foot to step into the stirrup, I took a steadying breath.

And faltered.

“Only fifth?!” Matthew screeched at me, and I felt the sting across my cheek. Becky pranced beneath me. “I spent all this money for you to walk away from the NFR in fifth place? You good for nothing bitch.” His fist made contact with my rib cage, and I buckled forward.

I whimpered, clutching my side. “I’ll do better next year. I promise,” I cried out, barely louder than a whisper.

“There will be no next year!” he roared at me, and both of his hands tore me from the saddle. I crashed onto the hard dirt beside our trailer where we were alone, hidden away from anyone else who might accidentally see us. Becky neighed, startled, and jumped away from my body that he railed into with kick after kick. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to drown out the pain that rippled through my body.

“You better not make a sound, or we’ll have to finish this at home. And you know that’ll be worse,” he hissed in my ear and kicked me again. Hard. I felt something snap in my side, buckling beneath the force that ripped through me, and I stifled the scream of agony that begged to be released.

Remaining still, I braced for the impact of his foot again. But it never came. He jerked Becky away from me and kicked some dirt in my direction.

I gasped, my eyes snapping open, and I dropped my foot from the stirrup. This time it didn’t matter who saw me or what they thought, I needed out.

So I ran.

Sprinting as far and fast as I could out of that arena, I left it all behind. I didn’t care where I was going, or what I was doing, I just needed out.

I was angry at myself for still being afraid. There was so much anguish that coursed through me, so much cold terror despite knowing that Matthew was locked away. And it made me so furious.

My feet pounded across gravel and then dirt and then patchy snow and grass. Eventually, I slammed against a fence and buckled over, gripping the rail with my hands and panting hard. That had been suffocating, way too much. It didn’t matter that I grew up riding, there was no way I could ride in front of anyone ever again.

Ever.

Soft tickles of whiskers slipped across my knuckles, and I glanced up from the frosty ground. Becky nibbled at my fingers with her lips.

“Hi, girl,” I whispered, feeling an unexpected rush of peace. It pushed down the fear, temporarily hiding it away, and I stood up a little taller, trying to steady my breathing. She nickered at me, and I stretched my hand forward to caress her neck.

I couldn’t ride in front of others, but maybe I could ride Becky again. Alone.

Alone had to be the key to all of this.

I kissed her nose. “I’ll be back when it’s dark,” I said and then walked toward the bunkhouses.

The small nap I was able to take before the rest of the girls entered our shared home was refreshing, and I pretended to still be asleep. Gemma was gossiping with Aubrey about what I had done earlier, and I didn’t find any sort of frustration when she said I was scared of horses.

Because I was scared.

Not of horses, but I was terrified, and if that’s the little white lie that they needed to believe in order to keep me from having to ride in front of anyone else, then so be it. By the time all five of my shared bunkmates had showered and climbed into bed, it was pitch black outside. But that didn’t matter.

Tonight, I was riding Becky.

Slipping out from under my sheets as quietly as possible, my socks barely made a sound as I padded across the floor and grabbed my boots. Gently tugging open the door, the hinges groaned softly, but I managed to slip outside before anyone turned lights on or sat up in bed.

## Chapter 6

The sun no longer warmed the chilly air that swirled around me as I led Becky away from her pasture and into the barn. The moment I entered, I sped through the grooming, because I knew every second I lingered increased my chances of getting caught. If I could get outside quickly, and just ride along the outskirts of the fence, I was less likely to be seen. It would be a short, lonely ride. Perfect for my first time back.

The saddle settled onto her spine and something changed. Anticipation bubbled within Becky, and she shook her neck, releasing years of tension. It felt as if she somehow knew we would someday be reunited; somehow, she'd waited for me. Becky waited five of her fifteen years of life to be ridden again. It had been five years for me too, so this was going to be a refresher for both of us.

I led Becky along the back of the property, the other horses in her pasture trotting over to the fence line to watch. As I stopped and Becky turned her head to me, the adrenaline once again raced through my veins.

An owl hooted.

A wolf cried out.

A couple cows bellowed and even a horse whinnied. All doing exactly what they were designed to do, and the slight breeze carried the melody of a bird that braved the cold. Slowly, as the world continued to spin around me, as the stars shifted in the night sky, I approached Becky's left side.

She stood calm, just as Gemma's horse had been, and I was once again feeling ready to throw up. My heart drummed in my chest and then dropped to my stomach. My skin was prickling with each rapid pulse as I gripped the reins and Becky's mane in my left hand once more. I stared at the saddle horn next to where a small piece of leather tied a rope off to the side.

Such familiarity sat before me. Taking another steadying breath, I placed my left foot in the stirrup. It creaked and groaned from my weight.

It was now or never, if I didn't swing myself up on her back, I knew I would surely never get on a horse again. One more glance at my surroundings to make sure I was alone and I hopped twice on my right foot, closed my eyes, and let my muscle memory take over.

The landing wasn't as graceful as it used to be, but Becky didn't balk as I settled into the saddle. Slipping my right foot into the stirrup, it was as if my body had never forgotten, never left her back. My heels easily adjusted down, and the stirrup rested on the balls of my feet.

My calves brushed gently against her sides, and I moved my legs under me so I was sitting upright. Becky's ears picked up as she waited, and I bumped the reins, pressing my legs a little tighter around her body. Her back rose under the saddle, and I sighed in relief at the reassuring movement.

"Ready to go for a ride, girl?" I asked and tapped my heels against her sides, asking her to move forward. For the next hour or so, we walked and eventually trotted along the fence line. I giggled a few times as I was shoved out of position, but it took only a couple mistakes to get things back under me. A surge of confidence bolted through me, and I smiled.

And then I let her run.

We ran. I got up out of the saddle a little and shifted my torso forward. And just let her run. The wind whipped across my face, turning it absolutely numb quicker than two of her hoofbeats, but I didn't care. It had been so long since I'd felt this free, this alive. Matthew had taken this from me, taken Becky from me, taken everything I once called mine from me, but for these next few months, I would allow myself to have her back.

Have this back.

Have all of this back.

Eventually, me being out of shape caught up, and I brought her back down to a trot and then a walk before turning around to head home. I practiced a couple side passes and spins along our return route, although it took a minute for me to remember how to cue correctly without spurs.

As we snaked down, headed directly to the barn, my eyes latched onto something, and I pulled Becky to halt.

Not something. *Someone*.

My body froze, my lungs gasped for air as I stared at that same cowboy with a black hat, who was sitting still on his horse far across the property. It was too dark to make out his face, too dark to really see any details, but a shiver ran down my back and I knew.



He was watching me.  
Had been watching me this entire time.  
I thought I'd been alone.

My heart raced as my vision blurred. Becky began breathing hard feeling the anxiety rise in my figure, and I stumbled to the ground. When my boots touched the dirt, I tripped, landing hard upon the frozen soil, and by the time my eyes were able to return to where I'd seen the cowboy, he was gone. Not a trace of him left.

Shaking, I stood and stared at the vacant spot. Who was he? Was he going to tell Jake what he'd seen? Was he going to tell this Tate guy that I'd gone on a solo ride without permission? That I'd technically borrowed his horse without permission and could've seriously messed something up? Or what if he figured out who I was and told Jake? Or the boss?

Questions bounced through my head as I quickly untacked Becky, groomed her, and turned her back out into the pasture.

Riding alone at night went from feeling free to suddenly a little burdened. I prayed that whoever that strange cowboy was, he wouldn't tell Tate or Jake what he saw.

As the sounds of the night grew louder, and realization that I was utterly alone and exposed coursed through me, I shuffled to the bunkhouse—practically running while constantly glancing over my shoulder in hopes I wasn't being followed. I didn't see another soul on my entire trip back to the bunkhouse.

I was just overthinking things, turning into my paranoid self as usual due to everything that had happened with Matthew. Shaking it off, I removed my boots before slipping up the steps of the bunkhouse to turn in for the night.



This morning was the same as the last—driving down a new set of fences, hostility still coming from Oakley, and curiosity from Jake.

I saw him again too, this time as I was leaving breakfast instead of heading toward it. That same cowboy from last night that just kept appearing.

He was back on his palomino, trotting leisurely down the side of the mountain.

But I wasn't able to watch long as I was rushed away with everyone eager to finish chores early, because tonight, instead of a late dinner at the ranch like usual, everyone would be getting dressed up and heading into town for some decompressing at a bar. And the sooner we finished chores, the sooner lessons would start and end, which resulted in more time to get ready to go to town.

Eva linked her arm with mine, startling me a little, as I walked with my entire team toward the arena for some riding practice. "I bet we will meet some really handsome cowboys tonight," she said, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Are the three here not up to your standards, Eva?" Aubrey bantered back. Everyone giggled as Gemma gave loving eyes to Anthony, although the two of them remained quiet.

"We are turning into real cowgirls out here!" Melody exclaimed and twirled in her spot. "We will be the best dressed tonight, and maybe Brexlynn will be a little happier than she has been lately," she teasingly glared at me, and I rolled my eyes.

"I'm happy," I countered, and everyone snorted.

"You've been in a totally different world recently," Gemma said, and the mood became a little more somber. She wasn't wrong. I'd been so cooped up in my thoughts and fears, I knew they were all concerned. Even for being quiet most of the time, I wasn't normally *this* closed off.

I kicked at the ground as we turned the corner and the arena loomed in sight. A whinny off to my right pulled my attention, and there was Becky, waiting at the gate.

"Sorry guys. I don't mean to be. It's just taking me a bit to get used to all of this." I glanced at the group that stepped in a little closer.

"Look, I know we've never said this before outright, but just because we work together, doesn't mean we are only coworkers. We are also your friends, and we accept you as your quiet, shy self. You're just usually a little happier." Melody linked my other arm and smiled softly at me.

We pushed open the door to the arena to find the three ranch hands and Jake waiting. "I just need a few more days to adjust, and I'll be back to my usual quiet but happy self." I smiled widely, and Gemma bumped her hip into Eva beside me.

“Good,” she said, and they all walked into the arena while I mindlessly wandered to the bleachers again.

As they tacked up, Jake let them know that today would be their first lesson while trotting. He normally didn’t push it this fast, but we were apparently in an unexpected time crunch as the boss man wanted to push up the timeline a week.

I watched as my teammates, or should I call them friends, rode their horses in the arena. Kicking up the sand footing, getting yelled at by Jake, or the other three, and a sweet memory with my father flashed through my mind.

An old memory as I rode around my first barrel on Becky. It was before Matthew, before my parents had fallen for his charms. We were happy then, and I allowed myself to smile this time, a simple reminder that at one point in my life, I’d been content in this world and maybe that meant I could be excited again.

The bleachers rumbled beside me, jostling me from my thoughts, and I glanced to my right to see Jake climbing toward my seat. He sat down next to me, his spurs jingling against the cold metal and then we just watched the lesson for a minute as my heart raced in my chest. A shiver slid down my spine.

Whether it was that refreshing sweet memory, or the comfort that came from the familiarity of the arena, or something else, I wasn’t sure. But I spoke without thinking. “Anthony needs to pull his pelvis under him just a little more and open his hips up. He’d sit the trot much better.”

Jake chuckled. “I keep telling him that he—” He paused and looked at me, which reminded me that I had just once again, possibly blown my cover. So, I backpedaled.

“What? I’ve been listening,” I quickly said. Jake stared at me, the wheels were turning in his head as he processed what I was saying.

Then slowly, he shook his head no. It was subtle, slow, and one of disbelief. “Well, if you’ve been listening, then why don’t you get on and show me.” He raised an eyebrow and leaned forward against his knees.

I shrugged my shoulders, pretending to be nonchalant about everything. “Maybe next lesson. It’s nearly time to end so we can head into town anyway.” I brushed off his offer and told myself that I would need to somehow come up with a better excuse to stay out of these rides, or I would be forced to get on a horse in front of people.

He clicked his tongue. “I will get you to ride one of these times,” he promised, a twinkle of humor in his eyes.

I smiled, a genuine smile as I accepted his challenge teasingly. “I look forward to that day.” He shook his head and then clanged down the bleacher steps, heading into the arena to end their instruction for the day. I couldn’t help but feel light, and even a little bit of excitement. I had been here for a few days now and, so far, it hadn’t been that bad. It had actually been a little bit fun and comforting. Terrifying, but also exciting.

Standing up from the bleachers, I carefully made my way down and met the rest of my coworkers at the rail as they untacked their horses. We hustled back to the bunkhouses and began getting ready for the evening.

Each of us took really quick showers and then slowly curled each other's hair. I applied some extra makeup to my face, using some eyeliner and shadow instead of just the simple mascara and concealer on my freckles like usual.

It was full on contouring and going out attire. Which proved to be a slight dilemma. I had brought two dresses, but one was too fancy and the other just didn’t seem to fit the colder spring weather. So I scrounged through my suitcases once more and found a pair of dark wash, high-waisted bell bottoms.

Cute, a little risky, but perfectly dressy for the occasion. Quickly pairing it with a cream cropped sweater and some simple turquoise jewelry, I was ready. A couple of the girls wore long dresses with their boots, while Aubrey wore a nice pair of jeans like me. I slid out a fancier pair of square-toed cowgirl boots that had hand stitched sunflowers on them, and we were off.

## Chapter 7

It wasn't a long ride into town. Beautiful actually, as Jake drove one of the two trucks that toted me and the four other hands through the winding highway and out of the mountains the ranch was tucked back in. My stomach felt heavy with both nerves and excitement. I hadn't been dancing in such a long time. And drinking? Well, I'd been married before legally able to do so at a bar, and Matthew had forbidden it once I turned twenty-one. So it was something I only ever really sipped on during social settings.

Jake turned us left into a little parking lot and glanced across Eva, who sat next to him, to meet my gaze, furrowing his brows as if he could read my thoughts.

The open space around us was crowded with vehicles, and the big brown, square building in the middle lit up with neon as if the entire population was in attendance.

This would be fun, I repeated over and over as he pulled the truck into a makeshift parking spot and turned off the vehicle. A stillness settled upon me, a nanosecond of nothing, before the blares of music from inside the bar crashed over me.

Everyone squealed in excitement and scrambled out of the truck as quickly as possible, I on the other hand was a little more hesitant. This could go one of two ways, and I prayed it was the good one.

Following quietly behind the group, Cole pulled open the entrance, and I was blasted with the strong scent of alcohol and sweat. Mixed with some hay and leather, the laughter was loud, the music louder.

I smiled to try and fake myself into some sort of safety as we entered and took in the surroundings. Pool tables to the right were crowded with cowboys and girls all chatting and having a good time. The bar to the left stretched the length of the wall, a couple tables and chairs were planted in front of it, but most of the building was open to a dance floor in the center. Pony walls surrounded it, allowing for people to watch and drink or join in

the fun.

Aubrey and Melody immediately took off, heading straight for the dance floor. Anthony offered Gemma a hand, and they attempted to subtly sneak after the other two girls. Jake and the two brothers had already headed toward the bar, leaving Eva and Oakley with me. Though they smiled as two strange men asked them to dance a moment later, which left me completely alone.

I was okay with that. Alone was safe and allowed me to process everything.

Except Jake suddenly returned with a drink in each hand, offering me one of them. “So, New Yorker, what do you think?” he asked.

I gave him a tight smile and raised the beer bottle, taking a long sip before opening my mouth. “Just as I expected.”

“In a good way?” he asked and I nodded before a stranger approached me. He had green eyes, his hair hidden beneath a cream-colored felt hat. A thick light-brown beard covered his chin as he held out a hand. Boldly stepping in despite the fact that I was standing beside a rather imposing and handsome looking cowboy already.

“Would you like to dance?” he asked, his voice a little shaky as he glanced at Jake. I smiled, despite the thumping of my heart in my throat. Say yes, I urged myself. I needed to do this and I could do this.

I nodded cautiously and set my drink down, placing my trembling hand in his.

He led me to the dance floor and off we went. I only stepped on his toes twice before all of my muscle memory of swing dancing with my daddy and brother kicked back in. And I forgot all of my worries.

I grinned, giggling and swaying across the dance floor to song after song. Several different guys asked me to dance, and I said yes to every single one of them.

Not once did we exchange names, nor had I ever met them before, but I didn’t care, it was fun. A couple of times I saw one of my coworkers or the other ranch hands pointing at me as I twirled across the floor, but it was always brief. I knew they would ask how I knew how to country swing dance, but that was a worry for later.

After a couple exhausting hours of dancing, I admitted I needed a break, so I excused myself from the dance floor and ordered a drink. The bartender smiled and quickly handed me a beer. I sighed, not remembering

the last time I'd had this much fun.

Jake sidled over to me, finding me through the crowd that had only seemed to grow since we arrived. "Now, where'd a city girl like you learn to dance like that?" he asked, taking a swig of his own beverage.

I bumped my shoulder into his, feeling heat rush through my body. He was rather intriguing. "The guys do all the leading, you just have to follow. It's not that hard," I responded, keeping my answer vague, and he shook his head before excusing himself to the restroom. He was totally onto me, and I wasn't sure how that made me feel. He seemed like a nice enough guy, maybe it wouldn't be so bad...

Walking forward, I squeezed myself past a few gentlemen and then leaned against the rail. Just simply watching the dancing. I felt absolutely free and relaxed, almost exactly how I felt riding Becky.

Gemma and Anthony were still attempting to country swing, not caring they looked like fools. It made me smile even wider, and I took another sip of my beer, enjoying the bitter taste. Aubrey was being shown a dance move by a cowboy that she kept blushing at. Eva and Melody were partnered with Cole and Chance, being swept across the floor like they didn't have a care in the world.

I took a sip of my drink and sighed. It was perfect. This night was amazing, and knowing that I would return to ride Becky wrapped it all together in a nice bow. I began humming to the song playing and tapping my foot, thinking that nothing could ruin this night out. Coming back to the west wasn't a bad thing after all.

I took another sip of my drink, swaying my head to the song as my eyes continued to scan the surroundings.

The tan, nearly orange wood reflected the lights from the jukebox and ceiling that spotlighted the dance floor. Laughter from everyone around me was a pleasant sound that blended well with all that surrounded me. It was a lighthearted environment, and such an awesome way to end the weekend.

And then my eyes locked onto a face.

One that had been haunting my memories for far too long.

It couldn't be.

Crushing my eyes closed for three seconds, I calmed my erratic breathing and attempted to shove that adrenaline rush away. It was the longest three seconds of my life, but I knew that all I needed was those three seconds to remind my head that he wasn't actually here. That he was a

figment of my imagination.

I opened my eyes.

And the profile of his face stared back at me.

Matthew was here.

That was Matthew, there was no way it wasn't.

Crashing my eyelids closed again, I fought three more seconds, hoping that it was just some nasty trick.

But it wasn't. As "Boot Scootin' Boogie" by Brooks and Dunn came on, playing in the background, all sound faded away for me.

Everyone still seemed happy, excited, but my world became entirely still and silent.

Matt wasn't looking at me, not yet anyway. But if I didn't do something fast, he would see me. Except, I was frozen in place, terror and fear pounding through my body. It twisted inside me, my bones ached, my muscles screamed at me to move, but I couldn't.

This was real. I couldn't understand how this was possible, but no matter how many times I closed my eyes and reopened them, he was still there. Wearing a yellow button up with a beer in hand, laughing with some buddies on the other side of the building.

And then slowly, as if stuck in some sludge, his head began to turn my way. His eyes leisurely swiveled toward my direction.

Something about the impending possibility of him seeing me snapped me out of my frozen state. I panicked. My mind was blank, but my body said hide.

My arms moved on their own. Without looking, my hands gripped the solid gray shirt collar of the rather tall cowboy next to me. They jerked him in my direction, and I shifted slightly to use his body to hide mine.

And my lips somehow crashed against his mouth, without glancing at his face.

First, it was his turn to be frozen, and I felt his body go rigid against mine. Then, probably out of instinct, he began to kiss me back. His steel frame relaxed beneath my hands, stepping closer and pressing deeper against my mouth. Massive hands snaked around my waist, squeezing my lower back tighter into him.

Wow, this felt—

Wait, what was I doing?

It was then that my brain finally registered what my body just did, and



I shot away from the random man I was kissing. Disbelief coursed through me as my eyes slid up from the floor, along his square-toe worn boots and up his nicely fitting dark cinch jeans, pausing at his massive buckle from something he'd won a year ago. I took in a shaky breath and my gaze continued up his chest, scanning the muscles that were hidden underneath his shirt. Which at least gave me a flicker of hope that the first man I'd kissed since my divorce, the second man ever in my life, might be at least semi-good looking.

My eyes finally reached his face. Black stubble peppered his chin, just enough to cast a dark shadow across his strong, wide jawline. Perfect lips sat underneath a nice nose. But his eyes, such a deep piercing hazel set beneath primal-like brow bones, were just watching me. Studying me.

And I winced, knowing he just had to be angry. That would be a normal reaction after being randomly kissed by someone. My brows twitched as I studied his face in return, waiting for the rage to twist his handsome features.

But the longer I stared, the more confused I became. There wasn't a hint of malice anywhere on his powerful frame.

Curly, dark hair peeked out from under his black, short brick crown, wide brim style cowboy hat and brushed along the nape of his neck. He raised an eyebrow and I clamped a hand over my mouth, embarrassed.

And darted away.

Shoving myself out into the cold evening air, I placed my hands on top of my knees and panted. That was the dumbest thing I could've done to attempt to hide myself. Why hadn't I just run out of the bar in the first place? Why had I thought kissing a complete stranger was the best choice? Where had that courage come from that actually forced me to seek protection from another man?

At least he'd been an extremely handsome cowboy.

But what if he'd ended up as angry as Matthew would have been had that happened to him? Whoever that guy was, was also probably now being ragged on by his buddies for letting some random girl kiss him. So, even if he wasn't mad at first, he had to be now.

My fingers mindlessly touched my lips. He had kissed me back. At the end, he'd kissed me back.

I groaned, shaking away the whiplash. That was the dumbest thing I'd ever done, and I needed to talk to someone about it. Someone who

understood my situation and could maybe explain to me why I'd done that. So, I slipped my phone from my pocket and called Katie.

It took some time, but I managed to explain all of the events over the past three days and was met with nothing but heavy breathing. "Katie?" I questioned again, sitting down on the railing in front of the bar.

"He's there?" she finally asked.

"I checked. Several times to make sure I wasn't just seeing things. It was him," I whispered back into the receiver.

"How?"

"I don't know." A tear slid down my face. Not one of sadness, but fear. My worst nightmare was coming true.

"He didn't see you?" she asked, pulling me from diving too far into dark thoughts.

"I don't think so. The cowboy I kissed was tall and broad. His entire body swamped mine and then some"

She giggled, softly, and then it slowly grew louder and louder. Her giggle became a full on laugh which forced me to join in. "I can't believe I did that!" I said between fits of laughter full of disbelief.

"That's one way to make sure he didn't find out you were there," she responded, and I leaned backwards, nearly toppling off of the rail from laughing so hard, and latched onto the wooden column beside me. "And at least you kissed someone handsome!"

"Oh, he was stunning. His eyes, Katie. Like if Matthew finds me now, fine, whatever, because I've looked into those eyes," I gossiped like a girl with some high school crush. It kept me from falling into thoughts that were harmful, depressing. It kept my anxiety at bay. It kept me from slipping too far away.

The door behind opened, and I glanced at the people who were leaving—my companions I'd arrived with. Quickly explaining to Katie who was coming and that I needed to go, we ended our call with love and the promise to talk again soon. I felt less like an idiot and crazy for what I had done after talking to her.

But, neither her nor I could figure out how I'd been brave enough to kiss some random guy. Strangely enough, it felt oddly freeing. Almost like I'd finally, after these two long years, gained a little bit of control back in my life. As we drove home, my friends asked how I learned to dance, and while I kept my answers vague and tried to steer the conversation away from me,

there was a small part of me that was beginning to grow in fear once more.

Matthew was near and had almost seen me. It was only a matter of time before he did find me. Before I had to confront my past.

## Chapter 8

Through all the excitement from the bar, and the terror, I ended up not riding Becky until the next evening. And then I rode her the next. And the next. Over a week of secret late night rides around the ranch and returning to routine chores and lessons during the day. For whatever reason, Jake didn't continue to push me to ride during the instruction time, and so I just watched, or he would sometimes ask me to clean tack. By next Saturday, every saddle was spotless.

Next week I would start working on the headstalls, but my current dilemma was convincing everyone to believe my excuse so I wouldn't have to go into town to the bar with everyone again tonight. There was no way I was risking Matthew possibly seeing me again. I had to find a way to stay here, where it was secluded and safe.

It was a dumb reason, but Katie said to keep things simple, so despite the pestering and constant begging from my friends, I stuck with the story that I wasn't feeling well and wanted some extra rest. Luckily, they eventually gave up.

I was, in a way, actually sad to not be going. It had, overall, been quite enjoyable last week, but I couldn't ruin the joy I was finally feeling intermittently by interrupting it with another wave of fear. Another Matthew sighting that would also increase the possibility of him seeing me. So, after saying goodbye to everyone and watching the two trucks head out, I hustled over to the pasture to get Becky.

Tonight, instead of riding outside along the trails and around the ranch, I was braving the arena and going to run some barrel patterns and possibly work the flag a little bit. To see how much cow training she remembered.

Which also meant I was breaking my spurs out for the first time in years. Sliding out the suitcase from under my bed, I removed the box and popped open the lid. There they were. A little dusty, and the leather strap

could use some oil, but otherwise ready to go. I ran the rowel over the palm of my hand, making sure nothing sharp had shown up in the past couple years of no use.

They still rolled smoothly, still just the same as before. I inhaled sharply, staring at the sunflowers engraved in the metal. My favorite flowers. Or they had once been, before Matthew. He'd told me it was such a cliché to love sunflowers, but my Nana and Pawpaw used to grow them, and I loved how they tracked the sun across the sky. I, too, used to live for the moment the sun rose until far after it had set.

The warmth it cast upon the earth below had once filled me with immeasurable joy. And after my Nana died, I'd never worn a different pair. "Here we go," I said out loud to nobody and strapped them onto my boots.

Pulling my jeans over the footwear, I zipped my patterned coat up, hesitating for just a moment before ducking out of the bunkhouse. It was a crystal clear night, the stars littered the painted purple and black canvas above. Even the moon shone so brightly without any hazy obstruction that I didn't need light to guide my way down to the barn.

A soft nicker met my ears as I exited the tack room with a halter and lead rope. She was waiting for me, her eyes bright. Comfort. Home. My horse. I slipped the black halter behind her ears and tied it off, before leading her through the gate and double checking that I'd latched the cold red iron behind me.

Her hooves clipped across the gravel in tune with the ching from my spurs. Each step rattling along closer and closer to doing something my heart yearned for, for far too long. The apprehension hung stiff in the air as I ran a curry comb across her coat, making sure I dug out all of the mud from her hooves, and then began to wrap her legs.

My hands moved as if they hadn't had a day off, my body rushing with adrenaline of excitement. But my mind continued to betray me as flashes of Matthew's anger continued to battle with the joy that this brought me. Those thoughts kept trying to convince me that I was jumping into this too soon.

As I slapped the Velcro in place for the last polo wrap, Becky snorted as if knowing, and the joy that showed in her face gave me the last bit of courage I needed. I held the bit up to her mouth and she gladly packed it in. And then we were walking out of the tack room toward the empty arena.

Our breaths mixed in the cold night air, steam swirling in front of

both of us as my footsteps moved us closer and closer to the arena.

Cold. Looming. Taunting.

Matthew was close, and I wanted just one more run, just one more ride before he destroyed my life again.

Waiting. Excited.

I pushed the button for the garage door on the barn and it rattled to life, the lights flickering on inside as it rose higher and higher. The streams of brightness illuminated the ground as if we were in a spotlight and I led Becky inside, not bothering to close the door.

No one was here. It was just her and me. Heading toward the black electronic box, I turned the speakers on and synced it with my phone. Blasting some classic country music I'd grown up on, I tied Becky to the rail and got to work rolling the barrels into the arena. It felt like old times, like I was a teenager rebelling against my bedtime just one more time.

My parents had known, but they'd never stopped me. I could've been doing worse things. Once the blue and red cans were in their typical spots, I began to warm up Becky. She kept eyeing the barrels, but was respectful of the routine. Lots of bending, flexing, lots of walk to trot transitions, and then I slowly began working her around the barrels.

Not a full run yet, and I could feel her twitching beneath my saddle each time we completed the clover pattern raring to go, but I needed more practice. A little more reminder for myself after I'd had so much time off.

And then it all clicked together. My legs were finally working in sync with my hands, fingers that hardly tugged on the bit barely had to apply much pressure other than to guide her head in a new direction to get some whip around the barrel at just the right time.

I could feel the joy in her body as she knew that this was the last practice run. As we loped slowly around the third barrel, my hips rotated in rhythm with her back to the entrance of the arena. Calmly, she walked out and tucked her head, tossing her mane as she danced beneath me.

My heart was racing, something felt so right, so familiar, so perfect. There was no one else here but Becky and me. There was no one near to make things go wrong, it was just the two of us. Once we reached the entrance to the arena, I turned her around and faced the open gate.

She snorted.

Pawed at the ground.

And I dug my heels into her side just light enough to urge her

forward. She danced, her eyes on that first barrel to the left. She hopped sideways, waiting for my next cue.

Her snorts sent steam like a bull ready to run. And just as we reached that gate, just as her nose passed the lip of the rail, I sent her.

We were off. Running hard and fast to the left. Tucking my legs against her body, eyes already on the far side of the barrel, she dug her hocks into the sand and whipped around. Shoving off of her hind end, I reached forward, cueing her faster with my heels against her sides.

Signaling for that lead change, she flipped and then tucked and as we rounded the second barrel. My vision narrowed and time slowed. Each second, each movement was calculated, deliberate as I drove her around the can. Tight, tucking under and shooting off like a rocket once she'd made the last little turn, she raced toward the third barrel.

Faster than before, breathing hard, my inside calf shoved her ribs away as my outside leg turned her hips and she brought her shoulders forward. It was euphoric as we bolted around that last barrel, Becky finishing that last turn and then my eyes met the end of the arena.

There he was.

That cowboy sitting atop his palomino, his black hat tucked low over his eyes.

I slowed Becky as we neared the gate and asked for her to completely stop before we ran out of the arena. Her chest expanded and collapsed rapidly beneath my legs, mirroring my own lungs, as his silhouette remained still in the open garage door. His horse was barely moving. He was barely moving. I couldn't make out any of his features beneath his hat, and the black slicker that was tucked up near his ears cast dark shadows around his frame.

Freshly falling snowflakes landed lightly against his shoulders, quickly melting, and then slid off of his figure. Snow that hadn't been fluttering to the ground when I'd entered the arena earlier, and my heart stopped.

He was so close. Light glinted off of the spurs that sat around his heels, and I knew he was watching me despite the fact that I was unable to see his face.

A face that I wanted to see.

I urged Becky forward and she moved into a slow walk, feeling my hesitancy as we closed the distance between the cowboy I'd seen everyday riding mysteriously out of the woods.

He remained still.

And then just as I neared close enough that I should be able to make out some feature beneath his hat, he turned his horse and they loped off. I shook my head in frustration and whipped Becky back around.

So much for that. Frustrated, we made three more runs to try and clear my head before I wanted a change and rolled the barrels back out of the arena. That was always the worst part, setting up and taking down the barrels, and my exhaustion was slowly creeping in. But I wanted a couple turns with the flag, although using a barrel saddle probably wasn't the best choice. But I figured it wasn't a huge mistake since I was going to keep things light anyway.

I needed a reminder. And time to just be.

Becky was a star. As the flag slid back and forth across the rail at the far end, she got down in that dirt and tracked it with barely any cueing from me. It was amazing how little she'd forgotten and how often the mistakes were mine. Several times I had to pull her away to collect myself, and I made sure to give her a lot of pats and love before returning to work.

We finished with much satisfaction and exhaustion. I dismounted and undid her cinch loose enough to relieve the pressure but kept it around her belly as I led her from the arena, turning the music off on my way out. As I moved into the snowy night air, the garage door closing slowly behind us, I paused.

The white flakes that fell, just beginning to stick to the ground, were indescribable. I simply watched the pastures where animals were grazing for some time before feeling the numbing wet cold breach my coat, and I regrettably decided it was time to trudge back to the barn to untack and turn her out. Just as I stepped away from the hypnotizing scene, there he was. Once again trotting down the fence line with the cattle. One brayed quite loudly, piercing the still night and sounded strange. Even Becky noticed the unusual noise echoing around the valley. It bellowed even louder, shaking the buds on the trees free of frost. The cowboy took off at a lope through the pasture and my eyes tracked his movement.

He reached a patch in the cold snow and dismounted. A much more graceful dismount than I'd ever achieved. One of only two times that I saw the cowboy not on horseback. His figure hunched over and strained against whatever was going on, and I knew then and there something was wrong. Glancing at Becky, I took a deep breath in, still lapping in courage and



adrenaline from that barrel pattern. “One more run girl,” I said to her and jogged to her side, tightened her cinch, swung a leg over her back and then we barreled straight toward the cattle pasture.

Without dismounting, I opened and closed the gate before racing Becky toward the middle of the field where the cowboy was still on the ground struggling with something. As I got closer, I could see it. He was elbow deep trying to help a poor cow give birth.

Sliding Becky to a stop, I dropped the split rein from her neck and ground tied her before plopping beside him.

“What can I do?” I asked.

“New heifer and the calf’s coming breech. I’ve got the legs, just wish she was standing since that might give her more room,” he started. His voice was deep, a little gravelly and quite powerful, but I ignored the wave of curiosity that crashed through me.

Bracing the best I could, it took some finagling and quite intense urging, but she eventually stood up with a heavy cry. The strange cowboy shifted his weight now that he was in a more optimal position to help pull the baby. After some very stressful minutes and intense work, the cowboy grunted and the mama strained as a newborn calf slid free and plopped on the ground, healthy as could be.

Charging around us in fright, the cow freaked out for a moment and then her instincts finally kicked in. She trotted over to the newborn calf and slowly began cleaning the little thing up. I breathed out in relief at the sight as the cowboy and I watched in silence, making sure that this new black angus mama accepted her baby.

The cowboy eventually sighed, threw off the gloves, and lifted his hat from his head. My gaze slid away from the new cow-calf pair and rested upon the stranger beside me. He was close enough that I was finally able to make out his features. He ran a veiny hand through his dark, super curly hair cut into a short mullet style, and his eyes met mine as he replaced his black hat.

Hazel eyes I’d seen before.

My hand snapped over my mouth as he raised a slow eyebrow and his lips spread into a crooked grin. “Why hello, darlin’,” he said, his eyes twinkling with some humor, and I stumbled backwards.

My spur caught a rock and I tripped, landing flat on my bum. “Ow,” I mumbled, rubbing my sore backside, and he chuckled. A low hum vibrated

from his chest as I glared at him. Cold moisture seeped through my jeans, soaking in the snow that had dusted the pasture.

Offering me a rather large and calloused hand, I hesitated for a moment before placing my palm in his rough one, and he helped me back to my feet. His fingers lingered against my skin, and for whatever reason, I didn't pull away. I let myself soak into his touch that was rough but gentle.

"You've put me in a bit of trouble with that stunt you pulled at the bar last week," he said quietly, and I ripped my hand away.

"Are-are-are you mad?" I stuttered. My heart dropped to my stomach in preparation for the slap that was surely to come.

"Not mad," he responded and stepped a little closer to me. I watched him blink and study me for a moment, his eyes raking down my body before returning to my face.

"I promise I don't just go around kissing random people. I-I-I... there was a situation and—"

He raised his hand, cutting me off. I flinched away, expecting it to meet my face, and he furrowed his dark brows for a moment before cautiously lowering his hand.

"I'm really not mad," he said and I nodded, but not completely believing what he said as his voice turned a little colder.

His boots crunched across the freshly fallen snow as he slowly walked back toward his horse. I took it as a prompt to go get Becky, which I did as quietly and softly as possible, praying it didn't incite any sort of frustration in him.

He picked up his reins and looked back at me. "But I was being serious when I said you put me into a bit of a bind."

"What kind of bind is that?" I asked, flipping the split rein over Becky's golden yellow neck and running my fingers through her black, long mane seeking comfort.

"I've got a cousin's wedding to attend next weekend, and everyone is expecting me to come with this girlfriend I apparently have now, or if I show up alone, it confirms that I sleaze around with random women," he answered and then leisurely swung himself into his saddle.

"What?" I cried out, pausing my movement and spinning around to face him, still not mounted.

He nodded, peering down at me from under his hat. "Your 'situation' has caused one for me now. One that has my reputation teetering on

downfall, and I have a lot that rides on my reputation. If I'm seen as some player, business deals will fall through. Large business deals that could determine whether or not this ranch continues to run." The humor had completely left his eyes, not to be replaced with anger, but absolute soberness.

I cowered away from his gaze, facing away from him to stare at Becky's flank. "How can I fix things?" I timidly asked, frozen in place.

I heard leather creek and body heat encompassed my cold back. Slowly turning around, I found myself trapped between Becky and his beautiful golden palomino. The dappled coat was so close to me, I instinctively took a step away, bumping into Becky's side.

"What's your name?" he asked, and I forced myself to look up from his square-toed boot to his hazel eyes once more.

"Brexlynn Phillips."

"Ah. One of the New York City girls," he said and then cocked his head. "How does someone from New York ride as well as you do? Let alone on Bucky Becky. Or have spurs like that and use them correctly?" he continued and glared down at me. I shrugged my shoulders and flinched away from his stare.

He side passed his horse a couple steps away from me, giving me space, and I breathed out in relief. I could feel his gaze staring daggers through me, wanting more of a response, but I wasn't going to give one, so he sighed. "I've really got a lot riding on next weekend, and since you kissed me, you owe me," he said again, and I scoffed.

"If I remember correctly, sir, you kissed me back," I said and swung myself up onto Becky.

He chuckled. "For only a second at the end."

"You still kissed back," I reiterated and spurred Becky forward. He trotted his horse to catch up to me as we turned back around to head to the gate. "Besides, I don't even know who you are, so how am I supposed to help you?"

"You really have no idea who I am?" I shook my head no. "My name's Tate," he finished, and my mouth fell open as I skidded my horse to a stop.

"As in the owner Tate Pierce?" I questioned, and he confirmed things with a curt nod. "I thought the owner was old. Well, older." I was baffled as he turned his horse to face me, a wide grin slowly erupting. It was a nice grin,

one that seemed genuinely kind, which frightened me. Matthew had been able to dupe me and many others with his smile.

“Surprise.” He chuckled and then turned around and rode on toward the gate. I quickly caught up with him and we continued forward in silence for a moment as I let the facts settle in. No wonder I’d seen that mysterious cowboy so often just riding around the ranch. He owned this place, he was allowed to go wherever he wanted and do whatever he wanted.

And he now knew my secret. Or at least had some idea of it, so I had to think fast.

“Alright, I’ll make you a deal,” I started, and he scoffed.

“You aren’t in a position to negotiate.”

“You have a problem, I have a solution. But I need something in return.” I glanced at his face, and he shook his head. He was kind of a jerk if I was being honest.

“Fine,” he harshly stated, and I rolled my eyes.

“You can’t tell anyone that I know how to ride like this. No. One,” I said and waited for him to chew on my words.

“Why not? Jake would be happy to know that he has one less person to train before the season opens.”

“Because,” was all I said.

He clenched his jaw. “And what is it that you’ve come up with to solve my issue?” He was being short with me, and I was getting frustrated.

“Agree first.”

“No.”

“Jerk,” I muttered under my breath, and he raised his eyebrows at me. He was probably just as frustrated with this situation, but since when did one little kiss make someone’s reputation teeter so badly that they were desperate enough to ask for my help? I was the last person who should be sought out to help fix a reputation.

“Fine,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Good. You might not like my idea, but since people think you have a girlfriend and you’re so desperate to prove that you don’t just kiss people willy nilly—”

“*You* kissed *me*. Let’s not forget that,” he cut me off, and I rolled my eyes. We passed through the gate and I stepped Becky to the side before closing it after he rode through. Continuing down the path toward the tack barn I bit my lip for a moment, halfway hoping that he would refuse the idea

I was about to present.

“So, I was thinking...” I paused, and he glanced my way as we turned up the road. “We would pretend to be in a relationship while at this wedding of your cousin’s and then amicably fake break up after. Saying we were better when there was distance between us since I’m from New York and you live here.”

Looking away from me, he mulled over my idea as we turned right back down the small dirt pathway that would lead toward the tack barn. Once in front of the door, he stopped his horse and I dismounted from mine. I waited, holding Becky’s rein in my hands, wondering what he was thinking. I really hoped he would say no, and just let things go.

“And how’d we meet?”

“Business trip?” I suggested, and he began slowly nodding. Crap...

“That would work. You’re not dating anyone are you?” he asked, and I blinked a couple times at him in disbelief. “Right, dumb question. Alright, we leave Thursday night since I was just planning to drive down to Vegas instead of flying for the wedding. Tell Jake you have some family emergency you need to attend to or something, and I’ll offer to drive you to the airport along my way to the wedding.” His voice was cold, a little unpleasant.

“Don’t sound so excited,” I grumbled, waving my hand at him in dismissal and turning to lead Becky away.

“Don’t kiss random people,” he countered.

“I don’t!”

“That’s exactly what you did!” he shouted back.

“Jerk,” I quickly said again, and rushed into the barn, slamming the door behind me. Apparently, he was only handsome on the outside, caring more about work and his business than anything else. Jake had mentioned how rich he’d become, all based off of his reputation, maybe it’d gone to his head.

Either way, next weekend was going to be exhausting.

As I was untacking Becky and grooming her once more, it dawned on me. In the whirlwind of everything, I just agreed, no suggested, to go somewhere random with a practical stranger. This was how all horror movies started.

And I’d walked myself right into one.

## Chapter 9

It wasn't easy getting through the entire week skipping riding lessons and not having anyone become suspicious of me, but at least the evenings were quite enjoyable. I was no longer afraid of someone seeing me as I worked Becky in the arena since the only person likely to do so was Tate. And he'd already seen me ride. In fact, there were several times that Tate stopped to watch for a moment. I still refused to wear my cowboy hat, the one I'd worn riding in the NFR, the one that my Pawpaw had bought me the first time I'd won a buckle and continued to resize it as I grew older.

There was a part of me that hadn't accepted that I was returning to that girl, that lifestyle. There was the part of me that continued to cover the freckles every day of my life, that continued to pray no one noticed my red roots showing through. Yet things were shifting in every area of my life. Things with my coworkers were even changing. They were lighter, freer, and we laughed quite frequently. I was happy again.

So when the day came that I realized I had to tell Jake I was leaving that evening with Tate, I was actually upset. Tate and I hadn't spoken since the first night, and I feared that the fifteen or so hour drive was about to be the longest moment of my life. Running toward Jake as he walked away from the lodge after lunch, I caught his arm just as Tate rounded a corner.

This was the first time I saw the boss himself while I was not out working somewhere. He stopped to watch as Jake spun in my direction. "Is everything alright?" Jake asked, noticing the concern on my face.

I was a terrible liar, always had been, so I was halfway grateful I wasn't looking forward to the long drive with Tate and used that emotion to my advantage. "I think I need to go home for a few days," I quickly said.

"Why?"

"A family emergency came up," I mumbled, blinking a few times. I wasn't proud of the fact that no one here truly knew me, knew my life, but it was coming in handy during this exchange. He couldn't refute a family

emergency if he didn't know that I hadn't spoken to my parents in two years. He couldn't protest if he didn't know that the only contact I'd had with them had been my brother and that relationship was becoming a little strained lately because of his new girlfriend.

He watched me for a moment and then nodded. "Okay, I can drive you to the airport in just a few minutes." He glanced at his watch as spurs clanged behind him, and he looked over his shoulders.

"Why are you needing to go to the airport?" Tate asked, glancing briefly at me.

Jake noticed the subtle exchange and furrowed his brows for a moment before responding. "Brexlynn here has a family emergency and needs to return home for a few days."

"I can drop her off. I've got Janie's wedding to go to this weekend in Vegas, remember." Tate smiled at Jake, a smile that told me these boys knew each other at a level that I would never understand.

"A'ight," Jake said and then shook his head. "Nice stache by the way." He gestured to the thicker hair growing above Tate's mouth. I pulled both of my lips between my teeth as Tate looked appalled.

"I thought it looked nice. Does it not?" Tate ran his fingers over the mustache. It actually fit his face decently well, paired with the shorter, light stubble that coated his jaw.

Jake laughed and mocked his best friend. "Maybe it'll keep random girls from kissing you again."

Tate hissed. "That was one time, and you need to be quiet about that. I've got damage control to do at this wedding already."

"Someone randomly kissed you?" I interjected, feigning innocence, and Tate glared at me for a moment before his eyes twinkled with humor.

Jake grinned at me and threw a thumb in Tate's direction. "First time he's kissed anyone since everything went down with his ex five years ago too." Tate rubbed his fingers over an eyebrow and shook his head. "Don't worry, it's only an hour to the airport that you'll have to be alone with this sap."

"Seriously," Tate muttered, shaking his head, and then addressed me. "Be ready to go in an hour. I want to get started on the road before the sun sets."

I saluted him. "Yes, sir." And then turned on my heel as Jake chuckled.

As I walked back to the bunkhouse to begin packing for a wedding that I hadn't even planned on attending, I heard Jake turn to Tate and speak. "I can't figure that girl out."

Tate snorted. "You've never been able to figure any woman out. Ever."

"And you're any better?" he countered, and I nearly tripped over the dirt I was walking on as the two of them bantered back and forth a little longer. Their voices faded as I turned left down the dirt trail that led me to the bunkhouses and my mind grew in volume. I was curious as to this ex girl that had hurt Tate so badly, making it so he had gone five years without kissing another woman.

I assumed it was this Morigan girl that never got a chance to ride Becky, since he'd bought her five years ago, but I pushed that thought to the side of my mind. A fifteen-hour drive loomed ahead, perfect time to ask.

Stepping quickly into the bunkhouse, I pulled out the smaller of my two suitcases and dove into packing. Bra, panties, two pairs of jeans and T-shirts, some flip flops for wearing around whatever hotel we were staying at, and then I shoved both dresses into the luggage. Lucky for me I never traveled without at least one or two fancier outfits, but I hadn't thought this would be the reason that I would need them.

After throwing a pair of heels in the luggage just in case, along with my toiletries, I was done packing and zipped it close. The door creaked open and I glanced up to see Oakley strut in, her arms crossed and a stern look on her face.

"I heard the boss is taking you to the airport," she stated.

I paused, puzzled by her sudden concern. "Yes." My answer was stiff.

"Well, just remember your place as his employee." She stepped one foot into the room, and it dawned on me.

"You like him." I stood from the bed and studied her. She flashed with shock that I recognized it so quickly and then let her arms fall to her sides. "Message received," I finished, and she sighed and then quickly left the building.

Chuckling quietly to myself, I pulled on my sunflower fancy boots. She was his employee, too, but it didn't matter. He was kind of a jerk, and I wanted nothing to do with cowboys. Matthew was it for me. The next man that I fell for would be the opposite of him, which meant *not* a cowboy. Besides, the little I knew about Tate told me he was a hothead and annoying.



I dragged the luggage from the bunkhouse and began toting it up the hill to find Tate standing off to the right by the employee vehicles. He'd pulled on one of those sweatshirts that only buttoned halfway down and it framed his body quite nicely. I felt immediately underdressed, still in my grungy bootcut jeans and a long-sleeve T-shirt paired with a vest that covered my belt and massive buckle. My hair was in its usual braid down my back with a ball cap pulled on top.

Maybe I should've spent more time getting ready for the drive. But this was a fifteen-hour road trip with someone that I was mostly annoyed with. This was more of a business transaction than even friends.

He was watching me, one hand tucked into a pocket as I struggled to haul my suitcase over in his direction. Finally, as I reached where he was standing, a small, crooked grin erupted on his face.

"That looked difficult," he teased, and I clicked my tongue in disgust.

Turning around, he took a step forward, and just as I attempted to drag my suitcase again, he snatched it with his massive hand and picked it completely off of the ground. Carrying it the rest of the way, he threw it in the bed of a box style Chevy next to his luggage before tugging open the driver's door and hopping in.

I hustled toward the passenger side, hoisting myself up and buckling in as he turned the key over. It only had a bench seat in the front, a lift kit that told me he'd modded it, and the design was a simple checkered pattern. Deep grays and black that matched the black exterior.

As the engine hummed loudly, he backed us out, and we began the long trek toward his cousin's wedding. Fifteen hours of a drive. And the first entire hour was in complete silence.

"Can we turn some music on, please?" I asked, finally breaking the awkward tension that had filled the cab.

"Oh, yeah," he muttered and pushed the power button to the speaker before sliding his phone from his pocket. "Sorry, I was lost in thought about this weekend."

"Wedding stuff stresses you out that much?" I asked as he scrolled through his playlist for a moment before selecting a song. It hummed low through the radio, an old country song by Alabama that I recognized.

"Business stuff stresses me out that much," he sharply responded, and I glanced his way as he removed his cowboy hat, set it on its crown on the dash and ran his hands through his curly hair.

“Why is it so important even on a wedding weekend?” I quietly asked, and he clenched his jaw for a moment.

“Because it’s not just me that is affected by my business choices, but my entire family. I employ two of my three sisters and their spouses. I’ve invested money in the third spouse’s business. My parents still live on the ranch above the lodge and, if I fail, they have nothing to fall back on.” There was a sweetness about how he spoke of his family. Something I knew lacked in my world. I took a mental note to ask him more about his family.

Later.

As long as he didn’t get upset with me and attempt to hit me for prying too much.

“That’s a lot to put on someone who looks to barely be what, thirty?” I leaned against the window, watching the beautiful green scenery pass by, and offered some understanding.

“I’m thirty-five.”

“Still a lot,” I whispered, my breath catching in my throat. He was ten years older than me. I thought a five year gap between Matthew and I was a lot, but now I was fake dating someone ten years my senior.

He didn’t respond as Randy Travis came on the speaker and I began to quietly sing along with his song Deeper Than the Holler. My foot tapped to the beat, and I swayed to the tune, having forgotten how carefree I could feel listening to the beautiful fiddle that played along.

“A New Yorker knows Randy Travis?” Tate said, interrupting my singing, and I blushed. He probably thought I sounded horrible.

“What? A girl can’t like country music?” I bantered back a little defensively, and he smiled softly.

“Just unexpected. Especially since this isn’t that pop country stuff that is commonly played on the radio.”

I pretended to gag, feeling oddly a bit more comfortable. “That stuff is horrible.” His smile widened.

“You ride like you were born in a saddle, have spurs of your own, know who Randy Travis is, and ride Becky of all the horses. I don’t get it,” he continued.

“You don’t have to,” I countered, putting my walls back up, but glanced away from the scenery to study him for a moment. Thicker neck, wider jawline but sharp. He was intimidating and imposing, strong but not from hours in a gym. No his body was hardened from a lifetime of hard labor.

“See something you like?” he snickered, catching me staring, and I rolled my eyes.

“You wish,” I quickly bantered back. What a self-centered jerk, thinking the reason I was staring was because I had some measly crush on him.

“So, how many times have you ridden a horse? Not counting the past two weeks when I’ve seen you sneak Becky out every night,” he asked, an elbow set against the windowsill, and he twisted a curl between his fingers. Of course he was nosy too.

“It’s not nice to spy on people,” I muttered through gritted teeth.

“It’s not nice to sneak around someone else’s place.”

I rolled my eyes and turned away again as he laughed.

I sighed, annoyed but wanting to find some joy in this situation I’d shoved myself into, and so I clapped along with John Denver’s Thank God I’m a Country Boy. He joined in singing along with the lyrics, right on tune, and I paused for a moment baffled. But the surprise quickly disappeared as I added my own voice and he didn’t get upset or yell at me for singing too loudly. Suddenly, I was feeling light and added an air fiddle to our little chorus as he shook his head but had a wide grin plastered across his face.

“You even know John Denver. How?” he asked again, and I slipped. I shared half a secret because I was caught off guard, with my walls down.

“Who said I’m from New York?” I answered with a question, and his eyes shot my way as I clamped my hand over my mouth.

“I knew it,” he said, the smile widening to a grin.

“Knew what?” Stupid, stupid me, I thought.

“That you weren’t a native New Yorker. You don’t have the same accent as your coworkers, and you’re way too skilled with horses and even cattle to not have some experience under your belt,” he answered, and I bit my bottom lip but fell silent, plastering the shields from my personal life up once more.

That was all he needed to know. The more I let him learn, the closer he’d get to discovering my horrible past, that horrible life that I’d only just recently escaped from. So, it was my turn to ask questions to dissuade him from pressing more about me. This jerk didn’t get to just swoop in and make me feel like he was a genuinely nice guy simply because he didn’t get mad at me for singing out loud to a song in the truck.

“How come it took you five years to kiss a girl?” I asked, and he

shook his head, his eyes focused on the road as we drove farther and farther away from the thick, deep green forest. Closer and closer to my home state.

“Because I don’t go around kissing random people.” He gave me a crooked smile, his eyes twinkling with humor. Not frustration, but humor. I shook my head but couldn’t look away from those hazel orbs. The ring of gold around his pupils with the greenish hue stretching outwards. They were unique, captivating.

I rolled my eyes once more. “I already told you that I don’t normally do that either.”

“But you did.”

“Why can’t you just answer the question? I answered one that I’ve never answered before.” I crossed my arms, frustrated and a few crinkles appeared between his brows.

“My girlfriend turned me down when I proposed to her five years ago,” he finally said after a long silence, and I suddenly felt like an idiot for asking, for pressing so hard for an answer. My mind shut down a little. I wasn’t sure what response he was looking for after that, and I didn’t want to get hurt, I didn’t want to arrive at a wedding with some new bruise forming if I replied with something he didn’t like.

But I obviously took too long to respond, for Tate breathed out heavily beside me. “And that’s why I didn’t want to answer.”

“You bought Becky for your ex, for Morigan,” I finally said, giving some sort of answer, and he looked my way, his eyes a little pained.

“Morigan isn’t my ex,” he muttered and I sank a little deeper into my seat, wishing I could fade away. Except he had been a little short to me, so maybe being a little rude back and asking more would keep him from returning more questions toward me. Maybe it would protect myself.

“Are you still in love with her?” I asked, knowing I was prying too deeply, but I couldn’t help it. It kept the focus on him, not me. It kept me from accidentally letting a window open in my walls of comfort and shields that held everyone away from the shame that I had experienced.

“Question for a question. If I answer, then you answer another one of mine. Deal?” he said, and I glanced his way, pausing. I was a terrible liar, but really good at skirting around providing too much information if I was prepared, so I nodded once before he continued. “No. Not for years now. However, that trust, that left when she did, and I’m not sure that one’s back yet.”

“Then who’s Morigan?” I asked, and he shook his head, clicking his tongue several times.

“My turn to ask a question.” I waved my hand for him to ask. “Why did you kiss me?”

I bit the inside of my bottom lip. To answer this question wrong would open a can of worms that needed to stay closed. He didn’t need to know, no one did. I couldn’t let him know, no matter how many times he asked or different ways he asked me. This wedding and fake relationship was merely something I needed to survive for the next couple of days and that was it.

Shooting my walls back up, I took a sharp breath in. “I was hiding.”

“From who?” he asked, and I shook my head.

“Uh uh. Question for a question, remember?” I smiled, a little mischievously at him, and he shook his head. It was as if the mood slowly shifted in the cab, and he smiled back at me. And then I fell silent.

“You’re not going to ask a question?” he continued as I turned my attention out the window and said nothing more.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Not right now.”

“Rude.”

“Jerk,” I muttered, and he scoffed once more but didn’t say anything. Turning the music up, he once again belted out the words to the song, and I eventually joined in, a little more confident in my singing as we crossed over into Idaho. I was home for the first time in two years. Closer to my family ranch than I had been in so long, and not by choice either. I couldn’t help but marvel at the scenery as the trees changed and the sky was beginning to darken.

My stomach growled, rather loudly, and Tate looked over at me. “What was that?” he asked, and I clenched my belly. “You did not just make that monstrous noise,” he exclaimed, and I pushed my lips into a slightly pouty face.

“I think I’m a little hungry,” I responded shortly, and he chuckled.

“A little?”

“Rude,” I teased, and he smiled. It was odd. No matter how frustrating and annoying he was, his smile was comforting, infectious, friendly. And frequent. But once again, I’d already been burned once by a friendly smile.

“Can that stomach of yours hang on maybe twenty more minutes? I

was going to pull off for some gas since we've been on the road for a few hours now." He glanced my way, and I nodded.

"You'll just have to deal with the odd noises that my tummy makes for the next twenty minutes," I responded with a small grin.

He shook his head. "You owe me for the torture that I'm about to go through then."



My head whipped up from the window that I'd fallen asleep against. It was pitch black except for the headlights coming from our truck. Panic bubbled up in my throat, the acid churning with the gas station food we'd snagged earlier. Tate was still awake, driving us steadily closer to our Vegas destination. We were due to arrive around ten or so in the morning at the hotel everyone was staying in, and when I glanced at the clock I saw we had about eight more hours of a drive.

My anxiety grew. Falling asleep with a strange man, alone, was an absolute no. Falling asleep while he had to be awake was even worse, and I clenched my jaw waiting for the slap to the face.

But it never came. Instead, he simply continued to drive forward as if unaware that I was no longer sleeping, or he chose not to acknowledge me.

"How are you not tired?" I finally croaked out. Tate whipped his head toward me, startled, and then smiled. Smiled. He didn't roll his eyes or groan. He smiled.

"Caffeine, Brexlynn. And a lot of it. I thought about turning the music up reaaaaallllyyy loud and rolling the windows down, but then you might have fallen out on the road," he teased me. I studied him for a few more moments, waiting to see if this sarcasm and joking was real or a façade, and I became a little more cautious.

"I can drive for a few hours if you want," I finally offered, and he blinked at me in exaggerated disbelief.

"I saw the drool all over that window. If that's how you treat my truck while asleep, how can I trust you to take care of it while awake?"

"Jerk," I muttered and glanced at the window. He was right though,

there was a massive smudge where my face had been plastered, sleeping the night away. Using the sleeve of my shirt, I attempted to clean it up, but it only made things worse. Turning to face him, I felt my cheeks heat up with red embarrassment. Yet, I couldn't help but find that, once again, he held no malice in his eyes. Only humor and a softness.

I stared. And realized that I wasn't as afraid as I thought I should've been.

How was I not terrified to be in this vehicle alone with him? He was a cowboy. Matthew had been a cowboy. He was tall, intimidating, intense. He could easily hurt me, manipulate me the way Matthew had, yet, somehow, I found myself with strength to joke with him.

"Sorry about that." I grimaced, and he just chuckled before signaling to exit the freeway. He pulled over at a truck stop and jumped out of the vehicle. I watched him, confused, as he crossed in front of the truck and then pulled open my door.

"Well, are you going to slide over?" he asked, as I continued to stare at him.

Bewildered. For just a moment.

"You're going to let me drive?" I squealed in delight and quickly unbuckled before rushing over to the driver's seat.

"Maria" by Brooks and Dunn came on, and I began belting the words, carefree, as he hopped back in and buckled himself up. I immediately slammed my mouth shut, realizing how loudly I was singing, and glanced in his direction. Furrowing my brows, it was strange. Once again, I found him with a crooked grin and a raised brow. He'd found humor in my actions, and I began to wonder if maybe all the times I'd thought he was a jerk, he was just teasing me. Keeping me at arm's length the same way I was doing to him.

I threw the truck into drive and turned out onto the road, heading toward the interstate to continue crawling us closer to our destination. "If you get one scratch on this truck," he warned and I waved my hand at him.

"Close your eyes and go to sleep. I've been driving since I was seven," I replied, attempting to shush him, but instead all it did was cause him to open his mouth in shock.

"Your parents were okay with that?"

"My dad's the one that taught me. Someone had to help out and since it was just my brother and I, and both of us had to take turns driving and

tossing hay,” I answered, and then clamped a hand over my mouth as he grinned.

That had not happened. Again.

“You, Brexlynn Phillips, are not very good at lying,” he said, shifting in his seat to get more comfortable, and leaned his head against the headrest. Snatching his hat off of the dash, he placed it low over his face.

“I know,” I grumbled. He closed his eyes, but the smile on his lips didn’t leave until he started to softly snore. I drove us well into the morning, the sun rising as we continued chugging down familiar roads and entering Nevada.

Despite how little I knew about him, how unfamiliar he was, something felt safe with him and continually caught me off guard with my walls down. Most likely it was because Matthew was far behind us, back in Montana, or maybe it was because Tate was actually a genuinely nice guy. Whatever it was, no matter how much I wanted to continue to think he was a complete jerk, a small part of me was beginning to doubt my initial assessment.

I was suddenly oddly determined to turn this weekend into something fun.



## Chapter 10

The weather was so much different here. Warmer with not a speck of snow on the dry desert ground. I didn't particularly mind it as I cracked the window and continued driving. As the sun pounded heavily through the windshield in front of me, I squinted, but it did nothing to help. So I flicked the visor down, but being a mere five-foot-four made it useless.

And a small picture fluttered into my lap. Picking it up, I kept one hand on the wheel and glanced at it. There was a little girl crouched in front of the photographer and grinning widely. She had the cutest dark brown pigtails and chubby little cheeks. The girl was maybe five or six, wore a buckle larger than herself and paired it with cute bell bottoms and a cactus t-shirt.

Tate stirred in his sleep, and I quickly slid the picture back into the visor and flipped it closed.

I was curious about who she was, but I remembered him saying he had sisters, so maybe it was one of his nieces. Either way, I figured I'd ask about her when he woke up and went searching for a pair of sunglasses. I found a massive pair of aviators and placed them on my face before continuing to drive.

An hour later he shifted beside me, finally sitting up and blinking the sleep from his eyes. He glanced my way and a lazy smile spread across his face.

"Lookin' good there, Brexlynn." His voice was deeper than usual, and a little more gravelly.

Rolling my eyes, I cranked the window even lower and let the wind whip through my hair as he sat up and fished out another pair of sunglasses from the side door. After about another thirty minutes of driving he told me to pull off so we could top off with fuel, grab some breakfast and he would finish the drive.

Signaling to leave the freeway, we pulled up to a small gas station and

he sent me inside with some cash while he filled up the truck. I relieved myself and returned with some jerky, energy drinks, donuts, and a few other snacks similar to the last pit stop. Sliding into the passenger seat, he quickly headed inside to pee, and then we were back on the road once more.

“Who’s that little girl?” I asked a few minutes later through a mouthful of jerky as I gazed out of the passenger window.

Tate choked on his donut, tried to wash it down with his drink, which only made things worse, and he coughed for the next several minutes. “What girl?” he finally managed to say, after downing half of his drink.

“The one in the picture you’ve stashed in your visor,” I explained and grabbed another donut. Kicking off my boots, I stuck my feet up on the dash and shifted in my seat so I could watch the passing nothingness. I could feel him staring at me. Glancing in his direction, he furrowed his brows before swatting in the direction of my legs.

“Get your feet off my dash.”

“Not until you tell me who she is.” I stuffed another bite of donut in my mouth.

“It’s none of your concern,” he said and motioned at my legs again.

I took a second bite, chewed a little slowly, and then glanced at him. “Why? Oh right, this is just a fake relationship. Sorry for asking,” I jabbed and turned back out the window.

“Exactly,” he scolded a little coldly, and whatever smile that had crept onto his mouth was wiped from his face. Taking another drink, he stared ahead and dug into the jerky beside us on the bench seat. I rolled my eyes—luckily he couldn’t see it beneath the sunglasses, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t rightfully annoyed. The least he could do was answer my questions, after how rude he’d been and how now I had to spend an entire weekend with him.

“Do you have a daughter?” I asked, not quite ready to give it up, and if it made him more frustrated, even better. What a jerk. Every thought that he could be an actually decent guy had left once again. Except he hadn’t attempted to hit me, even with me purposefully trying to set him off.

I knew it was dumb, immature, but I was testing to see if I was actually going to be safe this weekend since I was stuck with him.

“No.”

“Is she your niece?” Grabbing a piece of jerky from the same package he reached for, he jerked his hand back and leaned away from me.

“No,” he said again. “Now will you drop it? I already said it’s not your concern.”

“Alright,” I mumbled and ripped the piece of meat with my teeth. Chewing for a couple more seconds I turned back to him pretending not to care. “We should probably get our story straight for all these people that rely so much on your reputation. As you pointed out before, I’m a terrible liar so I need some preparation.”

He sighed and shook his head. “You’re kind of annoying, you know that?” he said through gritted teeth.

“And you’re a jerk. But we agreed to this, so let’s play nice for the next couple days, and then we can fake break up from our fake relationship, and it’ll all go back to normal,” I replied, frustrated with his sudden changes in mood. Although, they were probably my fault.

“There wouldn’t be a need for this fake relationship if you hadn’t kissed some random stranger so publicly,” he chided, and my heart sank. The frustration turned to embarrassment and fear. This was my fault, my problem, all because I chose something stupid to try and hide from someone I panicked upon seeing.

If I didn’t feel so inferior because of Matthew, I wouldn’t be in this situation. Which I’d so foolishly thought he was at fault for just a moment ago. But I was stuck with someone who was probably pretending to be nice to me all because I created an issue with his life to try to protect mine. I slid away from him, placing my hands in my lap and any sense of comfort was swept away.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you because of it. I’m truly sorry,” I whispered, staring out the window trying to get a hold of my own emotions. I had caused this. I kept putting up the walls on my end by prying into his life, yet this wasn’t anything other than a fake situation. A business deal to keep him from losing his lifestyle.

He released a heavy breath beside me. “I know.” I didn’t look at him, I couldn’t look at him. Tate was stuck in this situation because of my past, and it was slowly catching up to me.

“I should’ve ran farther,” I muttered, not even realizing it was out loud until Tate paused the music.

“What?” he said. I shook my head, still not looking at him as the nothingness outside moved onto more nothingness. It was warm, beating hot outside, which didn’t help my situation as a tear slid down my face. Going

with a stranger into a stranger's world wasn't the reason I was once again scared. It was the impending explosion that would occur once we returned to Montana and Matthew found me.

Something told me that was inevitable. No matter how far I ran, he would find me.

"She was my ex's daughter," Tate said beside me, pulling me from my self-pity and I glanced his way, wiping the tear quickly from my cheek. I had been so consumed in my own woes, I hadn't taken a moment to even consider how much pain he'd possibly been through with all of the questions I consistently peppered him with. He had a life too. A past that I had no right asking about or needing to know.

"Who was?" I timidly questioned, hoping I wasn't pushing too far again, and he flipped the visor down. There was the picture, that little girl smiling sweetly back.

"Her name is Morigan, and I bought Becky as an engagement gift for her when I proposed to her mom, Megan," he continued and flipped the visor back up against the roof. "I honestly forgot I had that picture there until you said something."

I smiled softly. "You really cared about her, didn't you?" He nodded, becoming lost in thought for a moment. "What happened? If you don't mind me asking." I quickly added the last sentence, not even sure if he would open up to me, but hoping that maybe this weekend would at least provide me with a fake friend for a few days.

"She was already married."

My jaw dropped open. That was definitely not the answer I was expecting. He glanced my way and let out a low chuckle. The chuckle turned to a short laugh and my shock turned to confusion. "Why are you laughing about this?"

"Because that was my exact reaction before reality hit. Apparently she had been cheating on her husband with me for a year and, when I proposed, that's when she thought it was appropriate to tell me." He laughed again, and I slid my legs from the dash.

"You're not angry?"

He shook his head, his hazel eyes full of humor once more. "Well, I was for a bit. Angry at her, angry that I would never get to see Morigan again, but then once I wasn't hurt by it anymore, I was also no longer angry."

"How long did that take?"

“A good two and a half years,” he responded, and I sighed, leaning my head back. Well, at least that meant I had some hope left since it hadn’t been two and half years since my divorce.

“Alright, since I spilled something about me, you owe me something about yourself,” he continued and ran a hand through his silky curls.

“My favorite color is yellow. Not the ugly mustard or pee yellow, but the sunflower yellow,” I said and smiled at him as he rolled his eyes.

“That’s not quite what I was looking for,” he muttered.

“Well, be more specific with your requests, sir,” I bantered back, and that crooked smile slid across his face once more. Finally, the nothingness outside was becoming more. Buildings were beginning to be less sparse, even a couple desert trees were finally poking out once in a while.

A new song came on and we both began singing to it, a comforting feeling rushing back in once more. How strange it was to me that no matter how upset I got, he didn’t seem to stay frustrated for long. Even my therapist told me I would be a roller coaster of emotions toward anyone who attempted to get close to me and I needed to find a way to regulate it better. Which obviously wasn’t going well if this was what was happening.

But Tate didn’t seem to mind. Or he didn’t let on that he was upset by it.

“What’s your favorite color?” I asked over the music.

“Red. Not the bright red that blinds you, but that deep red that holds mystery to it,” he said, and looked at me. “So, we should probably go over our backstory.”

I lightly pushed his arm, breaking that touch barrier, and quickly withdrew my hand from near him. Setting it quickly in my lap I muttered, “Pretty sure I said that already.” He chuckled and nodded.

“But now we are about fifteen minutes from the hotel my mama said to meet at, so we really should cover our bases.”

“Alright. We... met a year ago, and we’ve only ever done facetime calls,” I started and he nodded.

“You decided to visit for a few weeks. Which would lead into an easy breakup where we both agree that we are better over the phone than actually together.”

“Exactly,” I finished, and he glanced at me, something flashing across his face. “What?” I asked as he stared at me. He shook his head and looked away.

“We should probably know basics like family and hobbies. I have three sisters, plus my parents,” he started. “I grew up hunting, fishing, rodeoing, training horses and still do that. We’ve actually got four two-year-old colts coming in next week that I’m going to start.”

“What event?” I asked, and he furrowed his brows. “Rodeo.”

“Oh, team roping and calf roping. I tried steer wrestling once, but that wasn’t as fun as I thought it’d be.” He turned the vehicle off of the freeway, and we slowly began heading toward downtown Las Vegas. It felt smaller this time, smaller than when I’d come for the NFR. Though there were still tall buildings, and a lot of them crammed together, neon lights and casino’s flashing. After being in New York, it felt cramped.

Odd to be back here after everything, and as we slowly drove farther through the strip, past the event center the NFR was held at, I shuddered.

“Never thought I’d be back,” I whispered against the window.

“You’ve been to Vegas before?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Once. It was a lifetime ago, though.”

Coming back might help me heal, help me find myself again. And I removed the sunglasses to get a better look around. Thoughts of my parents and brother flashed through my head—happy memories too. Unusually happy memories. But that was enough. That was all I could handle of my parents right now.

Wanting these feelings to wash away, I wiped the tears from my cheeks and replaced the glasses on my face. “Header or heeler?” I asked him, hurrying to change the subject back to him.

I glanced his way, concern etched across his chiseled features. I think he was figuring it out, learning that I didn’t like talking about myself.

“Heeler. Jake was my header,” he muttered and then turned away as we slowed to a stop. “So, what about you?” he pushed.

“Just my parents and the brother I mentioned,” I said, and he somehow knew he wasn’t getting any more information about them or me at this time. I wouldn’t give him any more information if I didn’t have to; this was a fake relationship anyway.

Tate signaled and exited onto a massive roundabout entrance. The beautiful hotel stretched high into the sky, white and spotless as we pulled up to the valet. A short, stubby man waddled up to the side of the truck. Tate stepped out and spoke with him while I stared at the sliding glass doors.

We were here, no more delaying the inevitable.

Suddenly Tate's face was in front of my door, and he pulled the handle to open it. Hat on his head, two suitcases behind him, and he held out his hand to help me down. I stared at the outstretched palm. Take it, just take it, I kept saying to myself. But something held me back. I didn't want to get smacked or kicked as soon as we got to someplace where it was just him and me and my hand had been too sweaty, or too cold. Or too hot, or not soft enough.

Tate stretched his fingers a little closer to me. "I won't hurt you," he whispered. Had he seen the terror that tightened my face? Had he seen my hesitation and somehow understood? Either way, it seemed to help, and I timidly placed my hand in his before dropping out of the truck—and tripping.

Right into the wall of muscle that was him.

His arms encircled me to keep me from falling. I could feel his heartbeat against my ear that was smashed into his warm chest. It was beating rapidly, matching mine as adrenaline pulsed through me. But he smelled so nice, like caramel and pine trees with a hint of smoke.

I slowly stood up straight, and he kept his arms wrapped around me. My gaze remained at his chest, level with my height as I waited for the scolding that would come. But for some reason, he didn't bend down to my ear and swear at me. He didn't shove me off and shake his head in disappointment.

Instead, he slowly helped me balance myself and then slid his hands to the sides of my arms. "Are you alright?" he softly asked, and I blinked, confused. He was wondering if I was okay. He seemed to genuinely care that I may have hurt myself.

"What?" I asked and looked up at his face. He raised his eyebrows, his face soft with concern.

"I asked if you are hurt anywhere?"

"Oh, no. Just tripped is all. I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to inconvenience you. It won't happen again," I quickly blurted out, and he looked at me in disbelief.

"It's not a big deal," he said, almost as a question with confusion written across his face, and then let go of me before grabbing both handles of the suitcase and rolling it across the bumpy stone road. The valet driver took the truck away, and I followed Tate onto the sidewalk, then through the sliding glass doors.

# Chapter 11

Loud ringing from the casino portion of the hotel reached my ears as we entered. The lobby had purple carpet flooring, with those large, neon patterned circles. Elevators were to our left, split by a few couches and some potted plants. Ahead was the noisy casino full of chattering people, alcohol, and money being lost.

Tate continued to our right toward the desk to check in. “Uh, we are here for Janie Wight and Dustin Robinson,” he said and the lady with slicked back blonde hair smiled. She was petite, a low bun on the back of her head, with bright blue eyes and thin lips.

“Perfect. Can I get your names please so I can cross you off the guest list and send you to your rooms?” she said, her voice bright and bubbly.

“Tate Pierce and my plus one. I doubt her name is on there,” he said and inched a little closer to me. I was surprised by his movement and stiffened a little, but willed myself to remain still as his leg bumped against mine.

The lady typed a few things into her computer, glanced down at a paper, and then smiled back at Tate. “I have you right here. Room 404,” she said and scanned a couple cards.

“One room?” I whispered at Tate, and he glanced at me.

“Relationship, remember?” he muttered under his breath, and I bit my lip.

“Can you ask if there is more than one bed?” My heart was rising into my throat with panic. I would not be sharing a bed. I was already about to be trapped in a room with this stranger, with a man. There was no way I wouldn’t die if we had to share a bed.

“Janie requested a queen size bed for you, which luckily was the last room we had available anyway. Here’s your cards. Happy stay!” she said, not having heard my question but answering all the same, and with a little too much excitement in her voice. She then returned to staring at her screen.



Tate slowly slid the cards from the counter and stretched his hand out to me. I numbly took the plastic key from his hand and mindlessly stepped toward the elevators. The room was spinning, the oxygen leaving. I felt sick to my stomach, nauseous. Anything we'd munched on for breakfast was rising into my throat. Bile and acid.

I pressed the up button on the elevator and stared at the door, listening to the soft beeps as it descended to us.

"I'll sleep on the couch," Tate offered beside me, and I shrieked, then jumped sideways, startled.

He fumbled between reaching for me, and pulling his hand away. Back and forth. I clutched my chest and leaned forward, trying to curb my panic attack. This was not happening. I was not about to be trapped in this room with this cowboy, even if he slept on the couch.

But there was nothing I could do. "We can alternate nights," I finally said, my voice hoarse as the elevator dinged and opened in front of us.

"No. I'll be fine," he said, wheeling the suitcases into the elevator, and then waited for me. My legs were trembling as I stepped forward into the dark box. The walls were stainless steel, a blurry reflection of my disheveled self stared back. Tate pressed the number four and the doors closed.

It rattled to life as we slowly ascended. "Are you alright?" he asked as we reached the first floor and then continued upward.

I curtly nodded yes but wasn't able to form any words. This was not happening. Why had I suggested this? It was his life, he could've fixed it on his own. It didn't matter if he hadn't hit me yet, I was still heading to a shared hotel room with a guy! With one bed. This was a disaster waiting to happen, and I realized I really was exactly what Matthew had carved into my hip. My thumb slid back and forth across the scar on my ring finger.

This was a nightmare.

"You seem scared to death," Tate said, and I twitched but glanced his way. He was watching me, sympathy and curiosity blatantly scrawled across his handsome features. His mustache twitched as he sniffed lightly, and it paused the anguish for just a moment.

Then it was gone. The fear immediately flooded back in.

"I-I-we-same-same-one room," I stuttered out, trying to explain to him that I felt trapped and terrified to be going to someplace alone with him in Las Vegas. The last time I'd been in a hotel room alone with a cowboy in Las Vegas, I'd ended up in the ER with several cracked ribs and a punctured

lung.

“I’m sorry, but I have no idea what you just said,” he softly replied as the elevator stopped and the doors slid open.

Standing in front of us were three little girls, all looking eerily similar to the woman whose face erupted in a grin. She had dark, curly hair like Tate, brown eyes instead of hazel, and thin lips. Not nearly as tall, and quite curvy, but she seemed to know him.

She had on a pretty striped, purple romper that reached her ankles, her toes peeking out beneath, manicured and adorned in cute brown sandals. The little girls shrieked and ran toward Tate.

“Uncle Tate!” they yelled and jumped into his arms. He took a stumbling step backwards to steady himself and then wrapped them in big hugs.

“You must be the girlfriend that no one believed he actually had,” the woman said, and she stretched her hand forward. “I’m Tiffany, Tate’s older sister.”

I smiled, trying to force it to reach my eyes, but with no luck. So I willed myself to grasp her hand and shake it. “Brexlynn,” I said, my voice squeaking slightly, and she laughed.

“You picked a shy one this time,” she said, turning to Tate, who stepped out of the elevator with one girl on his hip and the other two around his ankles. He gave a half-hug to his sister and glanced at me.

“Give her a minute to warm up and she’ll offer you more sass than your triplets put together,” he said, his eyes sparkling lightly as he stared at me. Man, he was good at this. For half a second, I actually believed he was giving me a real compliment, that he actually seemed to enjoy being around me.

Tiffany pulled away. “We are headed down to the strip. Meet us for lunch. I’ll text you where, and then we have to go to the rehearsal dinner,” she said, and the four of them entered the elevator, disappearing from view.

Tate nodded his head, and I turned to the right, following him down the brown hallway. The wallpaper was lightly striped, attempting to give the illusion the space was bigger than it actually was. The corridor had light-brown carpet with similar stripes, and it smelled like every other hotel I’d been in. Strong cleaners mixed with that human body scent you couldn’t quite get rid of.

That sickening feeling returned as we stopped in front of the wooden

door with the golden handle numbered 404. Tate inserted his card, the lock clicked, the light flashed green, and he opened the door.

He seemed unphased as he wheeled both suitcases into the room and let the door swing shut behind him. I watched him go, but remained frozen to the floor. If I stepped through that room, whatever happened was he said/she said. What haunting memories I would walk away with were of my own doing for following him in.

The knob turned and his head reappeared in the doorway. “Are you coming?” he asked, confusion dripping from his figure. I blinked but didn’t move. The horror that oozed from my frame was pungent and excruciating.

Despite the frozen stature of my figure, my mouth seemed to form words on its own. “I can’t go in there. I can’t be alone with you. I won’t get hurt again.”

“What?” he said, shoving the door wider.

Those cold, blank eyes stared back at me. It was fifth place, which I thought was still good. But he didn’t think so. He had wanted first. And he let me know with that.

“Please,” I trembled, and tears slipped past the dam I had created. My joints ached from fighting for so long. I wanted to collapse, wanted to curl up into a ball and cry. I wanted to go home. “Please don’t. I can barely breathe as it is,” I whispered, feeling another wave of pain crash from his boot that had already connected with my side so many times back at the arena.

I could see the anger rolling across Matthew’s face as he stood in the doorway, cursing me under his breath. If I didn’t go in there, I wouldn’t be alone with him. But if I didn’t go in there, he would find some other way to tell me how that made him feel. In a much more horrible way than usual.

“Brexlynn,” he said, and I blinked, confused. Matthew never called me Brexlynn. I think the only time he’d ever heard my middle name was when we said our wedding vows.

“What’d you just call me?” I asked, staring at those cold, lifeless blue eyes that suddenly filled with heavy confusion. Those eyes, they seemed a little different than his normally looked.

“Your name. Brexlynn,” he said again, but his voice was deeper, sharper, filled with concern. I blinked as that gaze filled with life and color. Hazel. A mustache. Dark hair, not blonde. Curly hair, not straight. Tall.

“Tate,” I breathed out in relief. “I’m sorry,” I quickly added as he stepped sideways, making room in the entranceway.

“Who’d you think I was?” he asked as I took a deep, confident breath and slid past him.

The room was just like every other hotel room. Bleach white comforter over bleach white sheets. Four pillows with, again, bleach white pillowcases just past the bathroom on my right. A large curtain covered the massive window above the room's air conditioner. However, while the wall was clean and bright white, the carpeted floor was that burgundy, reddish-brown that hid all the nasty stuff. I let out the breath I was holding as the door shut behind me and I jumped.

“I’m not going to kill you here, Brexlynn. Everyone would know exactly who did it,” he said as he walked past me and laid the suitcases down on the far side of the room. A round table with two chairs was parked next to it, and the couch, that same burgundy red, waited beside the table.

A dresser sat across the foot of the bed with a TV mounted on top. The same as every hotel room. “That doesn’t eliminate the possibility of you killing me elsewhere,” I attempted to joke back, and he chuckled, plopping himself down on the couch, and placed his hat on the table beside him.

“Now you have the idea,” he smiled. But I could see the concern and confusion that was still evident in his eyes.

I bit my bottom lip and timidly tapped to the bed, sitting down on the edge of it. “I haven’t been in a hotel room with a man in a while. It just made me nervous,” I said, a half-truth. A half-smile that didn’t reach my eyes caressed my lips.

He nodded but studied me. “How many men have you been alone with in a hotel room before?” He gave me a tender crooked smile.

“How many women have you been alone with in a hotel room before?” I countered, and his smile spread across his entire face. He got a couple dimples when he grinned that wide.

It was a little infectious.

“Are we including family or not? Because my list is pretty high if we count family,” he said lightheartedly.

“Obviously not family.”

“Then you would make three,” he said.

“Three?” I was genuinely surprised. A guy this good looking had only been in a hotel room with three different girls in his entire life.

“What? Did you expect more?” he asked, kicking his boots off and throwing his feet up onto the couch.

“Maybe...” I admitted, and he laughed.

“Your turn.”

“Including you, two,” I said, admitting to someone who hadn’t known me while I was married to Matthew that I’d been with another man.

“That’s one too many,” he teased and winked at me.

I scoffed and reached behind me, grabbing a pillow from the bed, and it was soaring through the air before I realized I’d thrown it. Another wave of alarm coursed through me until it smashed against Tate who laughed. All he did was laugh and then tossed it back.

“How old are you anyway?” he asked after I’d lightly pitched the pillow toward him again.

“Twenty-five. Why?”

He threw it back. “Because sometimes you act like you’ve lived an entire lifetime before; other times, you act like you’re still an innocent teenager.” I tossed the pillow in his direction once more and kicked my boots off. Scooting up onto the bed I crisscrossed my legs as he rolled the pillow between his hands and launched it in my direction again. “Like now. How you’re sitting. Who does that in their mid-twenties?”

“I do, dummy,” I said and hurled the pillow just a little harder this time at him. He laughed and caught my gaze. I was beginning to think I’d misjudged him. He seemed kind, even when he asked me things; there seemed to be a genuine curiosity in him. “What’s your family like?”

He tossed the pillow back in my direction. “Complicated. Like any family I guess,” he said.

I smashed the pillow into my lap. “In what way?”

“Question for a question,” he said, and I rolled my eyes.

“Fine.”

“We grew up close, like most families that work a ranch together. And I’m still really close to them, I mean they live on the ranch with me. But lately, it’s been complicated with my parents. Just between my parents and I anyway. So this wedding is going to be interesting.” Tate ran a hand through his hair and then leaned against his arm that was tucked behind his head. His muscular arm sat at just the right angle.

“What happened between your parents and you?” I asked, struggling to not ogle, and he clicked his tongue.

“My turn for a question.” I gestured for him to go ahead. “What about your family?”

“Complicated,” I said back, and he rolled his head at me. Waving his hand for me to continue, I sighed. “I’ve only talked to my brother in the past two years. So complicated.”

“Why not your parents?”

“Eh eh.” I wagged my finger at him.

“My sister, Thalia, bought all of the siblings one of those DNA test things for Christmas once. Anyway, when mine came back, I found out my dad isn’t actually my dad, and my parents definitely know since they’ve been married longer than I’ve been alive. My older sister is also one hundred percent theirs,” he explained and then sat upright a little more as I stared in shock at him.

He chuckled. “I’m a little messed up,” he finished, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“Aren’t we all,” I responded, and he shook his head in amusement and then motioned for me to answer his question. But I was saved by a knock on the door. Tate glanced at me, and I shrugged my shoulders, silently communicating to him that I didn’t know what it was about.

He padded across the floor softly in his socks and peered through the peephole before throwing the door open wide. Lunging through the doorway, whoever was here wrapped Tate into a massive hug, with several slaps on the back.

“So glad you could make it!” a voice said. He didn’t have the same country twang that Tate did, sounding almost sophisticated, and when they finally broke apart and I was able to get a better look at the visitor, I understood why.

This man wore skinny jeans and a deep V-neck T-shirt. Skater style, with the sweeping bangs. His light-brown hair paired well with his round yet joyful face. He had large eyes and not a speck of facial hair. Tate moved away from the door and gestured at me.

“Dustin, this is Brexlynn. Brex, this is Dustin, the groom,” Tate said, and I smiled, waving hello until it dawned on me that Tate called me a nickname. I glanced his way, but the two men were already lost in a conversation.

He called me Brex. Casually, like we’d known each other forever. Confusion settled upon me. Sometimes it seemed like he genuinely was interested in who I was as a person, but this entire relationship was all for show—fake. It didn’t make sense.

I watched the two of them laugh for a moment before slipping off of the bed. It was time to change into something more fitting for the really warm spring air.

I searched through my suitcase, making a slight mess before quietly heading into the bathroom. The light flickered for a moment before the bulbs that lined the mirror popped on. A single sink sat in the middle of a white countertop. The shower/tub combination was behind me with the toilet to the right. I faced the mirror, not realizing how tired and messy my hair really looked.

Taking the fastest shower of my life, I reapplied my concealer and added a little extra mascara to my lashes before pulling on a new pair of Aztec-patterned bell bottoms. I paired it with a plain, white short-sleeved, off the shoulder bodysuit, and brushed through my hair. My roots were slowly beginning to show, so I pulled it up into a high, purposefully messy bun and brought a couple strands back down to frame my face.

Simple, but pretty. I could hear laughter outside the door as I turned to my left and exited the bathroom. The two guys were sitting on the couch and Tate glanced in my direction as I entered the room. He immediately stopped talking.

His eyes widened and a subtle half-smile of adoration filled his face.

I stopped moving—no one had ever looked at me like that before. He was putting on a really good show of this fake relationship because, even I, who knew this was fake, felt like that was genuine admiration before he looked away and reengaged with Dustin. My stomach fluttered for a moment, before I found the strength to head back to the suitcase and return my clothes, buckle and belt that was tucked neatly inside them, and toiletries.

Dustin groaned and stood from the couch. “Well, I’ll see you two in two hours then.” I turned and smiled as he waved and then left the room.

Tate slowly rotated on the couch to look at me behind him. He smiled again, and I timidly bit my bottom lip. “Is this okay?” I asked, wondering if I had imagined the look he’d given me earlier.

“You look very pretty,” he softly said. For a moment there was this silence between us, a shift in whatever acquaintance we shared. For a moment I just stood there as his eyes held mine. I liked his eyes, they seemed so kind, so full of joy, so full of life. So unlike any I’d seen before.

Tate broke the spell, standing from the couch, and I inhaled sharply before slipping past him and sitting back down on the bed. “You smell nice

as well,” he whispered, and I looked back at him as he squatted down and rummaged in his suitcase. Maybe this wouldn’t be as bad as I thought.

“Thank you,” I squeaked out, and he chuckled. “Should I wear a dress, though? I don’t know what this rehearsal dinner will be like,” I continued, feeling my cheeks turn a little warm.

“No, it’s a casual thing. More for Janie and Dustin and the wedding party to practice how tomorrow is going to go. Plus free dinner for us!” He wiggled his eyebrows, standing from his luggage. “I guess I should get on par with your outfit.” And Tate disappeared into the bathroom.

I heard the shower turn on and bit my bottom lip. My mind reeling with what had just happened. I kept going back and forth between what was happening—whether he was kind or a jerk, whether anything he said to me was real or just for show. Dustin had been in here, but then he’d told me I was pretty when he wasn’t. He didn’t have to do that, no one else had been around.

The shower clicked off, and within ten minutes Tate opened the door, wearing a new pair of clean jeans. His fresh red button up was tucked in, the sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. I saw a little bit of ink peeking out on his right arm, something I hadn’t seen before. Tate had tattoos.

He scrunched his hair a couple more times with the towel and of course it was already dry. He’d cleaned up his neck, trimmed it bare, and shortened the stubble around his chin, but left that mustache to grow even longer. And as he walked by, he smelled fresh. Still a little forest-like with a hint of caramel, but even better.

He snagged his hat from the table and then turned to smile at me. “Would you like to go get some lunch before we head to the rehearsal site? But not with my sister and her family. I love them, but they can be exhausting.” I really liked the dimples his face got when he smiled. They were sweet and calming.



## Chapter 12

The bell clinked as we entered this cute little diner just down the block from the wedding festivities' location. It was an eighties design, with the bright red-and-black booths lining the walls. Pictures of different famous people from that era with popular vehicles and music were hung on every available inch of plaster. Even the servers wore the classic eighties waiter outfits.

I giggled to myself as one sweet girl rollerbladed over to us. She led us to a booth to the left and then sat the menus down in front of us and scooted off again. Tate had picked this place from reviews he'd read and because it wasn't where his sister's family had gone to lunch. I scanned the menu, feeling a slight sense of concern bubbling up in my stomach.

Most of the food was things like hamburgers and fried chicken. Fitting for the era the diner was portraying, but terrible for me. I blinked, furrowing my brows, and was quickly feeling overwhelmed. Glancing above my menu, my eyes met Tate's. He was watching me, curiously.

Inside my head, I battled over whether to ask him or not. On one hand, he might say yes, might actually be ok with me eating something other than a salad out in public. Yet, on the other hand, he could get really mad. And I didn't want to make him really mad. He was bigger than Matt which meant he could do more damage.

Tate leaned forward, as if about to say something, as this sweet, curly-haired, waitress rolled on over to our table.

She smiled softly at me and then turned to Tate, her smile widening, flashing a flirtatious grin at him.

"What can I get you to eat, handsome?" she asked. I clenched my jaw, returning to the menu in front of me. This was an odd feeling that was suddenly circling within me. I wasn't even sure what it was.

Tate watched me a little longer and then ordered a delicious bacon burger that I'd been eyeing.

"And for you?" she asked, turning to face me, the sweetness ebbed

from her. I bit my lip for a second and then glanced at Tate. He was still studying me, the curiosity shifted to concern.

“Can I ask you something?” I breathed out, my voice barely audible.

He tilted his head. “Anything.”

“Would you be embarrassed if I got a hamburger and fries too? I don’t want to make you uncomfortable eating that in front of you, but—”

Tate cut me off when the waitress snorted. “She’ll have the same thing I ordered.” He handed the curly-haired girl his menu, gently pulled the one from my grasp, and placed it on top of his before dismissing her. I stared blankly at the table as he slid his water over and took a sip.

He didn’t speak, didn’t force me to say anything as I kneaded my hands in my lap. That was so stupid, so embarrassing to ask. Now he’s going to see me eat something unflattering and he’ll end up disgusted with me. More disgusted than he probably was right now, and the moment we left this place I was in for a world of hurt.

“Why’d you think I’d be uncomfortable with you eating a hamburger?” Tate finally said, pulling me once more from my head. It surprised me again how sweet he sounded, how non-judgemental and calm he was.

“Oh. Well. It’s just...” I couldn’t quite seem to find the words to answer him, still staring at the table.

“Brex, look up,” he commanded as a tear slid down my cheek. I quickly wiped it away and forced myself to look at him. “Why did you think I’d be embarrassed?”

He’d done it again. Called me by a nickname, something casual, and maybe it was because of that, or because he didn’t have an ounce of frustration coursing through him, that I finally admitted a little something more.

“Someone I spent years with always was.” A whispered confession.

Tate immediately stood up and walked around the booth, sliding in beside me. I watched in confusion as he slid closer and closer. Close enough that his leg brushed against mine. I flinched. But he just smiled. With those dimples again. And then didn’t say anything else about it. Instead, he asked a silly question referencing a conversation we’d already had.

“So,” he drawled. “Who’s this other guy you went to a hotel with?”

I bumped his shoulder without thinking and widened my eyes, pausing until he chuckled. “Wouldn’t you like to know,” I taunted back.

“Well, that’s exactly why I asked.”

I took a deep breath. A second confession rising in my throat. “My ex,” I whispered.

“What happened with him?” he asked.

“I thought we were doing this question for a question thing,” I teased, avoiding answering, and he shook his head, leaning back against the booth seat.

“That hasn’t been implemented yet. Besides, you continually dodge questions about yourself.” He paused and shifted to face me a little better. “Just tell me one thing that you haven’t told anyone else in a really long time. Anyone new in your life.”

I mulled it over. I knew what he was fishing for, he wanted something deeper, something more personal, and most likely something I didn’t want to talk about. He had already figured out I knew how to ride, and probably assumed I’d been riding for most of my life, so that wouldn’t be super intriguing. He already knew I had a strained relationship with my parents, and there was no way I was expanding on that right now.

“You can’t judge me,” I said. He nodded for me to go on. “I’ve only ever had one boyfriend in my entire life. Hadn’t kissed anyone else except him, either. Well, until you now as well.”

His mouth fell open and he blinked. Heavily.

Stunned.

It did the trick. The waitress rolled over carrying a tray of food, and she scowled as she saw Tate sitting next to me. Very close. He even glanced her way and casually threw an arm across the back of the booth, behind me.

The food looked delicious. Smelled even more so, and my mouth was watering by the time she placed it down in front of us and plopped a ketchup bottle on the table. We thanked her and she left. I didn’t even wait for Tate, leaned forward, and shoved a massive bite in my mouth.

He chuckled beside me and dove in right after. We ate in silence for a minute, the food tasting as good as it had seemed, before Tate licked his fingers and faced me again.

“When’d you meet him?” he asked and then shoved another bite in his mouth.

“Question for a question,” I responded, sauce dripping down my chin, and before I had a chance to wipe it off myself, he ran his napkin across my skin and then returned to his hamburger. I don’t think he even realized what

he'd done. It cast me into a stupor, one that took me until after he spoke again to shake off and continue moving.

"Alright," he muttered, his words muffled from the food stuffed in his face. Never once had a meal with Matthew felt this casual and relaxing.

"I was fifteen," I said, and he paused halfway through a chew, thought for a moment, and then resumed eating. "My turn. What about you and Megan?"

He swallowed, washed down the few crumbs left in his mouth with some water before answering. "I was twenty-nine and just finished one of my reining competitions that I'd won." He tilted his head. "You know, maybe that should've been a red flag." He chuckled.

"Oh, man. You got ensnared by a buckle bunny," I teased.

"I think I did!" he exclaimed, and I laughed before dipping a fry in some ketchup and shoving it into my mouth. I was getting full and slid in the booth so I could prop a leg up on the bench and face Tate while mindlessly shoving fries in my mouth.

He raised an eyebrow and then smiled at me. "How long did you date him for?"

"Three years," I said and ate another fry.

He turned to face me completely, shock covering his face. "You've only been with one guy your entire life and it lasted for three years? What about the seven years of your adult life after you turned eighteen?"

"Who said we broke up after those three years? You asked how long I *dated* him for," I teased and then realized what I said as his face fell even wider in shock. I clamped a hand over my mouth and slid away from him so not a single part of my body was still in contact with him. Why was it that he so easily slipped through the cracks in my walls and found ways to get me to divulge things about myself? Shame flooded my figure as the world became larger, wider, denser and I felt smaller and smaller.

I dropped my feet to the floor and couldn't look at him. "I need to use the restroom, please," I whispered, terrified by what he was going to think. He slid out of the booth, and I walked as quickly as I could around the corner and crashed into the bathroom. The lock clicked behind me as I leaned against the sink and finally cried.

Cried from embarrassment, shame. From knowing what doors I'd just opened, what questions were bound to come after. Cried from the fact that I'd barely known this man and somehow, in whatever crazy turn of the world, I'd

just confessed something so deeply guarded that I hadn't told anyone who'd never known Matthew.

The world spun around me, time ticking on as I remained frozen in self-pity once again. Begging myself to be able to turn the clock, erase that confession from his memory. But I couldn't. Why couldn't I have said something cuter, or flirtier? Oh wait, probably because this was a fake relationship, and any delusion I'd given myself over this was just that: a delusion.

A soft knock sounded on the door. But I didn't respond. Another knock, a little harder this time. Still, I didn't move. Standing utterly rigid, I hoped whoever it was, would just go away. Hoping that I could come up with some excuse to allow me to leave now before Tate asked anything else when I finally decided to return to the table.

"Brex?" It was Tate. He was the one outside the door.

Quickly wiping away the last of my tears, I fixed myself in the mirror and then slowly unlocked the door. It creaked open along the hinges, and his face appeared just around the frame. He pushed a hand against the wood and shoved it open wide.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, looking at the floor.

"For what? Makes more sense why you've only ever had one boyfriend if you married him," he said, and I glanced at his face. Once again, I was shocked. He gave me a teasing glare. "You're not *still* married, right? 'Cause I can't do that twice."

The corners of my lips twitched, ebbing away much of the shame. "No, it ended two years ago."

"Cool," he said and then held out his hand. I stared at it, confused. "Well? I still need my girlfriend to accompany me to the wedding rehearsal."

"*Fake* girlfriend," I reiterated, and he rolled his eyes. I crossed my arms, a grin spreading across my face.

He wiggled his fingers. "Come on, Brex. Don't leave a man hanging. Even if it is just a fake relationship." His eyes twinkled with humor.

I shrugged my shoulders and shifted my weight to my other hip.

"Free food," he added and wiggled his fingers again.

"Should've started with that!" I said and placed my hand in his. For a moment he didn't move, and then he slid his fingers between mine. His hand practically swallowed my hand, but it didn't feel suffocating the way Matthew's had. The rough calluses felt good against my skin.

“Oh! I forgot to pay!” I exclaimed as we were passing our booth. Tate squeezed my hand a little tighter and pulled me forward.

“I took care of it.” He pushed open the door, and I followed him out onto the crowded sidewalk. As we walked along, my hand still leisurely entangled in his, he began talking about some of his dreams he’d had as a kid. I blatantly asked at one point how rich he actually was, and he laughed before telling me that if he retired today and never worked another day in his life, he still couldn’t possibly spend the amount of money he had.

Obviously, I was shocked, but he glazed past that and began talking about rodeo and horse stuff, all while consistently pestering me to tell him how long I’d been riding. “You already know that answer,” I replied, and then a stranger along the sidewalk pummeled into my side.

It shoved me against Tate, who stumbled a couple steps as he wrapped his hands around me to catch me before falling. I of course panicked once more as we finally found our footing, but he wrapped his arms tighter. It shoved me against his chest, and he gently placed a protective hand against the back of my head before scanning the crowd around us.

My heart was pounding. Quickly moving from my stomach in fear to my throat in excitement. And even when I knew that the stranger was long gone, Tate refused to let me go.

“Anything hurt?” he asked, his voice vibrating in his chest against my head.

He let go just enough that I could look up at his face, my arms still squished between him and me. Those hazel eyes, piercing and concerned, watched me. I shook my head no, but I was more nervous that he was about to scold me.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you,” I quickly said and pushed away from him. “I don’t mean to be clumsy. I’ll pay more attention—”

Tate grabbed my arms, preventing me from fleeing completely. “Why do you always think I’m going to get mad?” He cut me off. I shut my mouth and stared at the ground. I looked like enough of a fool already, he didn’t need an answer to that. I would *never* give anyone else an answer to that.

“Brex, please,” he quietly said and dropped his hands from my forearms. “A girlfriend shouldn’t expect her boyfriend to constantly get mad at her. That would be such a horrible life.”

I whipped my head to glare at him. Something flipped in me at that moment. I wasn’t afraid anymore, I was done. In every sense of the word.

“I’m not your girlfriend,” I seethed at him and turned around, hastily walking away.

“Brex!” he shouted. “Brexlynn!” His hand brushed against my fingertips, but I ripped them from him and curled them into fists.

“Well, thank you for the reminder.” He sounded exasperated, and I couldn’t particularly blame him. But that didn’t make me feel any less over it all. The worst part, I didn’t know how I could explain to him that I was over *my* reactions, not what he was doing. This had nothing to do with him. I was no longer mad at Matthew. I had been using him as an excuse, and it only just now dawned on me. It was only after apologizing for the hundredth time, when Tate had not shown a single moment of being upset or angry with me, did I find myself absolutely frustrated with how quickly I shut down.

With how quickly I had put my walls up and locked him out.

Eventually I slowed down, even stopping so he could come stand directly next to me. When I chanced a glance at him, he looked cold, closed off, almost pained, and I had no one to blame but myself.

## Chapter 13

Tate kept walking past me, while I stood still just a few feet from the steps that led to the entrance of the wedding venue. It was a massive building, at least two floors, with an immaculately beautiful, landscaped outdoors behind it. He threw open the glass door and moved inside without a backwards glance at me.

Not because he was angry, but because he was confused. And of course, I knew it. I had to suck up my pride to go in after him, but my feet were stuck to the pavement. A couple pedestrians passing by cursed at me a few times before I finally found the strength to take a step forward.

Just as the door opened again and out walked Tate. He was creating all different kinds of commotion within me. Making me feel terrified, safe, frustrated, empowered, and free all at the same time. His shoulders sagged and he tilted his head, a comforting half-smile on his face.

I met him at the top of the steps and stopped directly in front of him. He had every right to be upset, but he seemed to be once again more confused than anything.

“You can’t just stop walking if you’re not holding my hand. I didn’t even realize you hadn’t followed me in,” he said, and I stared at him in wide eyed disbelief. “I’m not mad, Brex. I don’t understand, but I’m not mad.”

“Why not? You have every right to be? How are you not mad?” I asked, still shocked that he held no malice in his heart.

“Because.” He sighed. “Because I don’t know hardly anything about you, so why should I jump to the conclusion that your reactions have anything to do with me?”

And now I was even more baffled. My hand rose slowly into the air, pointing a finger directly at his cheek, and then I poked him. Twice.

He grabbed my wrist right before I went to poke him a third time. “What in the world are you doing?”

“Just checking to see if you’re real,” I responded, and he dropped my



hand. His lips twitched as he slowly raised both of his eyebrows, and then he laughed. A deep laugh that had me grinning along with him.

“Can I ask a favor, Brex?” he said next, his voice becoming serious. I nodded yes. “Don’t feel ashamed for whatever your reactions are to me. I just want to understand you, help me understand.” He stepped closer to me, and for a moment, I thought that maybe he didn’t really hate me. That maybe, just maybe he might even care for me. But I shoved that out immediately as I reminded myself this was all fake.

Another step closer. He came another step closer, and I could smell that faint scent of forest and caramel. I liked it.

“Okay,” I whispered, and he gripped the door handle to pull it open once more.

This time, I reached for him. I reached for his left hand as he turned away from me and snagged the tips of his fingers. He stopped and looked down to where I was touching him. It terrified me, and I wasn’t sure what had led me to reach for him. But he blinked, a crooked smile flashed across his face for half a second and then he turned away.

Not before he clasped my hand tightly and pulled me after him. It was a magnificent entranceway with vaulted ceilings. The second floor was lofted high above us, with a railing that had a golden shimmer along a grand staircase that widely spiraled up and away. The floor was shiny, reflective marble, tinted with whites and flecks of gold.

Off to our right were two golden couches facing each other with a blooming potted green plant sitting atop a beautiful ornate metal coffee table in the middle of the loveseats. Beyond the entranceway and to our left were double doors. At least four that I could see from here that all must lead into different rooms that could be rented for weddings.

Not my cup of tea per se, but then again, I’d given up hope long ago of ever having a say in my wedding. It had been exactly how Matthew had wanted, even my dress was what he’d wanted. Way too frilly and poofy. But I’d worn it and gone along with his antics, all as a blushing barely-turned-eighteen bride was supposed to do.

“If I ever get married again, I’d like to at least pick out my own dress,” I muttered under my breath as I watched a girl run from one room to another upstairs, carrying a heavily-tulle wedding dress in her arms.

Tate tugged on my fingers, and I moved my eyes from the glittering sunshine pouring through the windows back to him. He looked stunned.

“You didn’t get to pick your dress?” I shook my head no. “Why not? You were the one wearing it.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Honestly, at the time, all I could think about was how terrified I was to be getting married. I was engaged by the time I turned seventeen, and my parents would’ve signed off on letting us wed before I turned eighteen if my brother hadn’t made such a big fuss about that.”

“I’m sorry, what?” he said and spun around to stare at me.

“We didn’t get married until I turned eighteen. Chill,” I said, and he shook his head.

Pulling his hat off his head, he ran a hand through his hair and then replaced it. “Brex, did you want to marry him? Like at all?”

“My parents liked him. Everyone liked him...” I answered, trailing off at the end, and looked at the toe of my boot. Digging it into the marble floor I twisted it back and forth. “The whole town came to the wedding telling me what a catch he was,” I whispered and bit down on my trembling bottom lip.

It hadn’t felt like a catch. Not when he shoved me down onto the floor after the ceremony because I messed up a single word during our vows. Not when he’d torn my dress off the moment we were in our hotel room alone. Not when he’d left me on the bed, bleeding and sore, and didn’t care for the next week that I was in pain every time he wanted to do it.

“I didn’t ask what the town thought. Or your parents. Or anyone else. I asked if you liked him,” he said and placed his thumb and finger against my chin to slowly raise my eyes to his. At one point I had, or at least I think I had. He hadn’t always been cruel. No, in the beginning he was everything a girl could wish for. Attentive, caring, brought me gifts. Picked me up from school and drove me everywhere I needed to go. Attending any event I was at or in and made me feel like the most special girl he’d ever met.

Until the first time I’d made him angry. No one else ever saw it, my parents still don’t believe it happened despite the pictures I started taking. The folder was still saved on my phone containing the evidence of the abuse he’d given me.

My mind couldn’t seem to formulate words, which caused me to hesitate, and he noticed. That was all the answer he’d needed. “So, why’d you marry him if you didn’t even like him?” he asked once more, and the truth was, because I had been scared. I had been absolutely terrified he

would've killed me had I tried to leave. He wouldn't have ever left me alone after. Which he had proven time and time again with cheating and blaming me and hurting me so badly that I became deeper and deeper entangled in his web of lies.

And I had been scared no one would've believed me. Or so I had thought. Many still didn't believe me, even after it went to court and rumors circulated the town. Rumors that quickly shifted from him being a wife beater, to me being a crazy, delusional liar. They'd turned on me. So I'd run. Far, far away. Because he'd been right.

Katie had believed me, though. She'd been there the day I'd finally managed to kick him out for good. She was the reason he tucked his tail and ran, because there was no hiding it anymore. Paul had believed me. Despite my parents, my brother had stuck by me. But that was it.

Now, how to tell Tate that I was terrified for my life without opening that particular scar again? Luckily, I was saved from having to find an answer as the doors to my left swung open wide and a girl screeched, running in our direction.

Tate turned his head and grinned as this petite little blue-eyed, tan girl jumped in his outstretched arms.

"Hey there, bride-to-be!" he said. She pulled away from him, dropping back onto her feet before squealing again.

She had extremely long dark hair that was straighter than a post. It was thick and full, shiny and absolutely stunning, though I thought she might topple over from the extra weight of it. "I'm so glad Dustin agreed to letting you be one of his groomsmen, or I would've been so put out!" Janie squealed again, and Tate chuckled.

"I would've hogtied him and threatened him if he had said no," Tate answered, and she clapped her hands in glee, and then her eyes caught mine.

"Oh, Tate. She's absolutely precious." Janie launched herself at me, and I stumbled backwards before returning a stiff hug. "I thought you were joking when you said that girl that you'd been seen kissing at the bar was your girlfriend and she was coming, but here she is. What's your name?"

"Brexlynn," I answered, and she jumped up and down again. Her mint-green dress swaying with the movement.

"And she has a pretty name as well. You've really outdone yourself this time, cousin." Janie leaned toward Tate's ear, and while I think she meant to whisper, I could hear every word. "Does she know you're filthy

rich? ‘Cause you need to be aware of those gold diggers.’”

He chuckled and pushed her back a little. “She knows, and that’s not her intention, trust me. Are you drunk already?” Tate scanned her, and she rolled her head.

“Only a little. It’s the day before, I’m allowed to be.” She pinched her fingers together as the doors swung open once more and out came Dustin.

“Come on, we are waiting for you two,” he said, gesturing at Janie and Tate. She giggled and skipped back to her fiancé, the widest grin on her face. I envied her a little. To be that happy on your wedding day must be a once in a lifetime feeling.

Tate’s fingers slipped into mine once more, and I followed after him as Dustin and Janie spun to face us. “No, just you,” Janie said and pointed at Tate.

“What?” he said, stunned by her odd request. “What’s wrong with my girlfriend watching while we practice you walking up the aisle and saying your vows?” Tate stopped moving and pulled me a little closer.

“Because it’ll ruin the excitement of the wedding ceremony tomorrow. I don’t know her,” she pointedly said.

“But I do,” Tate argued, and Janie shook her head.

“No no no. It’ll be like a half hour, and then you two can reunite and spend the rest of the rehearsal dinner together.”

I leaned toward Tate. “It’s fine. I’ll just be waiting right on that couch,” I said and pointed toward the golden one near the entrance.

“But I don’t want to leave you alone when I’m the one that dragged you here,” he gently said and stepped closer to me.

I smiled softly. “I’ll be fine. I’m used to being alone.”

He sighed. “Yeah, that’s what I hate.” It took me aback, he hadn’t skipped a beat when saying that. Hadn’t paused for a moment, and even had spoken so quietly that the other two couldn’t hear. This was just an act, though.

Right?

“Thirty minutes is all,” I reiterated and slipped my hand from his. He watched me as I slowly turned and headed toward the couch. My feet sounded louder than usual as I felt all of them watching me for a moment before their footsteps echoed mine. I made it to the couch just as the doors to their chapel venue clanged shut, and I was left absolutely alone in this foreign building.

I didn't mind it, though. There was a peace that came in solitude.

And there I waited, scrolling mindlessly through my phone, facing the outside world and watching strangers pass by through the window in front of me. I shot a couple quick texts to Paul and Katie, to which I learned that my brother had broken up with his girlfriend and was proud of me for going on a little side trip; although, I left out the fact it was with a guy. Plus, he was mad I didn't stop and say hello when we passed through Idaho.

Katie was in absolute shock that I was here in Vegas, and yes, I told her it was with Tate. To which she peppered me with every question she could possibly think of asking about him. Her most recent one asked what he looked like, and as I couldn't deny my first assessment when I kissed him—he really was quite handsome.

As I was typing it out, I heard something directly next to my right ear.

"You know, I think I'm quite handsome too," Tate whispered, and I nearly threw my phone across the room. Shrieking in fright, I jumped up and spun around. Though, that initial thought back in the truck that he was conceited wasn't there this time.

Pressing my phone tightly against my chest, I breathed out heavily. He rolled his head back laughing, hard, as he took in my frightened state. "It's not nice to read someone's personal messages over their shoulder."

He winked. "It's not nice to talk about someone behind their back." I rolled my eyes but couldn't help the smile that crept across my face as he pushed himself back up to his tall standing position.

"Wait," I said and tilted my head at him. "Where's your hat?"

Tate shook his head and pouted a little. "Janie told me she didn't want me to wear it during the ceremony portion." He walked around to my side of the couch and flopped down on it, his hat in his right hand. "I always wear it."

"That's what happens when you have to participate in a wedding run by city slickers," I teased, and he grinned. I sat down on the edge of the coffee table and faced him.

Tate's goofy grin softened and he stared at me for a moment, a look on his face I didn't quite recognize. I was captivated by it, drawn in by his hazel gaze, his sweet smile, by those dimples, and even that stupid mustache.

"At least she didn't ask you to shave your 'stache," I teased quietly, and he chuckled.

"Oh, she did, but I compromised with the hat."

“What?” I mocked and pretended to be overly shocked. “That’s such a huge sacrifice. How will you ever manage?” He threw his head back and laughed.

“Don’t worry Brex, I get it back as soon as they say ‘I do.’” That infamous wink filled his face and he finally placed it back on his head. “I’ve gotta take a piss, will you be good for a few more minutes?” he asked, and I nodded yes.

“I’d rather spend a couple more minutes alone than be seen with you in public with pee running down your legs.” I grinned at him, and he snorted.

“I’ll be right back.” He stood up and walked to the back of the building, turned down a small hallway to the right, and disappeared. I stared at where he’d disappeared for a moment. He was actually sweet. Kind. Silly. Not at all the jerk I first thought he was. But this was all fake, right? Those kind traits of his could be faked too.

I looked back down at my phone, seeing the unsent text to Katie and pressed delete. There was a part of me that thought I was latching onto him because he treated me in a way that Matthew never did, in a way that made me feel alive and enough for him.

That part of me needed to fade away and quickly, before I forgot that this was fake.

Before things became too overwhelming and I forgot that I could never stay here with him.

The doors opened to my left, the same room that Janie had dragged Tate into for the practice run of the ceremony portion.

And out walked a figure that made my heart sink to the floor.

A figure that made my body go rigid, and every survival sense crashed onto high alert.

This couldn’t be possible. Couldn’t be happening. Not here, not now. This time I had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

Baby-blue eyes blinked slowly as his head turned to the right and locked onto me. He hesitated for a moment, shocked as much as I was. Or pretended to be shocked, because that bewilderment swept from his face immediately after to be replaced by the most terrifying evil smile. One that had my insides curdling. He’d never lost track of me and he now knew that I knew it.

Matthew.

## Chapter 14

His grin was malicious, cunning, devious as he strutted in my direction. Stuffing his hands into the pockets of his dark-gray dress pants, he raised an eyebrow at me and then used a hand to straighten his blonde hair and the collar of his white button up shirt. As he neared me, my eyes darted about, searching for anyone else.

How was it possible that I was completely alone? Where was everyone else? Why wasn't Tate back yet? His smile faded quickly as he stepped carefully around the couch, and then he snarled at me.

"You nearly ruined my fucking life," he uttered between clenched teeth. Our first interaction since I got him sent to prison.

I blinked back the tears that were welling up against the rims of my eyes. "I-I-There's a pro-protective order—"

"I know," he snarled again, cutting me off, and then the tone of his voice lightened. The whiplash was back. "Except, it seems, Cece, that you're the one in violation of it. I'm an invited guest here."

"It's Brexlynn, and I'm an invited guest too." I managed to say without trembling. This was my nightmare come to life. He was here, he was real, and I was panicking. No amount of time or therapy had prepared me for the day that he would appear back in my life.

He chuckled. Cold and menacing, and I slunk away out of instinct. "By the way, I heard you changed your last name back." Then he lunged forward, his hand snapping around my chin. "You may be an invited plus one, but I'm part of the wedding party. A groomsman. I take priority"

Matthew jerked my head back, and I whimpered. He leaned in close toward my ear and squeezed tighter, his fingers digging into my skin. "Do you remember my promise to you that day? My promise that I would see you again? That I would find you? Well, it's here and, while you merely attempted to ruin my life, you bitch, I will *actually* ruin yours."

I gripped his wrist and tried to pry his hand off of my face. A tear slid

down my cheek as I felt my breathing becoming erratic, uncontrollable fear pulsed the blood through my veins. He leaned back, glancing to make sure we were still alone, and then jerked my head toward him. Again.

“You want to know how I got out early? Your parents came and testified to my good behavior.” He tilted his head. “*Your. Very. Own. Damn. Parents.*”

“Please,” I cried out, more tears slipping down my cheeks.

This made him laugh and rage with anger even more. “I spent a year inside and it nearly destroyed everything I’d built. But the one thing that haunts me to this day, was that you somehow got away. Unscathed.”

He shoved hard and threw me away from him. I tumbled over backwards, crashing into the heavy metal vase, which barely moved an inch but rammed me forward, and I slammed to the floor. Matthew stalked toward me and pushed the toe of his dress shoe into my hip.

“Then I saw you, or at least thought I saw you, at the bar, because I knew you’d recently come to Montana on a work trip. But, you were gone so fast, I could’ve sworn you were a figment of my imagination. So, imagine my surprise when I learned that Tate Pierce was bringing a girlfriend to his cousin’s shit wedding.” He shoved me hard with his shoe, rolling me from my side to my back, and then crouched down beside me.

“And that girl just so happened to be you.” He gripped my wrist and yanked me off of the floor so hard I cried out sharply in pain.

“Shut up, slut,” he snarled at me and shoved me back down onto the couch, twisting my wrist with his hand. I opened my mouth in agony but kept myself silent.

“By the time this weekend is over, Tate will run so far from you so fast that you won’t be able to find him no matter how long you live. I will make you so unwanted by anyone else that you’ll come groveling back to me, begging like hell for me to take you back.” He threw my arm back at me, and I immediately clutched the wrist. That would bruise, and bruise quickly.

“Because, Cece, you don’t deserve anyone. I accepted you because I pity you. Just like I did when your parents introduced us at that rodeo.” He scoffed and leaned against the coffee table. “I could have anyone. When we just met, or even now, I still could have anyone. You should feel fucking blessed that I chose you. No one wants someone as broken as you.”

I sank deeper into that couch, cowering away from him, and closed my eyes as tears slid down my cheeks once more. I just wanted him to go



away. Please go away. Leave me be; I was fine without him. Clutching my bruised left wrist to my chest, I rocked forward, curling myself above my knees, and waited. Waited for him to say anything else.

To yell at me, to scold me. To call me any other names he could think of or to finally hit me. I rocked forward and back in anguish. My own parents got him out early, and maybe he was right. No one would want me broken like this, which would explain why I was always so terrified people would find out about my past.

I cursed myself, cursed him, cursed the life I'd lived. Maybe living was the problem. Maybe I hadn't run far enough away, because the only place that would put enough distance between us wasn't anywhere near this life. Massive hands clamped down around my shoulders and I screamed, flinching away.

But they didn't let go, and I was too destroyed to fight, too exhausted to leave, so I immediately gave in. They pulled me forward—no sideways. Sideways across the couch and gently pressed my head against a wall of muscle. Gently? Denser muscles than Matthew had ever had, and the hands were gentler, not threatening despite being larger and coated in thicker calluses.

I took a shaky breath, which filled my nostrils with a familiar scent of pine trees and caramel.

“Brex?” the voice tenderly said, and I collapsed into his chest completely. Sobbing. He didn't say anything else as one hand rested against the back of my head, his other arm wrapped around my body and pulled me tight.

That is where he held me, letting me cry. And cry.

When the wells had run dry, he continued to hold me as I trembled in his embrace. He had no idea why I was crying, what had just happened, but he also didn't ask. He gave me no pressure to say or do anything. It seemed odd, as my body began to process what had just happened and what was currently happening, that he would fake this tender moment.

Finally, I leaned away and glanced up at Tate. He was staring across the room at the far wall, his chin just above my head. His eyes shifted downwards upon my movement, meeting mine, and the corners of his mouth gently rose in a tender, sympathetic smile.

“I-I-I—” My voice trembled as I attempted to apologize, but he shook his head and silenced me with that single gesture. I moved my hand to wipe

away some tears, forgetting about my bruised wrist, and yelped as the pressure hit it.

Tate snapped even farther away. His gaze latched onto the already swollen and bruised skin. Gripping his calloused fingers onto the tips of mine to allow for a better look, he tugged it forward, keeping me from hiding it away.

“What happened?” he growled, the first hint of true anger in his voice I’d ever heard. I twitched and attempted to scoot away, but he wouldn’t allow it.

“I-I-I accidentally hit it on the edge of the coffee table.”

Lie.

And he knew. “You’re a terrible liar,” he quietly said, and I shrank away from him. His eyes filled with a curious compassion and he didn’t push it further. Instead, he tried to understand. “If this wedding continues to be overwhelming to the point that you collapse like that again, please tell me. I can understand how it must feel to see something like this when you had nearly no choice at your own.”

“Tate?” I whispered.

He smiled.

“Do you think—Am I someone—” I closed my eyes, unable to ask him the question I really wanted to. Whatever answer he gave me would be fake anyway, just like this relationship. But this fake relationship, his fake sympathy was something I was needing right now.

“You promised you wouldn’t run. That you would help me understand,” he emphasized, and I nodded. “That includes when you want to ask something.”

I bit my lip for a moment, contemplating what he was saying. “Can you promise me something too?” I finally asked. He didn’t need to know what I was originally going to ask. This, however, I knew he would understand. In his own way, he would understand, even if he thought it was because I was attending a wedding. Not because my abusive ex was here.

“Anything,” he said, his arm still around me. He brushed the last line of tears from my face. I closed my eyes and turned slightly away, but stopped myself.

Keeping my eyes closed, I took a deep breath. “Please don’t leave me alone again.”

“I thought you were used to being alone?” he asked, I could hear a

hint of humor in his voice again.

So, I faked a small smile, one that struggled to escape my lips. “To which you said you hated.”

“You might get sick of me,” he whispered and brushed a strand of hair from my eyelashes.

“Would you like to test that?” I teased back, softly, quietly, even scooting in closer to him. If he knew the real reason I didn’t want to be alone, he might hate me or feel used. But there was also a small something in me that lurched around in my soul that I would forever deny—I didn’t want him to leave me alone simply because I liked being around him.

Tate gently turned my fingers around, examining my wrist that was turning a deep shade of purple. “Brex, are you sure you’re okay? That looks pretty nasty.”

I opened my eyes and glanced at the wound. It did look quite awful, but I’d had worse, dealt with worse so many times before that I knew the difference between deep bruising and an actual injury that required some attention.

“Nothing a little bit of makeup and a bracelet can’t hide. I’ll be alright,” I smiled.

He shook his head, his hazel eyes glancing at mine, laced with deep concern. I think he saw through that, knew that my knowledge of injuries like this precluded something more, but he never let on. Didn’t ask about it after that.

Tate leaned back but refused to let go of my fingers, running his thumb mindlessly over the top of them. I actually wanted it, invited his touch, his presence, maybe even craved it a little. I wondered if he saw Matthew with me earlier, but if he had, then I assumed he would’ve asked about it. And he didn’t.

So, I decided to ask a little something of my own. “So, did you know any of the groomsmen?”

He shook his head. “Not until today. They seem like pretty alright guys though. Dustin and Janie both absolutely adore them all. Only one of them is single like I am, and I heard his story. It’s a doozy. Crazy ex-wife.”

“Oh?” I asked. He smiled and let my hand drop from his.

“I’ll tell you later. Right now, we are supposed to head to the back where they are setting up for the food and toast portions of the evening.” He stood up and held out a hand for me to take.

I glanced around in confusion. “Then why haven’t I seen anyone else come in?”

He laughed. “Because, Brex, Janie asked for everyone to enter through the garden. She set up these fancy decorations that lead you straight to the reception and dining area. So they’ve been entering through the side door. Plus the caterers were already here before we arrived.” I now felt dumb and shook my head. He just chuckled, his eyes twinkling with delight.

“Tate!” I suddenly exclaimed.

“Brex!” he mimicked me, and I rolled my eyes. He grinned widely, and I finally placed my uninjured hand in his.

Helping me to my feet I brushed my pants off and spoke. “What about your parents? If they meet me and then see me when we return to the ranch...”

“Uh.” He cursed under his breath, and I could see the wheels spin in his head. His eyes slowly locked onto mine and he smiled. It crept across his face, spreading from pixel to pixel. “Perfect excuse to not have to deal with parents! We just avoid them. At all costs.”

I almost went to argue that he shouldn’t be so excited to not have to interact with his parents and then I remembered that he had a recently strained relationship with them. Because his dad wasn’t actually his dad.

“Why does it bother you so much that the man who raised you isn’t your biological father?”

Tate froze, the smile dropping quickly from his face. “Because.” He took a steadying breath. “They didn’t seem shocked when I told them. Which leads me to assume that they knew all this time and kept it from me. Which also makes me wonder if my mama cheated on my pops.”

That was a lot. And I understood. If there was anyone out there that could understand a strained relationship with their parents, it was me. So I decided to be vulnerable with him, in a way I knew I’d regret the moment it had left my mouth. “When I split with my ex, my parents believed his lies that I was to blame, despite my best friend being there when I walked in on him in bed with another girl.”

He chuckled, and pulled me a little closer to him. “I think we both deserve something sweet for a change.”

“Something sweet?” I questioned, and this wicked, mischievous smirk spread across his face. He nodded and then took off running, dragging me along.

He was grinning so widely as I ran with my hand in his, past the door he'd gone through earlier, past a second one, and then we dashed through a smaller one after that. This room was bustling with people scrambling back and forth, but he kept running. Everything blazed by me as we stuck to the closest aisle between shelves of food and steaming stoves.

Then he bolted to the left and released my hand. That's when I saw it, his eyes set on a towering stand of cupcakes. Snatching two pink-and-white frosted ones and a mint-green one, he wiggled his eyebrows at me.

That's when we were noticed. One lady with eyes that nearly bugged out of her head shouted at us.

Screaming for us to put those back. But Tate winked at me and then ran.

I chased after him. He shoved through a two way door to our right out into a small hallway, knocking over some napkins and utensils along the way. I couldn't help but laugh, racing around the mess. Several people chased after us, their shouts for us to stop bouncing around the serving area. We burst back into the lobby and then took the stairs two at a time.

As I glanced over the extravagant gold railing, I could see four people running after us. Two in matching caterers' uniforms, and the other two had to be wedding planners or something. I giggled before following Tate to the right. He slammed through a small door to the left just down that hallway and shoved me against a wall beside the door.

The room was pitch black and all I could hear was our rapid heartbeats and the shouting outside of the door. Footsteps pounded past the closed doorway and Tate stepped in closer, his chest pressing into my body, shoving my back against the cold wall. My heart raced, feeling every beat of his own, every expansion of his lungs as his warm air washed over my face.

We waited, holding our breaths as the footsteps passed by again and then eventually receded to silence. I bit my lip as Tate leaned his forearms beside my head against the wall and stifled a laugh. I watched the outline of his face, his chest rising and falling hard. The deep dimples upon his cheeks had me wanting to reach out and feel them.

My hand raised on its own and swept my thumb across his right cheek. He blinked but didn't move as I let my hand slowly fall back to my side. He was captivating and exhilarating all at the same time.

His eyes softened as he stared back into mine. At this moment it was just the two of us, just him and me.

“Let’s stay here for the rest of tonight,” I whispered. His crooked smile widened.

“I did snag us some dinner, so we might be able to manage that,” he replied, humor but also a level of sweet sincerity danced across his words. Hesitating for one more moment, he slid his arms down from the wall and stepped away from me, glancing around at the dimly lit room.

It looked to be a smaller reception hall, although mostly empty. There was one little table in the corner just to my right, but otherwise, the floor was bare. Sparkling at the minimal amount of moonlight that streamed through the dark curtained windows, but bare.

Tracking Tate as he moved toward the table, he placed the three cupcakes down and then walked back in front of me. He paused, searching my face for who knows what, and then his hands suddenly gripped my waist. I couldn’t control the shock that pulsed through my veins, except it was slowly drowned out by something else, and he sat me gently down onto the table.

I waited, my heart in my throat as he brought a pink-and-white cupcake over and offered it to me. It took me a moment to accept it from him, not because I was scared, but because I wasn’t. That was unexpected. He was safe, even if all of this was fake; right now, I was at least safe.

So, I accepted his offer and slowly began peeling the wrapper from the cake. It turned out to be a delicious strawberry mousse cupcake. Light and airy. Moaning upon the first bite, I didn’t even notice that Tate had slid between my legs and was standing there, opening the green one.

“That good, huh?” he teased, and I rolled my eyes at him, though I doubt he could really tell with the shadows that danced across our faces. I scooted a little closer to the edge, closer to his body heat and comforting warmth, and continued to eat. Tate took a bit of what turned out to be a mint chocolate cupcake.

“I want to try,” I said through a mouthful of my own strawberry flavored one.

“No.” His voice was muffled as he chewed on another bite, slowly, and mockingly.

I batted my eyelashes and asked again. He laughed and then took a second massive bite. Lunging forward as he pulled his head away from the cupcake, I snagged myself a bite before he was able to jerk the dessert back.

“Not fair!” he cried out and then tried to reach for mine, but I stuffed

the rest in my mouth. Stunned was an understatement as he watched me attempt to choke the rest of it down.

And then he leaned forward. “You really think that will keep me from tasting the strawberry one?” he whispered, his mouth hovered dangerously close as I paused my chewing. For just a moment. I couldn’t pull my eyes away from his lips that were nearly against mine. If I just moved half an inch forward they would connect.

Then I chewed just once. And a second time. And a third, all while contemplating what he was hinting at until his left hand slid sideways and he grabbed the uneaten cupcake I’d forgotten about.

I quickly swallowed and pouted as he slowly peeled the liner off of the cupcake.

“That’s mean,” I stated and then crossed my arms in front of my chest. “Jerk,” I muttered, and he chuckled, finally pulling the entire blush wrapper from the cupcake.

Shooting forward, I attempted to snatch it from him, but he was prepared this time and held it just out of my reach. I tipped upward, trying to reach it, and slid forward along the table, crashing into his body. He chuckled and then shoved the entire thing in his mouth before looking down at me, a couple fingers still coated in the frosting.

He wiggled them out of reach and, when he finally swallowed the last of the cake in his mouth, he slowly licked his thumb, then the pointer finger, and then paused, just before he licked his middle finger. “That really was a delicious cupcake. I think I like the sweet, strawberry one better anyway.”

I slumped backwards.

“Then why’d you eat the mint chocolate one?” I pouted, and he chuckled.

“Because that meant you didn’t get it.” Then he booped the tip of my nose with the finger still covered in frosting. He licked the rest off of his finger as I wiped what I could feel from my nose, giggling, and even took advantage of the extra frosting.

“Will you get the rest that I missed?” I asked, innocently. Gentle fingers cleaned up the tip of my nose, his face unusually close to inspect if he missed anything.

“The strawberry one was my favorite because it smells like you smell,” he whispered, and things slowed down.

Time, the space between us. It didn’t matter that we were supposed to

be downstairs; it didn't matter what was going on anywhere else. I forgot all about the torture that was waiting for me if I ended up alone with Matthew at any point. I forgot all about the fact that this relationship was fake.

That had felt real.

Felt so genuine.

I studied his hazel gaze, wondering what he was feeling. I didn't even notice that I was still pressed lightly against his body, that he still stood between my legs as he stared back into my green eyes. The world spun on at a regular pace, but right here, between us, something shifted again. The corners of my mouth slowly crept upwards, and his mirrored mine just half a second later.

"Let's just stay here," he whispered this time.

I nodded, wanting nothing more. I wanted to be alone with him, with a man. With someone who I barely knew yet felt like I'd never not known. He reached down and dug into his pocket, pulling out his phone. I furrowed my brows, waiting to see what was going on. He tapped through a few things and then turned on some music.

Tipping his head, he smiled and asked me to dance.

And I immediately said yes.

We swayed slowly together, two-stepped, country swing danced for who knows how long. Laughing, talking about little things, and I did spill it to him that I'd grown up riding, that I'd grown up on a little ranch and even rodeo'd for a while. To which he didn't believe me, so I promised to show him a few of the buckles I brought to the ranch with me. He sang a few of the songs and, even after being in the truck for over fifteen hours while listening to him sing, I still couldn't believe how incredible he sounded. Although, he said the same thing about my singing voice, but I'm pretty sure he lied about that just to make me feel good about myself. He even confessed he knew how to play both the guitar and banjo, though he hadn't touched them in the years after Megan.

Above it all, we mostly laughed. And I'd never laughed that much with someone in possibly my entire life. His laugh was infectious, his smile was contagious, the simple fact that he seemed to listen was all consuming.

And for a moment, I pretended that this fake relationship wasn't actually fake.



## Chapter 15

The song changed and so did the mood. The sliver of light had long since left the room, and I was merely staring at his silhouette as he placed a hand around the small of my waist and pulled me in close. I flinched, resisting for a moment before my head registered what was going on and I voluntarily stepped into his body.

My hand draped lazily over one shoulder, my fingers entangled with his on the other, as I listened to his heartbeat and the music. Slowly. Steadily. He held me tighter, and I rested my cheek against his chest as he hummed along with the melody. The vibrations from his deep voice lulled me into the most blissful peace.

And it was over far too quickly.

Whatever playlist he'd selected finished, and the room became eerily silent. I leaned away from his body, barely able to make out the features of his face despite them being this close, and I smiled.

"Sorry for keeping you away from the festivities downstairs you're supposed to be at," I whispered, and he shook his head, the small curls on the back of his head bouncing with the movement.

"You've done nothing but save me from business things I don't want to discuss. Besides, this was much more fun," he tenderly replied and slid his hand from my back to brush away some hair tangled in my long, thick lashes.

I turned away from him for a moment, instinctively bracing for an impact that would leave my cheek stinging, except his contact with my skin was gentle and soft. Waiting for another half of a second, I finally relaxed. His eyes sparkled, the tiny sprinkle of silver from the moon reflected off of those hazel orbs as they stayed locked onto mine and then slid down to my lips to linger—to stare at them.

I knew what he was thinking, what he was wanting.

Inching toward me, he slowly decreased the space between our faces. So slow, agonizingly slow. This felt different despite us already having

kissed once before. This time I even seemed to want it, not just as protection from someone, and it meant more in my heart than before. Which worried me. If I let this happen, *he* would mean more to me.

A caress of my cheek with his thumb.

A steadying grip on the side of my face with his hand.

A rapid, erratic beating of my heart within my chest. He closed the distance. His lips just above mine, so close I could feel the warmth of his breath. It smelled sweet, like the strawberry cupcakes we had eaten.

Just tip forward. That's all I needed to do and my mouth would be against his. I would get to feel the gentle brush of his lips upon mine. I would get to taste the sugared delight of his mouth.

He paused.

His lips were right there, tickling the edge of mine. Soft, inviting.

Butterflies danced within my stomach, nerves and excitement. And yet this was still a fake relationship. Plus, he was technically my boss.

But what would be the harm in indulging in something that made me feel this alive? This safe? There was no one here but him and I. I let my hand slide to the back of his neck, gripping the bottom of his hair. It was silky smooth and the curls twisted between my fingers. He seemed to shiver under my touch. One more silent signal that maybe this wasn't all in my head.

And I rocked forward onto the tips of my toes, ready to press my lips against his as the door crashed open.

We froze, broken from the spell that had swallowed us into a different dimension. It was no longer silent, no longer just the two of us. No longer was I blissfully ignorant to everything at stake; so I quickly stepped away from him before our lips ever met. I let my hand drop from his neck as the warmth from his body pressed against mine dissipated.

Our heads in tandem turned to face whoever had joined our secret getaway.

Two figures, entangled in a very hot and heavy make-out session, stumbled inside and bumped against the wall to the right of the door. Unaware that this room was already occupied. They hadn't thought to close the door, so a new stream of light pierced through the blackness. And I knew who was here.

Two people that Tate and I recognized.

Dustin picked up Janie, pushing her back harder against the plaster as he shoved his hands up her shirt and she moaned. I covered my mouth and

quickly looked away as the noises that escaped her lips made me feel extremely uncomfortable. Tate's fingers immediately intertwined with mine and he rapidly tugged me forward.

As quietly and quickly as we could, we edged toward the door to escape this unusual scene. Her moans and Dustin's grunts became even more aggressive as we finally reached the doorframe and dashed outside.

I released a heavy breath as soon as we were far enough into the hallway that I couldn't hear much of what was happening. Glancing at Tate, he closed his eyes and shook his head before chuckling.

"That was..." I started.

He nodded, his eyes wide with discomfort and humor. "Oh, I know."

"You should probably make an appearance downstairs," I replied, quickly changing the subject, because I really didn't want to dwell on something that I found no fancy in doing.

He shoved his phone into his pocket and groaned. Tilting his head back, he threw a silly tantrum. "Why?" he whined.

"Because you, sir, are a groomsman," I answered and stepped closer. He sighed and slunk forward, dragging his feet while still holding tightly to my hand.

We made our way downstairs and toward the reception area. One massive chandelier hung from the center of the ceiling, twinkling lights illuminated the cream, rectangular room. At the far side, with windows lining the back, was a long table where Dustin and Janie had once been sitting.

Many round tables spotted about, filling in the empty space. Whites, blushes, pale mint greens all accented the cream-and-gold room. It was blinding how bright the space was, but the cliché wedding things I had prepared for. The frilly centerpieces that the bride would normally spend hours obsessing over. The color scheme with matching cupcakes that sat along the left wall beside a small amount of leftover dinner food.

Without thinking, I slid my hand from Tate's and made my way toward the table. They had served it buffet style tonight, and I was grateful because it made it easy to hang out quietly in a corner and stuff my face with the grilled lemon chicken and potatoes.

I'd just smashed a fourth deliciously ripe strawberry into my mouth when Tate's hand slipped around my waist.

I turned to him like a deer caught in headlights, panicking for a moment, and it took everything in him to not burst out laughing. He snorted,

coughed, placed a hand over his chest, and wheezed silently while I finished swallowing.

“I was hungry,” I sputtered out.

“Clearly,” he replied, barely able to speak between his fits of laughter. I was unable to say something else as an older gentleman approached and began chatting Tate’s ear off with business. And that’s what the next forty or so minutes turned into. Me standing next to Tate, his arm around my waist as man after man talked with him.

It became abundantly clear why Tate had been so worried about his reputation when over half of the men that spoke with him told one version or another of how they nearly pulled out of his company because he’d been sighted at a bar kissing a random woman. Luckily, it turned out to be his girlfriend. Once again, reiterating that none of them wanted to invest in a company where the man got rich and became a dirtbag player.

I was exhausted with it all, and it had only been forty minutes of me saying nothing. All I had done was stand beside him, smiled once in a while, and nodded. Finally, I’d had enough of it after we’d been dragged halfway across the room by another gentleman, and asked Tate if he would accompany me to grab a drink.

A strong drink.

We excused ourselves and Tate led me over to the bar that was on the right side of the room, my hand now linked in his elbow. The one lucky thing about all of that business talk, Matthew had only been able to watch us, track us with his eyes, but never had a chance to approach us. Approach me alone.

Although, even with Tate around, there was a constant drum of worry that he would simply throw caution to the wind and shoot his shot.

“Thank you,” Tate breathed out in exasperation.

“For what?” I asked, ordering a glass of champagne for myself.

Tate snagged a whiskey and faced me. “Getting me out of there. I may be good at it, but that doesn’t mean I like it.” He leaned in close to my ear. “Plus, the majority of them are or were those types of men that got rich and went after any girl they wanted to,” he whispered, and I couldn’t help but shake my head. Such hypocrites.

“Please don’t ever become like that,” I said nonchalantly and took a sip of my sparkling liquid.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

As my eyes scanned the crowd, taking note of where Matthew was to

avoid that area at all costs, I realized that there was still no sight of the bride and groom. “Dustin and Janie are still gone and it’s been like forty-five minutes,” I said.

Tate stopped moving his glass halfway up to his mouth. “Why would you expect them to be back? You and I are both aware of what they were up to.”

“That’s exactly why I would’ve expected them to be back. That’s a long time...” I leaned back against the counter as Tate tipped his head forward.

Shock etched across his face. “I’m sorry, what?”

I shrugged my shoulders and glanced around to make sure we were practically alone. “I’m just saying, people and movies have this insane idea of how wonderful sex is. I waited until marriage, so you can imagine my complete disappointment when it was over in ten minutes and I was left to clean up the blood and mess in pain all alone,” I whispered and took another sip of my champagne before looking around once more. “It was right then when I realized that the world had sold me the biggest lie of my life—that sex felt good.”

“Brex,” Tate started, and I glanced back at him. He quickly downed his whiskey and placed his glass onto the bar counter, facing me completely. His brows drew into a serious scowl. Confusion crashed through me at this new and odd expression, and he continued speaking. “It is enjoyable. It’s *supposed* to be enjoyable and not painful. Or bloody other than maybe the first time.”

I scoffed at him, placing my glass next to his. Of course he thought that. He was a man. “I was married for five years, I believe I learned what it is or isn’t.”

I expected a quick response, something snappy, something argumentative to my rebuttal but, instead, he watched me with sorrow and his face fell. Pain or grief slipped across it, but not for himself, for me.

Gently, he gripped one of my hands and pulled me across the room to our right and through the double doors that opened into the night sky. It was quieter out here, soft music playing and less people chatting. A couple kids ran around a roped off area. Twinkling little baby lights stretched along the edges of the grass, mirroring the hazy canvas above. The entrance that Janie had wanted her guests to come through.

The blurry stars above made me miss Montana. Miss Becky. But

Tate's hand in mine pushed that away quickly, as he pressed his body tighter against mine and we slowly wandered across the short lawn.

"Brex," he started.

"Hmmm?"

"Sex is supposed to be enjoyable for both partners. It's supposed to bring a couple together, allow them to share the most physically and emotionally intimate parts of their bodies. It's not supposed to hurt, or leave you bleeding every time." He stopped in front of me, and I pulled my hand from his grasp, letting it fall to my side.

"Right. That's easy for a guy to say. You're not the one who has something jammed into you over and over," I countered and folded my arms. What right did he have to tell me how it was supposed to feel? How it was supposed to go? I'd been the one to experience it, the pain, the bleeding. The constant bruising from it, and tearing over and over again.

"Whoever said women can orgasm lied too," I spat out before he had a chance to add anything, feeling an odd burst of anger. Mostly because I was feeling used. Mostly because I was feeling insecure and desperate to leave. This no longer felt safe.

"Look." Tate attempted to grab my hand, but I jerked it away. Then I turned my face, waiting for him to slap me for denying his touch. He sighed instead. "When my mama found out I'd started rolling in the sheets with my girlfriend at the time, she sat me down and explained a few things. Not the usual 'birds and bees' conversation that good parents have with their kiddos. No, she told me something completely different."

I chanced a glance his way. Once again, not a single ounce of malice was in his figure.

"She told me that if I take care of my partner, my partner will take care of me. That was the best advice I've ever received. Did it take me a while to figure things out when it came to you women? Yes. Am I still learning? Absolutely. Especially since everyone is different. But one thing I know for a fact is that it should be enjoyable for both parties. And yes, women can climax." He stopped talking and pulled the hat from his head.

His eyes slid away from me as he ran a hand over his hair, hair I wanted to touch again. I let my arms fall from in front of my chest. They dangled limp to my sides as I attempted to process what he'd just said to me. Something I was beginning to believe simply because it came from him. My parents had never told me that; no one had ever said that to me. Matthew had

made it clear that I was to be there when he wanted, do exactly as he asked, and then clean everything up when he was done.

Which had led me to find every possible way to avoid it. That's probably partly what led to the cheating, and I knew for a fact it led to more abuse. He'd hit me when I hadn't been around when he'd been in the mood, or kicked me when I'd been too sick. However, what pained me the most right now, is that I had spent the last seven years believing that there was something wrong with *me*. So much so that I'd convinced myself that everyone else lied about it to make sure women did it with men just so the men would be happy.

And for whatever reason, I made another excuse for that bastard Matthew. "Maybe he didn't know."

"Brexlynn, every guy knows. Does every guy bother to take care of a woman or know how to really pleasure her? No, but every guy knows at least the basics to make it semi-desirable for women. We are dudes. The moment puberty hits that's pretty much one of the only things that we think about all of the time. Until we learn some self-control and mature a little." Tate stepped cautiously closer to me.

"If he knew, then how come it always hurt?" I whispered out, barely managing to hold back the tears. Tate sighed and then closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he didn't hesitate, didn't give me the chance to move away, and tightly wrapped his arms around my body.

"The more I learn about this guy, the less I like him," he growled out. It was low, deep, and threatening. He seemed angry, and so far, Tate was almost never angry.

"I don't really like him either," I confessed into his chest as a couple tears broke the dam and tipped over the edge. He chuckled, placing a hand against the back of my head and squeezed even tighter.

I flinched before relaxing into his touch. "So you've really never, you know? Uh..." He stopped talking, and for some reason, I couldn't stop myself from sinking deeper into his embrace. Wrapping my own arms around his waist and squeezing a little.

"Nope. Never," I said against his chest.

"Not even by yourself?"

"By myself?!" I shrieked out and pulled my head away from his body to look up at a very confused face.

"Do you not just get aroused sometimes and take care of it?" he asked

me pointedly, and I remained as shocked as the first time he asked that question.

“No. I do not,” I barked back, and he blinked rapidly a few times before tilting his head.

“Then what do you do?” he asked, and I froze, bewildered for a new reason. No one had ever asked me something like that, ever asked me about pleasure before in general. Matthew had never cared to know, and because of that, I’d never thought I needed to know.

I looked down at my feet. Kicking the grass below me. I shuffled for a moment before quietly answering. “I don’t think I know what that feels like Tate, so I couldn’t say.”

“Wait, what? Arousal? You don’t know what it feels like to be turned on? You’ve never felt yourself get wet?” he asked and I remained absolutely still. I didn’t dare look at him, and my non-answer was enough. I knew exactly what he was thinking, or unable to process, by how rigid his body went. The arms that were still encircling my body went stiff and he seemed to have stopped breathing.

“I don’t need pity from you,” I mumbled, staring at the ground.

“Pity is not what I’m thinking about right now,” he gruffly replied. I wanted to ask him what it was he was thinking about. I wanted to know what was going on in his head, but my mind was too full of everything he’d just explained and what it truly meant.

If he was right, then there were things I didn’t get to experience during my marriage that I should’ve.

He stepped close to me once more and pulled me into his body.

“And what is it you’re thinking about right now?” he asked, noticing the concentration in my face.

If I told him, he might think I was a whore or easy. But I felt slighted now as everything settled within my mind. Realizing that the entire time, it should’ve been something that pleased me, and I shouldn’t feel ashamed for that.

My voice trembled as I spoke, still staring at the ground. “I feel snubbed and want to know what it’s like. What it is supposed to feel like.”

I glanced up at his face. He was watching me, whatever look was spreading across his figure was one I’d never seen directed toward me before from anyone. It wasn’t one that scared me either, it made me feel... desired?

Taking a steadying breath, I spoke just a few more words. “And not



alone,” I whispered. He inhaled sharply, understanding the implications of my words, and wet his lips.

I wasn’t dumb, innocent yes, but not dumb and his breathing became ragged. What I’d just said to him shifted things between us. As my mind settled on the words I had been willing to confess, I immediately shoved my walls up. Matthew was right all along. I was a slut, and whatever small, good reputation I may have had left, just fell apart.

And I was taking Tate right with me. He deserved better, more.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—” I started to apologize, but Tate shook his head.

“Don’t apologize. Don’t do that again. Don’t pull away like you do,” he commanded.

“I don’t want you to think I’m some sort of-of-of slut,” I confessed and returned my gaze to the ground.

No response came however, as his phone began to ring wildly in his pocket. I glanced up from the ground, meeting his eyes once more. What I saw stung a little. He seemed to be looking at me differently. Unreadable of an expression, but still different, and I reminded myself we were just pretending in the first place. It was a good thing what was between us was all fake, or I would’ve felt my heart break right there.

Maybe it still cracked.

Tate waited just a little longer before pulling out his phone and grazing through the texts. “Looks like Janie and Dustin are back, and they want to head to the pool at the hotel,” he muttered. I remained silent as he continued. “Apparently part of it is adults only and you can swim up to a bar to get drinks. They’ve invited just the wedding party, so we should probably head back and get changed.”

“Oh,” I whispered, and he furrowed his brows. So I quickly hid everything that I was feeling. All of the sorrow, the pain, the terror and embarrassment, and smiled. “I hope it’s fun!” I cheerily said as Tate began walking along the pathway that would lead to the front of the building again, and I trailed slowly behind.

“You’re coming with me,” he said, rounding a corner. I nearly tripped over nothing as I followed him.

“Why? I’m not part of the wedding party, and they didn’t invite me,” I quickly countered, hoping to get out of this. Pools meant bathing suits. Bathing suits meant displays of skin. Displays of skin meant the possibility of

someone seeing the word Matthew had carved into my hip. It meant others seeing the horrid scar and asking questions.

“You’re my plus one,” he said, reaching back for my hand as we made it onto the busy street. Neon lights flashed, smoke curled into the air, dirtying the sky even more.

“Which doesn’t put me *in* the actual wedding party.”

“You told me I couldn’t leave you alone.”

“I’ll be in the hotel room. I’ll be fine.” My voice turned a little short as we headed through hordes of people. He tightened his grip around my fingers, making sure to not lose hold of me.

“I want you with me,” he said so casually I wasn’t sure what it meant.

“What?” I asked as we weaved through a massive group of people that were taking up nearly the entire sidewalk.

“I said, I want you with me,” he stated again, guiding me farther away from the side of the street with cars sitting at a standstill, all jammed into a small space.

“Why?”

He sighed, not very loudly, but I could feel the air leave his body. “Because Brex, I enjoy being with you.” Eyes stared at him as we passed through the crowd. Hungry eyes from very scantily clad women and men that seemed to admire Tate, all of them ogling at this tall cowboy who was, indeed, very handsome.

It made me feel small and inadequate, but his words did the exact opposite.

“I don’t have a swimsuit,” I argued once more, allowing a little bit of humor to enter my voice. He rolled his eyes as we finally turned off of the sidewalk and made our way toward the neon-lit hotel.

“What is it going to take to get you to stop making excuses and come with me?” he finally said, the glass doors sliding apart, and we walked through into a very lively hotel. You could hear the clings of slot machines and a few cheers from people winning some money.

I pursed my lips. “You have to play me a song on the guitar and sing it at some point.”

“That’s it?” he asked as we approached the elevators. I nodded yes. “Done,” he replied happily, and the smile that spread across his face seemed a little too real. A little too genuine. Had I misinterpreted the look he had given me after my confession? Something had changed, possibly not

something that drove a wedge between us, but something else, something more intimate.

“I really don’t have a swimsuit, though,” I said, and he looked down at me, a teasing glare across his face.

“I’ll call my little sister, Tessie. I bet she’s got an extra, and you two are similar in size,” he said and then pulled me tight into his hip before slinging an arm around my shoulders.

“You’re getting awfully comfortable doing things like that,” I said, and he grinned at my statement. “You do realize when we go back to the ranch, all of this fake stuff ends right?” The grin faltered on his face. I hadn’t meant for it to sound as harsh as it had come out, but it had definitely sliced things open.

“I know,” he said and let his arm fall back to his side. We stood there waiting in uncomfortable silence for the elevator to finally arrive. He stared at his phone, texting and scrolling, and doing everything he could to avoid looking at me. I couldn’t blame him. I’d said something that had hurt me too. Honestly, I’d said it more to remind myself than to tell him.

But it had hurt him either way, and now I felt nothing but shame for my actions. Shame over something truthful. This was all fake. He and I were only here because of a fake agreement.

Fake. Fake. Fake.

## Chapter 16

The elevator door squeaked ajar, and a couple people walked off before Tate stepped on, still staring at his phone. Once I was in, he turned around and pressed the four before backing up against the far side of the elevator. I remained at an awkward distance to his right. He probably didn't want me with him anymore.

Just as the doors were about to touch closed, a hand slipped between the metal reflections and they slid open once more. I glanced up from staring at the ground to observe who was joining our very tense elevator ride to find it was Matthew himself.

Immediately, I stepped to my left, shoving myself between the corner of the elevator and Tate. He glanced down at me, cold and confused, then followed my eyes to the figure who had just joined us. I didn't say a word, didn't explain anything, but somehow Tate knew I was uncomfortable and quickly shoved his phone into his pocket.

He let his arm dangle in front of me, and I latched onto it, wrapping both of my hands around the crook of his elbow to try and shrink to the smallest size possible. Matthew wouldn't try anything while here would he? Not with Tate between us, and Tate was larger than Matt.

Matthew grinned at Tate and then slid his greasy smile toward me. "So, this is the girl that everyone is talking about," he said, and I squeezed Tate's arm even tighter.

"This is her. Brexlynn," Tate said, but didn't make a move to present me.

Matt peered around Tate just enough to see me. "Such a unique name. Doesn't seem to fit her though." He smiled, just a little too sweet.

"Why not?" Tate asked coldly, and Matt just shrugged.

"So." He turned and addressed Tate. "How do you know Dustin again?"

"I'm Janie's cousin. We grew up together, so she's more like a little

sister to me. When she skipped off to Colorado when she turned eighteen, which is where she met Dustin, Janie even tried to get me to go with.” Tate paused as I slid my hand down his arm and gripped his fingers. “Anyway, she brought him home the next summer, and they were engaged pretty soon after that. She asked him if I could be a groomsman; Dustin was thrilled. How’d you meet again? You told me once, but I don’t quite remember.”

I lightly bit my bottom lip, ready for this ride and polite small talk to be over.

“Once I got out of prison because obviously I was wrongly accused, I didn’t really have anywhere to go. My crazy ex-wife sold everything and skipped town. So I decided to do a little sightseeing and bumped into Dustin a week after. He offered me a job, we became tight, and here we are.” Matt’s eyes slid from Tate’s face and locked onto my gaze.

“What a small world,” he jabbed. My heart dropped to my stomach and I felt sick.

Tate had no idea what that truly meant, so I just closed my eyes and began counting to ten. Every second that passed, felt like a lifetime as I waited for the elevator to finally reach the fourth floor. When I hit seven, the elevator dinged and slid open.

Finally.

My eyes flew open as I clung to Tate, waiting for Matt to exit. He grinned widely at us once more. “See you at the pool!” he said and bounced out of the small space. I breathed out in relief, unclenching my tight grip around Tate’s arm, a grip that left little marks along his exposed skin.

“Brex, darlin’,” Tate gently said, and I looked up at him. “Are you alright?”

I nodded and gave him a grim smile. He watched me a little longer, seeing right through the lie, but sighed and stepped out of the elevator. I didn’t release my hand from his, and he didn’t seem to mind that I kept my fingers intertwined in his grip as we slowly made our way silently down the hall.

When we reached our door, he slipped the key card from his pocket and unlocked it before pushing it open. I quickly entered the safe space and slammed my back against the wall as Tate let the door swing shut behind him.

He stalked directly over to me and pressed both of his hands on either side of me, caging me in. Leaning down, his hot breath washed over my face.

My already-speeding heart nearly leapt out of my chest.

“Brex, baby. You promise you’re alright?” he whispered, seductive, hot, yet filled with concern.

There was a small pulsing that started, a feeling somewhere I’d never experienced that had my heart jumping to my throat, my mind losing control over my body. But there was enough fear, just enough self-doubt to quickly shove away whatever that was.

“I’m alright now,” I replied, my voice quiet, timid, and shy.

He stood up straight, removed his hat, and gave me a crooked smile. “Was it because there was no way to escape that elevator, like when we first came into this room?” There wasn’t a need to specifically ask if I was scared, he’d just known. I nodded, leaving out the fact that it was also the very man I was terrified of. He brushed his hand across my cheek as he stepped back, and only then did I realize what he called me.

“Baby?” I questioned, and he smiled, turning his gaze away from me. But I could see it, the light dancing upon his face, highlighting his widening grin, and I couldn’t help but smile too. Whatever had made me think this man was a jerk at the beginning was long gone. Underneath that gruff exterior was someone who was kind, thoughtful, and silly.

“You promised me buckles,” Tate said, changing the subject as he plopped down on the couch, placing his hat on top of the little table beside it. His hazel eyes glittered with joy.

I slowly walked toward my luggage that was zipped closed. “I only brought one with me here, the rest are back at the ranch.” I bent down, and after opening the suitcase, began rummaging through, attempting to find the belt I’d shoved near the bottom after changing earlier.

Tate rolled off of the couch, coming to stand over me. I liked him this close, I liked feeling like he cared to watch. Suddenly, his hand swooped down and he snagged something from the mess I was making just as I wrenched out the buckle.

“I found it!” I shouted, and then my eyes locked onto the very thin, very lacy piece of fabric he was letting dangle off of his pointer finger.

“Well, well, what do we have here?” he teased, waving it in front of me. I lunged forward, attempting to grab the thong from his hand, but he just laughed and held it up high, completely out of my reach.

“Tate!” I squealed and jumped for the black panty. The grin spread wider across his face as I attempted to launch myself high enough to reach

his hand.

He laughed, and I jumped. Again and again as he kept twisting it just out of reach.

“Now, why would you have such a thing as this?” he asked as I climbed on top of the couch to try and reach it.

“It’s comfy. And I don’t have any underwear lines when I wear it,” I responded, wheezing as I launched myself again. He chuckled as I barreled into his chest but still missed the thong.

“Just sounds like an excuse to own a very sexy pair of panties,” he teased, jumping out of the way, and I ran after him. I chased him around the room, laughing and smiling despite the embarrassment that my cheeks were showing.

“Give me,” I puffed out.

“I think I’ll keep them for a while,” he said with a grin.

“Tate, I didn’t bring my other pair, and that’s what I was going to wear under my dress tomorrow.”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “You have more than one?” He clapped his hands in glee.

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not like you get to see them on,” I taunted, and he frowned, pushing his bottom lip out as a knock sounded on the door. The lighthearted mood shifted slightly as I realized what he was suggesting.

“I’m not that easy,” I replied as he walked over to answer the door.

“I know, you are anything but easy,” his deep voice teased as his hand reached for the knob. I scoffed, knowing full well what he implied with that. His confirming chuckle made things even worse, but I rephrased my comment.

“I meant I’m not a slut.” My voice slipped out quieter, more hesitant, and he paused, his fingers wrapped around the handle.

His head turned, locking onto my gaze. “The last thing I would describe you as is a slut, Brex. Desiring someone in that way doesn’t make you one.” That tender, caring voice of his had replaced his humorous one. An answer to my earlier question without directly answering it. He didn’t see me that way, didn’t view me as Matt had.

Tate was kind.

A soft smile curved my lips upwards, and he responded with a mirroring smile of his own before opening the door. A girl around my height, looking so similar to Tiffany just not quite as curvy stood in the doorway. A

wide smile was plastered on her face and she was holding something in her fingers.

Her eyes slid down to Tate's hand that wasn't clutching the door handle. The same hand that still held my black, lacy thong in it. My eyes flew open wide and I felt my cheeks flush red hot. She was staring at a very intimate piece of fabric, dangling in the clutches of my very fake boyfriend who'd literally teased me about seeing it on.

"My. My." She gestured to his hand, and he quickly shoved it in his pocket before standing aside. "Hi!" She waved excitedly at me and came crashing into the room. Tate let the door shut behind her and flashed me an apologetic smile. I hadn't thought about it either, so it wasn't only his fault, but that didn't make me any less embarrassed.

"I heard a swimsuit was in need! Luckily, I brought an extra. I *almost* kept this one for myself since it's the cuter one of the two, but I'm not trying to impress anyone." She winked at me, her voice sing-songy and joyful. I glanced at the bikini that sat in her outstretched hand. This was what I was worried about—it was not a one piece that would cover the horrid scar on my right hip.

Hesitating, she shoved it closer to me. "Take it before I change my mind." She placed her free hand on her waist, against her cute, sheer cover up. It barely covered her bum, but it gave me an idea.

Snatching it from her palm, I glanced at Tate. "Can I borrow a shirt?" His dark brows knitted closer together, creating a few creases upon his skin.

"Why do you need one of mine?" he asked, and his sister stalked right over to him, lightly slapping him on his arm.

"For a coverup, dummy. Besides, it'll be your girlfriend. In your shirt. A teeny bikini and then nothing else on *but* your shirt," Tessie said, grinning at him. He quickly turned and shoved her toward the door. "See you down there!" She wiggled her fingers as he shut it behind her.

I stood still, as he slowly spun around to face me. My heart stopped for a moment. He was truly something else, truly someone who made me feel more and more like the spitfire redhead I used to be. Before everything, before I'd lost myself to someone who hadn't deserved me.

I smiled. So bright, that Tate looked a little taken aback before he, too, smiled. Those dimples eventually pressed into his cheeks, straight white teeth grinning wide.

Sighing, I knew there was no getting out of this. "I didn't ask for your



shirt for the reasons your sister said. I asked because mine are designed to fit me and I don't want to go walking through the hotel lobby and casino with my booty cheeks hanging out," I explained, leaving some of the truth out, and marched over to the bathroom door as he went from a smile, to startled, to laughing.

"I'll get you a shirt." He snorted as I shut the door behind me.

I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, taking steady breaths of reassurance. That shirt didn't technically have to come off. Hanging out on the edge of the pool with a couple drinks would be just fine. All I needed to do was show my face to make sure Tate went.

Tate. My thoughts seemed to consistently return to Tate. Those dimples, the way he made me laugh or smile, his oddly protective instincts despite me never explicitly telling him what made me so afraid.

So you know what? This, I could do for him, after everything he'd done for me.

Stripping out of my outfit, I pulled the string bikini bottoms on, tied them tightly against each hip and fastened the top. It was black with only a single shoulder strap that was a little thicker to secure it to my chest. My stomach churned as I stared at the bikini in the mirror. Some underboob peeked out beneath the slick fabric, and if I wasn't careful, more than just a smidge of exposed breast would come popping out.

I shook my head, reminding myself I wasn't going to take Tate's shirt off, so even if that happened, I would still remain covered.

As my eyes scanned down my toned body, and they rested upon the four letter word etched into my skin. Just visible above the bikini line. Two years had turned the red scars to white without hardly doing much to help it fade away. The skin there was raised, tight, and bumpy compared to the rest, and my heart began to race.

What if Tate could feel it through the shirt? What would he think if he knew it was there? But then again, why did I care so much?

This was fake after all. One more day with him and we would be on the road home.

Gathering my courage, I poked my head out of the door. Tate glanced up from the sofa where he was waiting, already changed into some swim trunks and a T-shirt. Another couple tattoos littered his forearm but, above his elbow, an entire sleeve of ink began, the art climbed up beneath the fabric hiding his shoulders.

I found myself unusually attracted to it—to him.

He stood from his seat and brought me a black T-shirt. “Thank you,” I squeaked out and quickly shut the door in his face. I slipped it over my head and it covered me down to mid-thigh. I knew he was quite a bit taller and broader than I was, but this was just confirmation to how much bigger he was.

“Ready?” I said, stepping back out into the main room and hustling to my suitcase to snatch the pair of flip flops from the mess I’d made earlier.

“Yep!” he said, pushing himself off of the wall he’d propped himself on. Quickly, I slipped the flip flops on and followed him out of the room and then down the hallway toward the elevator.

The ride to the main floor wasn’t uncomfortable at all, despite the silence. Tate kept glancing at me and then smiling to himself the entire descent, but I kept that observation to myself, oddly realizing I didn’t want him to stop. The doors slid open with a ding, and we stepped out into the lobby.

Blissfully following along, I took two steps and then something snapped. I glanced down and groaned, staring at the strap on my flip flop that broke. “Tate!” I cried out, and he stopped, turning to look at me.

Grabbing it from the floor, I held up my ruined shoe, standing on one foot, and pouted. He raised his eyebrows, shook his head, causing his curls to ripple, and then laughed. A deep laugh that had my pout becoming a silly smile.

Tate walked toward me and turned his back to face me before crouching down. I stared at his squatted figure, confused. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“Get on. Piggyback ride,” he said and wiggled his outstretched hands at me. I hesitated for just a moment. Every muscle in his back rippled from the tension, the contours of his body visible underneath his shirt. There was something different in me as I reached forward to drape my arms over his shoulders. This touch seemed more intimate than those before.

Something in my body stirred as I wrapped my legs around his waist and pressed my figure into his back. His arms that hooked under my thighs sent shivers through my skin. These strange thoughts nearly caused me to drop the broken flip flop as he took off weaving through the casino lights toward the back of the hotel.

I giggled as the curls from his hair brushed against my cheek. He

shook his head again and they tickled me once more. I let out another giggle. So girly, so flirtatious, so different from any of the interactions I'd had dating Matt that I suddenly felt a little embarrassed, a little withdrawn.

Until I glanced at his face and found a wide grin plastered across it. He seemed to be enjoying this too.

Several comments about him toting me through the casino reached my ears, but he didn't care. Instead he joked with me as we dodged and weaved. I laughed and teased him back as we finally passed through the entire casino and the massive, arched windows lining the back wall appeared through the haze.

To the left was a set of double doors that Tate had me push open with my foot. It was quieter outside, no more ringing of the machines, no more whoops and hollers or cards being dealt or lost. There was small laughter from adults who milled about, and the rustles of palm trees in the breeze.

The pools were separated by low walls, simply boxing out the portion that anyone under twenty-one wasn't allowed into, which happened to be in the dead center of a massive C-shaped swimming area. The entire wedding party was already there, I recognized two of Tate's sisters, Janie, Dustin, and Matt. That was it.

Dim purple neon lights lined the pool, flashing bright against the dark sky as Tate walked around the edge, toward a group of sunbathing chairs that housed everyone's stuff. He kicked off his shoes, but still didn't put me down. Instead, he wiggled my one remaining flip flop off of my right foot and tossed it onto the seat. So I plopped my broken one down as well.

"Look who it is!" Janie shouted from the middle of the pool, a nearly empty glass in hand. I wondered if she'd been sober at all today.

"Come on love birds!" Tessie taunted, and Tate turned to face the pool. Without skipping a beat, he ran and jumped off the ledge, not bothering to remove his own shirt.

The water was warm as we pierced the surface. I barely had a chance to close my eyes or snag a breath of air before plunging into the chlorine-filled abyss. He finally let go of me while underwater, and I quickly swam back to the surface, gasping for oxygen. Everyone in the wedding party was laughing as he surfaced, shook his head like every country boy seemed to do, and then faced me grinning.

Water dripped from the tips of his mustache, his shirt clung to his body, and I could see every crevice, every valley and mountain of his figure.

Every line of muscling that rippled as he made his way to me. I was blinking water from my eyes, spluttering and attempting to find the hair tie in my messy bun that now hung oddly to the side.

Finally, I was able to rip it from my hair to let the thick, wet locks tumble awkwardly every which way. He laughed even harder, so I ducked under, slicked my hair back, and broke the surface again. His laugh changed quickly as his eyes filled with hunger.

Obvious, explicit neediness.

Desire for something that wasn't his, but he had the look he was about to take it regardless.

The sounds around me muffled as he stopped directly in front of me. The laughter from the group, the shouts to join them all faded away. Maybe I even wanted him too. The water lapped against my torso, subtly rocking back and forth between us with each breath. Touch me, my brain seemed to shout at him. Just reach out and grab my waist, something. I wasn't afraid, I just wanted to be close to him.

And he did just that. His hazel eyes remained locked onto mine, the moonlight reflecting off of the small droplets of water that remained on his hair as he placed a hand on the small of my back and tugged me closer to his body.

I smiled.

He smiled.

I hesitantly set both of my hands against his hips.

He blinked, his chest rising faster, harder.

Shivers ran down my skin. The wet shirt stuck against my figure, hiding nothing, not even the skimpy bikini beneath. You could see my raised peaks upon my breasts poking through despite the fabric that was supposed to hide them, and his eyes had noticed. I could see the focus of self-control that he was attempting to elicit by maintaining a steady gaze upon my face, but I was okay with the fact that he'd noticed. And looked.

I liked the response his body was giving so I stepped closer to his frame, tilting my head back to gaze up at him. He shuddered involuntarily and then brought his free hand up to rest upon my cheek. His thumb swiped back and forth.

Back and forth.

Back and forth as his eyes flickered from my face to my chest then back up. I waited until he'd done that to give a small tug with my hands that

were placed on his hips. It rocked him forward, extinguishing any gap left between our chests and his hands slid from my back and face to beneath my thighs.

He picked me up, wrapping my legs around his waist and pressed his hips into me. I had to bite back an audible gasp from what I felt between my legs through his trunks and my bottoms. Matt was well-endowed, but he had nothing on what was happening with Tate's arousal. I shouldn't be comparing, but I was. It was hard to not focus on his hard, growing manhood.

As he leaned forward toward my face, I blinked in desperate anticipation. Kiss me. I begged, pleaded, practically screamed at him. His eyes shifted toward my lips, same as before, and I slid my hands around his neck to give him the go ahead.

Then we were doused in a massive wave of water. It went up my nose and down my mouth. Closing my eyes, I sputtered and coughed.

Frustrated. Annoyed. Our moment spoiled once again.

Tate whipped his head around, not letting me go just yet to find Matt standing behind him ready to shoot another wave of water at us. Of course it had been him and now I was even more disappointed. Dustin and the groomsmen were behind Matt, already engaged in a childish battle of splashing each other, not us.

Only Matt had even noticed us.

I sighed and slid my legs from around Tate's waist, the spell long since broken. He clung to me a little longer, wanting more, but he and I both knew that the time had passed. And I was upset. But we weren't here for us, we were here for his cousin. I was here to support Tate, make sure my actions hadn't ruined his businesses, and then to return to our separate lives as before.

"Go on," I whispered, Tate groaned but swam away and fired a wave at Matt before engaging in the water fight with everyone. I slowly swam toward the group of girls who were gossiping and relaxing. When I reached them, one of the women whom I didn't know handed me a glass of champagne. Then we watched the men be boys for a bit as I sipped on the drink.

At one point, Tate took a quick break and removed his shirt, ringing it out and setting it across a chair to dry before diving back in. I stared. Gawking was more like it. What had been hinted at under that shirt, what my fingers had glided across, was nothing short of seeing the actual thing.

The half-sleeve ended at his shoulder, finishing with a single tattoo running across his right pec. He had no farmer's tan, seeing as how Montana was still too cold to work in short sleeves anyway, yet somehow there was a golden hue to his skin. And as he wrestled and splashed with the guys like they were ten again, I couldn't help but drool over the contours of the muscles that rippled across his body. The water accented every movement. And even glistened against his chest hair, trickling down his abs.

Finishing my first glass of champagne, I felt extra woozy already, which was odd, but I thought nothing of it as I went back for another. Two didn't typically do much other than give me a light, warm feeling.

The girls chatted, I learned who Tate's third sister, Thalia, was, and I perched myself up on a ledge and listened. Simply listened and smiled once in a while. The water lapped around my legs and over the wall that I was sitting on. For an hour or so, the girls all sat around me, gossiping like normal.

And somehow, I ended up very drunk after only two very small glasses of champagne.

I sat on the wall, just minding my own business, drunker than a skunk, when Janie addressed me directly through the haze. "You're really quiet, aren't you." A couple of the guys were swimming our way. Tate, though, was still involved in some game of chicken they had going, apparently so far winning.

I was too drunk to feel nervous when Matt came to join our group and settled himself between the legs of the very girl who'd given me the first drink. And I realized why I felt as drunk as I was.

Even in the haze of being wasted, I suddenly understood how two small drinks had gotten me this hammered. He'd drugged me. Which wasn't the first time in my life that Matt had drugged me either. But that was irrelevant, what mattered now was finding a way out to safety. Except if I told Tate, that would ruin everything for him. Word would get out that I was the "crazy" ex-wife, and Tate's reputation would be down the drain.

So, I kept it to myself.

Of course, since I didn't answer the question soon enough, Matt added fuel to the fire. "I haven't known him long, but I definitely would've matched him with someone more strong-willed." He stroked the leg of the girl as I teetered to the right.

Janie sighed. "Me too, honestly." Her eyes shot to mine. "No

offense.”

My head pounded, but there was still some offense taken.

“Maybe she’s just good in bed. You know, a good little *slut*,” Matt taunted back, and a few of the others around us told him that was rude, but he grinned anyway. The girl he was with slapped him gently against his arm, but he continued to smirk. Anger seethed beneath that fake smile. Anger I could see now that I was out of his hold, but anger that was so easily missed by everyone else.

“It’s got to be her body. You can see the outline of her hourglass frame even through that wet shirt.” The girl Matt was with jabbed a backhanded compliment at me.

Tessie gave me a sympathetic smile and attempted to redirect the conversation away from the potential reasons I was with Tate. “She probably just needs to warm up to a big group of people. Tate’s never smiled this big with anyone, even if I’m disappointed I haven’t seen my better swimsuit out from under that shirt.”

I swayed to the opposite side and attempted to mouth ‘thank you’ to Tessie. Though in my state, I doubted it looked anything like it should. She furrowed her brows for a moment and glanced over at the boys still in the middle of a chicken war. I think she knew something was a little wrong.

Janie humphed, upset. “Is it your black one that you bought for this trip?” she asked, and Tessie nodded yes. “I want to see it. Take the shirt off, Brexlynn,” she commanded. I squinted, the figures around me starting to swirl and becoming blurrier by the second.

My brain was beginning to pound, but I managed to shake my head no. “Oh come on, Brexlynn, we all want to see it! Just for the girls!” another voice said, a girl’s voice, but everything was spinning so quickly I wasn’t sure whose. Begging voices reached my ears as I continued to protest and then hands clamped down around my arms and pulled them above my head.

The spinning state fled my body the moment my adrenaline picked up a sense of fear and of confinement. Yet, I still had no ability to lower my arms. My vision focused back in as I realized Janie was holding my hands high above my head and the girl who’d given me the first drink was gripping the bottom of my shirt.

“No,” I choked out, hoarsely as they managed to slip the shirt from underneath my butt. “Please,” I cried out, still barely able to make a peep as it slurred from my drugged and uncontrollable body. Matt was standing to the

right, looking very proud of himself, for he knew exactly what was about to happen.

My eyes jumped from girl to girl, Tate's sisters just hung back either thinking this was normal and something funny, or knowing that even with their help, this battle would be lost and, apparently to them, I wasn't worth the fight. The shirt was inching up the bikini bottoms now, panic settling in as I knew there was no stopping this. No escape.

A tear slid down my cheek as I took a shaky breath in and looked toward the boys that were still playing chicken war. They were my last hope; Tate was my last hope. My drunken, glazy eyes locked onto his just as the shirt slipped over my head and the entire group went dead silent.

This was my worst nightmare. Something I'd feared for the longest time. No one near me moved, Janie still held my arms above my head in frozen shock, and I was helpless as they all stared at the giant word carved into my skin. The four letter word that Matt had already used: slut.

Another tear slid down my cheek. "Please," I whimpered out, not at the group around me but at Tate. His entire body went rigid in the middle of his chicken war for a moment, his head catching up with what was going on, and then I'd never seen someone crash through water so quickly.

It startled everyone around us, words whispered out in judgment over what they were looking at as Tate barreled my way. Janie finally let go of my hands as the girl threw the shirt in my direction. I quickly shoved it in front of my body and attempted to leave. But I was so out of it by this point, I just fell into the water.

An arm caught me, lifted me from the muffled and tranquil abyss I was sinking into, and raised me from the pool. I coughed, spitting out what water I could, as Tate was cursing at everyone, swearing every profanity and harsh name he could think of. I'd never seen him angry, but at this moment his world was red. He shoved anyone in his way into the water and then literally jumped out of the pool with me cradled in his arms.

He snatched up his shirt, slammed his feet into his shoes, and stomped across the cement. "Why are you leaving, you coward?!" Someone shouted after us, my head was swimming too fast for me to know whether it was a guy or girl.

"FUCK OFF!" Tate yelled back.

Turning the corner he rammed the door open and didn't breathe again until it had closed completely behind him. I lay cradled in his arms, trying to



understand what had just happened.

“Who did that to you?” he snarled at me. I flinched from his tone, even though I knew he wasn’t angry at me.

Tate skipped the elevator and, instead, began climbing the stairs two at a time. His footsteps echoed through the empty stairwell.

“My ex-husband,” I slurred out, and he stopped moving, breathing hard.

“When?” he asked me, before resuming the climb, although this time it was only one step at a time.

“The sixth time I caught him cheating on me,” I whispered. The wheels surely had to be spinning in his head, trying to understand everything that happened. I think whatever he was trying to process, clicked into place, because he slammed the door open to the fourth floor and stomped to our room, panting like a feral animal. My head on the other hand was fairly blank, nothing much happening as everything spun around me.

“Why didn’t you leave the first time it happened?” he asked, pausing in front of our door. That was a very complex question. How could I explain that he threatened to kill me if I did? That he’d already sold off nearly anything I had connected to the outside world, or forced me to quit my job. How could I explain that I’d already tried to leave because of the abuse, and the beatings had gotten worse each time?

Or that I thought I didn’t deserve anyone else.

He inserted the key and it clicked open.

“I’d already tried,” I slurred out, and the door slammed shut behind us. “But each time he got more angry and everything got worse. It was my fault anyway, I couldn’t satisfy him.”

Tate froze mid-step. “Him cheating was never your fault.”

I tilted my drunken head to face him as he finally started moving into the bathroom. Gently placing me into the tub, he knelt down beside it and sighed.

“I am strong, you know,” I said. He gave me a halfhearted smile. “Really.”

“I know you are,” he whispered. “I’m going to rinse you off now, okay? Can you give me that shirt?” He pointed to the one I still had gripped tightly over my torso. I handed it to him, exhausted and tired of hiding. He’d already seen it anyway and still came to me.

“We have to get that chlorine off your skin,” he muttered.

Tate reached forward and pulled the extendable shower head down before turning it on and testing the water. He slowly let the stream start at my feet and began working his way up, careful to not touch me with anything but the water.

“In the five years we were married, I only went to the ER once, despite all the times he beat me,” I slurred out, flopping my head to face his side. He watched the water, but I knew he was listening. “It was right after I finished my run at the NFR. He jerked me off of my horse, pissed that I didn’t get first place, and kicked me so hard it cracked most of the ribs on my right side.”

He glanced away from the stream of water, only for a second, his eyes pained.

“He blamed my horse for the broken ribs at the hospital, obviously. But I never once cried when he was watching. See? I’m really strong, no matter what they say.” I closed my eyes, leaning my head against the back of the tub. “I met him at a rodeo when I was fifteen. He was twenty, one of the bronc riders there, and my parents absolutely loved him the moment he showed up. They still do.”

“Wait, he was how old?” Tate asked, the water now running across my arms that flopped to my sides.

“Twenty.”

“That’s illegal. You were a minor, he was an adult.” Tate’s words were laced with anger, and I flinched once more. The water ran down my chest and back, then he sat me forward, slowly rinsing my hair of any chlorine residue.

“My parents signed off on it, and his did too.” I shrugged my shoulders, not even realizing how strange it was until now. “Like I said, they loved him and apparently still do. He got the entire town to love him and hate me. Everyone believed I was the problem so I couldn’t really leave him. Which is also why I ran from Idaho all the way to New York City when I was finally able to get out. If Katie hadn’t been there the day I walked in on him banging some other chick in our bed, again, I don’t know if he would’ve let me go. But he’d been caught by someone who wasn’t me, so I had a witness now.”

Tate finished rinsing me off as politely as he could and re-hooked the shower head. I reached forward with both of my hands and squished his cheeks together, absolutely drugged out of my mind.

“I wish this wasn’t fake,” I whispered and then passed out.

## Chapter 17

Sunlight slipped through the cracks in the curtain that was pulled across the window. My head pounded horribly and I was in the bed. How'd I get in bed? I couldn't remember much after heading to the pool last night, but I could've sworn I didn't drink enough to get black out drunk. I would've never done that, because I knew it would've embarrassed Tate.

So, what had happened?

And again, how was I in bed?

I groaned, rolling over under the smooth sheets trying to rack my brain about anything that might have happened last night. But found myself drawing nothing but black. I slowly sat up, feeling a little sore in my joints, but nothing compared to the massive migraine that was thumping inside my head.

My eyes slowly adjusted to the unusually bright lights around me. I was one hundred percent hungover. My hand pressed against my cheek, attempting to orient myself as I realized I was alone. Tate was gone. Maybe down to breakfast, but he wasn't anywhere in the room that I could see.

I was alone.

And about to pee my pants.

Tumbling like a fool out of bed, I swayed for a moment to find my footing beneath me and then froze. This was not what I'd put on last night. No, I could've sworn Tate had given me a T-shirt of his for over the bikini from his sister. But now I was wearing a nice, blue-and-white striped button up that was also his, with *nothing* underneath.

This had to be some time reality loop that I was thrown into that had changed some memories, because there was no way that Tate had put me in this. Had he? Had I put myself into this? But why? Shaking those thoughts out, I shakily made my way to the bathroom and threw open the door.

And felt everything in my body betray me.

I should've quickly closed the door, should've quickly looked away,

anything that removed me from the situation that I just walked into. But instead, I stood there like an idiot, my feet weighing a thousand pounds each and unable to move.

Tate stared back, absolutely naked.

Butt naked with everything his mama blessed him with exposed. He held a damp towel in his hands from just stepping out of the shower. My face was on fire from embarrassment as he locked eyes with mine, which were sliding down his body and then back up to his face. Something I shouldn't have done, but did anyway.

Leave, I commanded myself. But I remained frozen in the doorway, stunned by what I was seeing.

His shocked expression slowly slid into a sly grin, as he dropped his hand and raised a mischievous eyebrow at me. Turning to face me full on. Straight on. Absolutely bare naked. That look, that movement shook me from my stupor, and I clamped a hand over my mouth before careening from the bathroom, slamming the door behind me.

Apparently, he hadn't actually left the room. He'd just gone to take a shower. I leaned against the wall, catching my breath and trying to slow my heart rate as I attempted to understand what I'd just done. What Tate had just done.

Obviously, I was embarrassed; obviously, I should be ashamed. *Should* being the key word. But something else had me playing that image over and over in my head, something that made me want to see him again. If hung like a horse came from anyone, it had to be Tate, but that wasn't the reason I found myself excited over it. No, it was the smile like he'd been pleased I'd accidentally seen him naked.

I would apologize, I needed to apologize and explain that I hadn't realized he was in there. Even though it really seemed like he wanted me to see it. That goofy smile, that devious, delicious smile had me feeling some sort of way. Some sort of way that I only felt once before. Last night at the pool when he'd nearly kissed me.

Timidly, I turned around and knocked on the door. "Tate?" I trembled, waiting for his response.

"Yes, Brex baby?" he said. He did it again, called me that word, and I felt warm all over. Smiling to myself, I couldn't help but like how it sounded coming from him.

Focus.

“I didn’t realize you were in there. Sorry for just barging in,” I said through the door. My bladder was slowly coming back online, slowly reminding me why I’d rushed to the bathroom in the first place.

The door handle turned and out he walked, freshly trimmed across the face with that ‘stache still upon his face and his curls all smoothed into place. The towel hung low on his hips, and I couldn’t help myself from looking at it—almost wishing it wasn’t there so I could see him again.

That mischievous smirk crept across his face again as he leaned down. He smelled really nice, like warm caramel with an extra dash of musky mountain air.

“Would you like to see it again?” he drawled in my ear, and I swallowed. Yes, yes I would. I would very much like to see it again.

No. No, nope. I couldn't see it again, I told myself.

This was fake; the moment tomorrow came, we would be heading back to Montana, and I would never get to be touched by this man again. Never get to smell him, feel his body heat, or hold his hand again. Begging my tongue to speak, to tell him no, I waited for the word to come out of my mouth.

But it didn’t. And that smile widened into a grin.

“Just ask, darlin’. That’s all you’ve got to do,” he whispered and then walked away from me. What was happening? Everything in me felt different, especially between my legs. There was something about all of this that felt raw, real. Whatever I was being drawn in by had to be real. He wouldn’t say something like that in private, with no one around if he didn’t feel something too.

Would he?

Quickly blinking out of my frozen state, I hustled into the bathroom and finally relieved myself. After flushing and washing my hands, I stepped into the shower, knowing that I also needed that badly.

Except I didn’t smell of alcohol or chlorine. I didn’t feel that gritty stickiness that came from a swimming pool, and my hair wasn’t grimy. Something had happened in that dead space that I couldn’t remember, and the answers my brain was providing me made me very anxious. Rapidly finishing my shower, I dried off, wrapped the towel around my body, and slammed out of the bathroom.

“Did we sleep together last night? Because I can’t remember a thing and yet, I woke up in your shirt and didn’t smell like I thought I would after

being in a swimming pool?” I held up his button up and glared at him.

He chuckled, turning to face me from his suitcase, and slowly zipped up his nice suit pants. Stare at his eyes, I warned myself. Nothing but his eyes.

“No. I wouldn’t sleep with you while you’re black out drunk,” he said, and I sighed, then became a little angry.

“What? Am I not pretty enough to sleep with?” I roared at him and stomped farther into the room, throwing his shirt at him.

He caught it and shook his head, a crooked smile still on his face. “I said while you’re drunk. Not that I would never sleep with you.” He exchanged the shirt I tossed at him for a nice white button up from his suitcase, not a wrinkle in sight, and pulled it on. Except it wasn’t buttoned up yet, and I liked that look on him. I was liking everything I saw today.

“Oh,” I muttered and forced myself to stare at the ground.

“I put you in that shirt last night so I could remove your swimsuit without seeing anything. Don’t worry, I didn’t touch anything either. It was a fairly easy bikini to remove,” he said, and my head whipped up from the carpet.

“I swear I didn’t drink that much,” I whispered as he was beginning to button up his shirt.

“I know. My sisters say they only saw you drink two small glasses of champagne. But you still somehow ended up black out drunk last night.”

My cheeks began to feel warm, hot with pink embarrassment and shame. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I didn’t think two glasses of champagne would get me hammered. I would’ve never drank until I was wasted, especially at something like this. I don’t want to be someone you’re ashamed of.”

Tate’s hands stopped moving and he looked in my direction. “Ashamed? Brex, baby, I don’t think I could ever be ashamed of you.”

I scoffed at him and turned around to head back into the bathroom. “If only you knew,” I muttered under my breath.

“If only I knew what?” he asked and I paused mid-step. “That you were married to a wife beater? That he carved the word slut into your hip? That he cheated on you multiple times and blamed it on you because he was unable to get you aroused like a real man would? I’m waiting to understand how any of *his* actions would make me ashamed of you.”

“How do you know any of that?” I blurted out, whipping around in

fright to face him again.

“You told me.”

“Last night,” I breathed in realization. Still no memory of anything, but because I couldn’t remember another time I’d blatantly said any of those things to him, it had to have been last night. “What else did I do?” I asked.

“Nothing you need to worry about. Apparently, even when drunk you don’t talk much to people you don’t know.” He resumed buttoning his shirt and then adjusted the collar before starting to tuck it in. I slowly walked his way and he glanced at me.

“You’re really not embarrassed by me?” He shook his head. “Even though I stayed. I stayed for eight years total.”

“Even though, Brex. Even though.”

I reached forward and grabbed the black tie off of the side of the couch and draped it around his neck. There were no words, no explanation as to why I tied it for him, but I did it anyway, and he let me. Whatever had happened last night, whatever else I said to him or did that he wasn’t telling me had changed something between us. Changed something massive.

Straightening it, I ran my palms down his chest and smiled. Then turned to head back to the bathroom to get ready.

“Brex?” he said, grabbing my hand. I looked at it for a moment and then faced him.

“Are you afraid of me?” he asked.

I paused. It wasn’t him I was afraid of. I was afraid of giving myself to someone else in fear that he would turn out the exact same as Matt. This wasn’t real, anyway; it was ending in a day despite the small cracks that were forming on the edge of my heart that had me thinking I wasn’t ready for it to end.

I’d warned myself, done everything I could to drag myself away from him and prevent this from happening. But despite the walls, the wounds, the fear, he’d found his way in. He’d weaseled himself into my life.

“I don’t know,” I finally admitted. He dropped my hand.

“Because you think I’ll hit you too,” he whispered, and I stared longingly at him for a minute more.

“Because I know you won’t,” I quietly said, and quickly disappeared into the bathroom. If he listened, which he always did, he knew that I had real feelings for him. That even though this was supposed to be fake and only last a weekend, I’d developed a real desire to be with him.



I honestly dreaded tomorrow. I dreaded returning to a world where I was alone. He knew most things and still wanted to be around me. It was so easy to talk to him, when I hardly ever talked to anyone. He may not know who my ex was, he may not know my real identity, but he knew how horribly I'd been treated and still wasn't ashamed of me.

There was power in that, even if this was a temporary relationship. And for the first time since I'd turned seventeen and convinced my parents to let me get more piercings on my ears, wear more makeup, I found myself wanting to really doll myself up. The man I was pretending to be with wouldn't get mad about the earrings like the man I'd actually been with when I'd pampered myself.

So I did.

I spent the next two hours curling my hair, applying makeup, and creating that woman who wasn't afraid of getting beaten because she looked "too much" for someone else. I parted my hair and pinned back the left side, so it exposed my ear, and began choosing my earrings.

First, a long, thin dangly pair that created the illusion of one strand of diamonds in the front and another pinned in the back. Then, I matched the rose gold theme with the second and third, a small one on the upper portion of my ear and then a ring on the inner portion. It was hard to puncture the holes that had slowly overgrown, but I managed.

When I was finally finished, I yelled through the door for Tate to bring me the dress bag that was folded neatly in my suitcase. The one thing I'd folded nicely and kept that way. Plus the baggie with body tape in it that would be beside it. The tape would hold everything in place so I didn't accidentally expose myself to anyone else.

After waiting for just a few minutes, a knock sounded on the door and I stuck my hand out through the crack. He draped the dress over my arm and placed the baggie into my hand, and I quickly retracted it before closing the door.

I taped myself up and then stepped into the blush-colored dress. Two very high slits in the front of the skirt portion exposed my legs all the way to the upper thigh whenever I'd take a step. The back was completely exposed down to the cinched-in waist.

Pulling on the halter top with a deep V-neckline, I smiled at my reflection in the mirror. My naturally golden skin made the dress pop, and I hadn't felt this beautiful or free in such a long time. Matt would've never let

me go out like this.

Turning the knob to the bathroom door, I stepped into the room to grab my shoes. I still hadn't decided between heels or boots and when I looked up from the ground to find them, Tate was staring at me.

"I can go change," I whispered, and he slowly shook his head.

"Don't you dare. You look beautiful," he breathed out, his voice cracked slightly and he blinked from the stupor that I'd apparently put him in. "Absolutely beautiful," he tenderly said again, a smile caressing his face.

I blushed, not from embarrassment, but from the timidness that his compliment had created. "Thank you," I said and then walked to my suitcase. "Heels or boots?" I asked, quickly changing the focus from what he'd said. I was terrible at taking compliments.

"Heels," He said and I slipped on a pair of simple chunky heels the same color as my dress. "Perfection," he breathed out once more. I stared as he walked in my direction, wearing a nice black suit that fit him very well. In one hand he was holding his hat, the other he reached forward and slipped into mine.

My smile matched his, the dimples growing on his face as he gently tugged me toward him. I bumped into his body and looked up at him. "The bride better watch out, I think my date might outdo her." He winked, and I grinned even wider. We headed out of the hotel hand in hand, feeling like a million dollars.

## Chapter 18

I sat alone on a white bench, waiting for the rest of the guests to arrive. Beautiful white drapes clung gently to the edges of the ceiling-to-floor paned windows. The aisle was lined with a pale pink rug, flowers hung on each row of benches, greens and plums and rose colors. Beautiful and elegant. And a little stereotypical, but I didn't care. If this was what Janie had asked for, then it was perfect.

The pews were slowly filling up, crowding in tighter and tighter, and I kept receiving glance after glance. Whispers about who I was or what I was doing filled the spaces around me until an older couple walked up to me. Both of them had thick gray hair, the lady had hazel eyes that matched Tate's, even the same dimples as he did. The man looked hardly anything like him, so it took me a minute to recognize that they were his parents.

His father wore a simple gray suit, while his mom adorned a billowing pale-blue dress. She was heavier and short, much like Tate's sisters. They slid down the bench and sat down next to me. His mom turned, looked me up and down, and scowled.

"So," she started. "This is who everyone says won over my baby boy's heart. Some chick from New York City." The scowl on her face deepened.

"My name is Brexlynn. It's nice to meet you guys," I replied, attempting to keep myself polite.

"I don't really care if that's your name, because you'll see yourself gone within the next few days," she said, refusing to look at me.

"I'm sorry?" I replied, a little shocked by her coldness to me.

"I don't do gold diggers, sweetheart," she sneered. "Tate may be completely blind to it, but the rumors are going around."

I blinked. "What rumors?" I asked, and she clicked her tongue, shaking her head.

"Have you not wondered why everyone is staring at you? Or

whispering about you? Oh yeah, your little secret is out. Now, you'll leave him if you know what's good for you. You don't deserve someone with a heart as good as his."

This was the first I was hearing about this, the first that I'd even thought about his money in a while. Honestly, he lived so simply, so like I had once dreamed—someone who had enough to be able to buy the necessities and a little more—that I had forgotten he was astronomically rich. Her message, on the other hand, was extremely clear. And while she didn't realize it now, she would get her wish in just a day or two.

A tear slid down my cheek and I quickly wiped it away. "I don't need his money. That's not why I'm with him. But message received," I managed to choke out, and she grabbed her husband's hand before they excused themselves away from me. Just as Dustin and the groomsmen walked in through a side door in the front. Tate scanned the room, his eyes finding mine, and he briefly smiled until he noticed his parents leaving me absolutely alone and the halfhearted smile I attempted in return.

His expression fell, disappointment not directed at me, but at his parents. They saw him standing up front and grinned, his mom even waved at him. He kept his expression cold, numb, blank. She let her hand quickly fall back to her side and waddled down the aisle to a different empty spot.

I took a deep breath, attempting to find any sort of confidence I had left. That had hurt more than I thought it would. This was all fake; I would be granting his mother's wish in just a day or two, but it still tore me apart that his mom didn't approve of me. Maybe Matt had been completely right this whole time.

Maybe I really didn't deserve anyone else, especially someone as wonderful as Tate.

Wedding music began playing and the cutest flower girls slowly walked down the aisle. I watched the procession, letting myself get lost in the moment. And as we stood for the bride and a beautiful love song came on that I'd never heard before, I glanced up front.

Tate's hazel orbs were already gazing at me. He smiled a crooked smile, and I couldn't help but feel his infectious joy. I smiled back. And didn't hear a single word of Janie's or Dustin's vows. The world faded, the pain, Matt's sneering glare over Tate's shoulder disappeared as Tate winked at me and made a couple goofy faces. For a moment, the smile softened and something else flashed through his eyes, something simple and innocent.

What shocked me the most as the cheering jarred me from the little bubble we'd blissfully been floating in, was that not once had I felt afraid of Matt. More so, I'd not even thought of him. The bride and groom walked down the aisle, the wedding party in tow, and then we were all ushered out into the massive foyer.

The same entrance area from yesterday. I scanned the crowd, searching for him. Tate couldn't be far. My eyes swept over the space, the couches where his parents were sitting, the guests over by the doors to the right where the ceremony had just been, yet so far I hadn't seen him.

He should be easy to spot in a crowd, seeing as he was taller than average with that distinctive curly dark hair, but I was becoming frantic. I spun in a slow circle, still not having seen him, still desperate to not be without him. As my eyes returned to the couch, my heart rate increased. I'd swept the entire room and he wasn't there.

Then arms wrapped around my waist and I jumped. "Miss me, Brex baby?" he whispered in my left ear, and I relaxed, leaning back into his embrace.

"Uh huh," I truthfully replied this time, and he squeezed me tighter. This had to be for show, I told myself. Such an intimate position, and so casual, that with how many wandering eyes were about, it most definitely had to be for show, no matter how much I was wishing it was genuine.

Blonde hair swayed into view as I turned and smiled at Tate, crushing the beauty of the moment. Matt walked right up to the two of us and nodded at Tate.

"Janie and Dustin want to take pictures outside," he said, and then grinned at me. "Oh, and I heard some nasty rumors about your girl being a gold digger. I bet it's so hard to find someone who's actually into you and not just your money," he jabbed at me. I would bet a thousand dollars he'd been the one to start that rumor, though there was no proof. However, since he was willing to drug me in an attempt to defame me, then this had to have been him as well.

Tate furrowed his brows. "She has a well-paying job in New York City. Money is not something that she's dating me for," he replied and tightened his fingers against my waist.

"Ah, good to know!" Matt shrugged his shoulders like it was no big deal. "Anyway, outside in ten. Just for the bridesmaids and groomsmen," he said and then swayed off like he'd done nothing.

“Matt is strange. Nice guy, but doesn’t seem to quite understand the impact his words can have,” Tate muttered and shook his head. I was doing everything I could to process the short encounter that had just happened, and the lack of intense fear I’d normally felt around Matt. It had to be because Tate was with me, because despite everything he’d tried so far, Tate hadn’t been too concerned or swayed by his lies.

I didn’t answer as the cowboy turned to face me, his hands gripping my waist. He had a blush and mint-green rose boutonniere pinned to his suit now. “What did my parents say to you, by the way?” he asked.

The smile left my face. “Nothing important,” I brushed it off, but he wasn’t having it. He placed a hand under my chin and lifted my eyes back to his.

“What’d they say?” he asked again.

“Your mom told me to break up with you because I’m a gold digger and she wouldn’t have any of that,” I admitted. His face fell in annoyance. My heart tore a little more at the thought that this was all ending. I stiffened in his embrace, expecting him to let go. But he didn’t. Instead, he pulled me a little closer.

I fell into his body as he wrapped me in a hug. This was becoming so normal, so safe for me that I wasn’t sure how I was going to manage without it when we returned. Or how I’d stop myself when we saw each other again.

“Don’t let go,” I said into his chest, closing my eyes and soaking in his warmth.

“I don’t plan to, Brex baby,” he gently replied. And he held me tightly against his body for as long as he could. I even heard him shoo away a few people who approached. At one point he even attempted to solicit my services in escaping the wedding pictures.

“I’m mad at Janie, so why do I need to go?” he whined and I giggled, finally moving my head away so I could see his face. I kept my arms around his waist, and he held me wrapped in his embrace, gently around my shoulders. It felt so easy and comfortable being like this.

“Because today isn’t about you,” I answered and rolled my eyes. “Wait, why are you mad at Janie?” I asked, but he didn’t answer the question. Instead he pouted like a little kid, slumping forward.

“Please don’t make me go,” he begged again, and I laughed.

“You have to go.”

“But that means leaving you,” he said, the humor shifting to

something a little more serious. One arm left my figure and he placed his hand against my left cheek, sweeping his thumb across it. His eyes slid from mine to my exposed ear and he gently traced the piercings. "I like these."

I smiled, relaxing into his touch. "My ex hated them and nearly ripped them out when he saw I'd gotten them," I said without thinking, and his thumb faltered.

"Then I like them even more." He resumed touching my ear. Eventually he slid his thumb in front of my ear and placed the rest of his massive, calloused hand behind it. I didn't want him to stop touching me. It was the first time in so long that I craved human touch, that I wanted that contact with someone else, especially a man.

His opposite hand slid up my neck and rested around my right ear. Pressure from his grip tilted my head to expose my left side a little more, and he brought his face forward. Without hesitation, his lips pressed against my neck. Soft, tender, his mustache lightly brushing the skin.

The world caved in, disappearing altogether, and not a soul was left in the room with us.

It was gentle, endearing, and simple. I closed my eyes, letting myself sink into his kiss. There was nothing aggressive about it, nothing lustful. He had simply wanted to kiss my skin, and that was what he'd done. I gripped his suit coat tighter as he slowly pulled away, his velvety lips leaving my neck.

My eyes remained closed as his breath swept across the freshly kissed skin. He was merely hovering over the dewey spot, and I dared not move, partially hoping he would do that again, but also trying to process the rush of emotions that action had elicited.

Never once before in my life had a kiss felt so innocent yet hungry. So much more.

His lips returned to my neck, and I shuddered under the contact. It was brief once again, and nothing more than his mouth pressed against my skin, but the message it spoke without a single word was so much more. This time as he pulled his head away, I blinked, and time resumed.

I slowly turned my head toward Tate once more, his eyes searching mine. A gentle smile spread across my face, my own gaze filling with warmth and twinkling at him.

Because of him.

Only him.

We were in our own little world once more, just the two of us despite the chatter that swirled around, despite the people that were frantically running back and forth to set up for the next event. And it was then as my eyes allowed others to enter, I noticed a young woman walking in our direction holding a camera.

She had her blonde hair pulled up into a ponytail out of her round face with the brightest cheeks. Her eyes were wide with delight, and she looked just a little out of place being the only one in jeans and a T-shirt. She waved as soon as she recognized I was watching her.

Tate's eyes followed mine when I hesitantly waved back, and she came to stand beside the two of us. "Hi! I'm Emery the photographer. I was sent to find a tall, curly-haired handsome groomsman with a mustache to wrangle for pictures outside." She smiled brightly, and Tate dropped his hands from me and turned to face Emery. Her eyes wandered up and down Tate before looking at me once more. "Although I wasn't told they were missing a bridesmaid, and you're not wearing the same mint-green dress."

"Oh, I'm not a bridesmaid," I said, politely smiling.

Emery tilted her head. "Oh."

Tate slipped his fingers into mine. "Sorry, I was just on my way," he said.

"Definitely looked like it. Why don't you bring your girlfriend, and she can watch? Then, when we are done with the wedding photos, I am actually wondering if I could take some pictures of you two?" she smiled, and I blinked, confused.

"What?" Tate said, voicing what I was thinking. Emery waved her hand, and we trudged after her, back through the reception hall where the rehearsal dinner was held last night.

"It's just, I'm a wedding photographer and I take pictures of couples all the time. Like all the time. But it's been such a long time since I've seen such intimate innocence between a couple that is clearly in love." She paused and turned to face the two of us. My mind was just attempting to process what she had stated. "Anyway, most of the time people fall in love for what they can offer, you two look at each other for simply who you are. You look at him, asking for nothing but him as a person, and he seems to want nothing but to be with you."

Emery turned around and kept walking. But my feet refused to follow, even after Tate took a step toward her. He glanced at me, but I couldn't read



his face, couldn't quite understand what was happening. We'd sold this fake relationship so well, the photographer thought this was something real.

Nudging my legs forward, I was able to resume walking, and as we passed through the doors, Tate spoke. "We don't want to impose on your time. It's Janie and Dustin's wedding," he offered.

"It's not a big deal. They are heading for some private time for a couple hours once we finish with the wedding party photos, so I have a break anyway." She grinned back at us. "I won't even charge you. You two would be your normal selves, and I would just happen to be there, helping make sure we get the best angles. Don't say no, it's free photos and helps me expand my portfolio."

The entire wedding party was already waiting outside beneath the twinkling fairy lights. The bride's and groom's families wandered the lawn, standing by for the pictures to finish. All that had been missing was Tate. "Besides, I must confess I already took some pictures of the two of you," she continued and then pointed to the group. Tate glanced at me, and I offered him a timid smile. He closed his eyes for a moment and then dropped my hand.

It was surprisingly quite entertaining to watch the picture process. She was a phenomenal photographer, making sure every detail was positioned just right, that everyone stood at their best angles. But I only glanced at the others for a few minutes before I couldn't seem to stop staring at Tate. He stood a little taller than the rest, and his suit seemed to fit him just a little better than even the groom's.

Or maybe I was just biased because, to me, he was the most handsome. Matt kept glancing between Tate and me, a scowl slowly forming on his face the more I smiled at Tate and the more he winked at me. I leaned against the table that was sitting upon the wall, waiting for pictures to end so they could put the signing book and a few other decorations on it for guests arriving this evening for the reception.

It was a beautifully sunny day and the scenery was breathtaking. A little more desert, a little more barren than I was used to, but all the same, the twinkling string lights and palm trees that swayed in the gentle breeze were nice. Near the end of the pictures, Tate's sisters all came over and told me they were sorry.

Although I had no idea what they were apologizing about, I graciously accepted their regrets while watching Tate who glanced over at me

and smiled, those dimples pressing into his cheeks. Even as his hazel eyes returned to the camera, I couldn't help but feel like the thoughts in his head were on me and not what he was currently doing.

Finally, the entire wedding party pictures were done, and that handsome cowboy came swaying back over as everyone else left. Matt was fuming as Tate pressed his hands on the table on either side of me and leaned forward.

And I didn't flinch away.

"Ready to be the star of the show?" he whispered, and I blushed. "Oh wait, you already outshone the bride, so now we just need to acknowledge that." He leaned closer and winked.

"Alright!" Emery said behind us, adjusting her camera lens, but I didn't even look at her as Tate's eyes locked onto mine. I couldn't focus on anything but him, and the grin on his face melted away into that same look that he had before. That same look he gave me before he'd kissed my neck.

My hyperactive sense of situational awareness that was normally stuck on overdrive, lugged and stalled; for the first time in years, I felt my system shut down and finally take a break. It was just him and I. And maybe that's why I thought I could do this. Maybe that's why I finally nodded my head yes and he turned around to receive instructions from Emery.

She had us start against the wall, pressing my shoulders tightly to it, as Tate held my waist with one hand, gently tugging me toward him to form an arch in my back. The other palm he pressed against the wall beside my head. His lips hovered just above mine, daring for me to place mine against his.

But I reminded myself that this was for pictures, to just gaze into those hazel orbs that I so longed to get lost in.

Emery gave us other places to be, other poses that were just as close, just as inviting and intimate, and with each passing picture, I was struggling to remain true to my conviction that everything was fake.

I draped my legs off to the side, planted firmly in Tate's lap, and Emery asked me to set my palms against the lawn. As I leaned back, bracing against my hands, his calloused fingers swept gently across my chin, tipping my head back up to the sky. I inhaled a deep, shaky breath as he brushed some hair from my neck.

And then kissed my skin once more.

My body felt warm and I couldn't help but let out a silent whimper.

This was a feeling I craved to savor.

“Tate?” I whispered.

“Hmmm?” he said against my skin, pulling away once Emery gave us the okay. I tilted my head forward and looked at him. Studied each sharp line of his face, each powerful feature of his figure. The hand against my back slid to my leg as the other dropped to the grass. I think he knew I wasn’t actually wanting to ask him a question.

I just wanted to see him.

I knew that time was slowly ticking against our favor, slowly taking us back to the ranch and out of this fake little world we’d created. And I just wanted a few more moments with him, just him. His thick dark lashes swept across his eyes as he blinked, curling upwards like his hair. Hair that I really wanted to touch again.

Just one more time. Just one more moment with him and no other responsibilities in the world. That’s what I wanted. The fear was gone when I was with him, the exhaustion, the hesitation that constantly consumed me slid away upon the breeze when I was with him. I was “Brex baby” to him. That’s who I wanted to be for as long as possible.

“Brex, baby?” he whispered, breaking my trance.

“Hmmm?” I sat farther up, twisting my upper body to face him.

He stretched his hand forward, keeping the one on my leg steady, but the fingers that brushed against my cheek were trembling. Resting underneath my hair around my ear. His thumb slid back and forth as he leaned forward, his hazel eyes telling me exactly what he wanted to do. I could feel the uncertainty of what the action would mean and just before his lips landed on mine, just before he kissed me, he paused.

Our eyes locked, wordless desperation passed between them for just a moment more, and that was all that was needed. My heart raced in my chest, driving me to be bold and take what I wanted. To steal a moment that had continually been ripped away from both of us. His eyes slipped back to my lips as mine glanced at his. Waiting, inviting.

I gripped one pant leg of his and crashed into his mouth.

He tasted sweet, like whiskey and honey. The warmth of his velvet kiss caressed my entire soul, filling me with a desire I’d long since denied. I wanted more. I craved this simplicity and passion as he shoved his lips harder against mine. As if he couldn’t quite get enough. The silkiness of him felt like nothing before.

A kiss that held more passion than the world had seen, whispering dark threats of all consuming fate.

He pulled back, pausing the spell that was slowly cascading down around us, and I opened my eyes. He only moved away just enough to stare at my lips for a brief moment, then the magic resumed. I placed my free hand around the back of his neck, and he crashed his lips back onto mine. My heart felt calm and excited at the same time as he kissed me more deeply than before. More urgency filled his frame as he tightened a hand against my back, holding me closer against him.

I slid my fingers through his curls as his hold pushed harder against my cheek, and then he parted his mouth.

Following suit as he kept kissing me, I didn't hesitate to allow entrance, and he slipped his tongue into my mouth. I shifted on his lap, pulling one leg from over his, and adjusted so I could straddle him. There wasn't a single lustful thing about this kiss. I just wanted to be closer to him. Feel more of him.

I wrapped both of my hands around his neck and kissed him back, as deeply as I could manage. And the spell locked into place, weaving a web of fragile uncertainty. His arms wrapped around my waist as his tongue slid across mine, our mouths moving in sync, easy and free and speaking something that was unable to be communicated with words.

Panting, full of desire and a hunger for more, I slowly pulled away. Our lips remained locked a moment longer than the kiss itself, and he blinked, his eyes latching onto mine. Solitude swelled around us, cocooning us into a delicate embrace. He smiled and leaned in to lock his lips against mine once more.

"That was the most beautiful kiss I've ever photographed, but let's change the scenery now," Emery said, bursting through our little bubble, and I jumped slightly.

I'd completely forgotten she was even there.

She smiled and started to walk away. Tate pulled his bottom lip between his teeth and closed his eyes for a moment, feeling just as I was. He had forgotten she was watching as well. Gently, he helped me off of his lap and stood up. We followed closely behind her as we walked back through the doors and into the completely empty reception hall.

She paused and then squealed. "Here!" She pointed to an ornate desk pushed against the wall near the entrance of the hall. Moving some of the

decor off of the table she turned back to us. “I want you to put her on the counter here and, well, be a boy. Like, a *boy boy*,” she addressed Tate, and he raised his brows, I think a little shocked.

“What?” I squeaked.

Emery winked at Tate as he studied her for a moment and then his gaze darkened and drifted to me.

My stomach flipped and I realized what she meant. My cheeks flushed red, but there was no time to protest as his massive hands wrapped around my waist and he did exactly as she instructed. This time, he didn’t hesitate, or wait. His tongue was down my throat before I had a moment to process what was going on.

And I liked it. I liked his hand that was slowly trailing up my bare leg, pushing higher and higher, past where the slit of my dress ended.

I liked his mouth that suddenly left mine and trailed over to my ear and then down my neck.

He bit down and then slid his tongue across what was exposed of my collarbone. Tate pressed his hand against my back, sliding me forward across the table, and I tilted my head back in reaction, my fingers kneading through his hair. I liked feeling his lips against my skin. I liked that his fingertips dug into my leg tighter.

My heart was racing, my chest rising faster and faster with every needy touch from him, and a strange pulsing started deep within my belly. His fingers inched up my skin closer toward the center of my legs, an area that was becoming increasingly wet. A very quiet moan released from my lips, and I felt him smile against my collarbone before he bit at it and then returned his mouth to mine.

This was more aggressive and needy. Even from me, as my free leg slid upwards, wrapping against his body and his hips thrust into mine. He was very excited, hard between my legs, and the image from this morning in the bathroom had me shuddering in desire. A very dirty thought, but one that had me craving more.

Tate pulled his mouth away from mine, and I let out a small whine. He chuckled and then moved his lips to slide across a couple of my earrings.

“And what is it that you are feeling right now, Brex baby?” he whispered, and I bit my lip. He knew exactly what I was feeling, exactly what I was wanting despite never experiencing something like that before. Somehow, even though I’d never known full pleasure before, I now

understood what he meant before when he'd asked me what I did when aroused.

There was an ache between my legs that had me itching for anything to happen, to relieve the desirable pressure. Growing to be almost uncomfortable. It had me pressing my hips tighter against him, nothing noticeable, but the subtlety in our body language was enough that I didn't need to verbally answer his question.

His lips kissed my ear once more as he slowly moved away, and I opened my eyes. The smile upon his face was laced with desire, temptation, and safety. My heart was racing from the excitement, not because I felt so unsure.

That was nonexistent. There was nothing but whatever strange and rousing feelings he had elicited from me swirling within my rather warm figure.

I smiled back, as wide as I could, and kept my right fingers laced with his curls. Twisting them around, I placed my left hand against his cheek. And smiled even more. His grin widened, spreading across his face so pure and sweet. There was also a little bit of gratification that glinted in those hazel eyes.

"Feeling proud of yourself?" I questioned, and he nodded before pecking my lips.

"Very." He kissed my forehead as Emery sidled over, once again breaking the spell. And there was a small part of me actually a little annoyed that someone else was there.

She took more pictures, these were more playful, and I was exhausted by the time we finished. She snagged our emails and told us she'd send them once she tried a few new editing things on them.

Tate threw his arm around my shoulders, after quickly running and grabbing his hat from the room upstairs he'd left it in, and we slowly walked from the building. Obviously to be back in an hour or two for the reception, but for now it seemed that even he wanted some time alone to relax.

"I want a nap," I said as he moved his arm from my shoulders to hold my hand.

"Me too."

"But not in the hotel room. Somewhere in the warm sun, up on a mountain top," I breathed out, reminiscing in the many summers that my brother Paul and I would ride up a hillside near home and stay over the

weekend.

“You are not made for New York City.” He chuckled.

“Idaho will always have my heart. The west with the mountains will forever be home, no matter how horrible the memories ended up being. There were still a few good ones laced in it all.” I looked up at Tate as we meandered along the sidewalk.

“Well, I have a knack for finding dirt roads that lead up mountains. What do you say about climbing in the truck and finding a spot?” He met my eyes, and I grinned, nodding an enthusiastic yes.

## Chapter 19

It only took Tate about twenty minutes to find this cute little hillside out in the middle of nowhere to park. He wasn't kidding about having a knack for it, and I had loved having the windows rolled down and my arm hanging out while he'd driven to the top. He'd also come prepared, and after removing his suit coat and rolling up his sleeves, he was now moving blankets from the cab to the bed, spreading them out so it would be softer to lay on.

I kicked off my heels and opened my door just as he came around and offered a hand. Stepping out, I accidentally landed on the edge of my dress and fell into a wall of muscle. He caught me easily, laughed at me, and then carried me the rest of the way to the bed of the truck. I clung to him, my arms wrapped around his neck, soaking in the comfort of being held by him.

He laid down in the back on top of the blankets, and I, for whatever reason, rested my head on his chest, staring at the sky.

The clouds were bright white and puffy, forming all different shapes across the light-blue canvas. The breeze was just right, the lack of motors and people chatting was perfect.

"Horse!" I pointed to one of the clouds that was floating by. His fingers danced up and down my back as we named shapes we saw in the sky.

"Of course you see a horse," he teased, and then pointed at a cloud nearby. "Boobies."

I snorted, completely shocked, and then burst into a fit of laughter. "I think that was the first time I've ever heard you say something so immature," I managed to cough out between fits of laughter.

"I'm just trying to keep you on your toes." He kissed the top of my head and stroked my arm. My eyelids felt heavy, so at peace. I was alone with a man, and so comfortable being with only him that I was tired. This was a safe place; he was safe.

I curled onto my side, scooching closer to him, and closed my eyes. The steady rhythm of his heartbeat and chest rising and falling with each



breath had me out like a light within the minute.



I awoke lying on the hard bed of the truck with Tate no longer beside me. Blinking the sleep from my eyes, I shot up, panicking. It was already dark, the sun had gone down long ago, and the moon was beginning to rise in the spotted starry sky. As my eyes settled in on my surroundings, I found Tate standing against the tailgate, smoke swirling around his head, and the red glow of a cigarette planted between his teeth.

“Since when do you smoke?” I sleepily asked, and he turned around, a cigarette hanging from his lips.

“Jake and I smoked off and on growing up, my mama used to get so angry every time she caught us. He can’t go nearly anywhere without a cigarette in his mouth now. I only smoke once in a blue moon.”

I slid forward, letting my legs dangle off the back of the truck. “And why was now the time you felt like it?” I asked as he took a long drag.

“Because I’m feeling unusually content and happy.” He blew out a puff and gave me a crooked smile.

“Well, you’ll need a mint before I’ll kiss you again.”

He chuckled and dropped the cigarette onto the ground before stomping it out. One hand shoved into a pocket as he picked up the trash from the ground and then presented me with a small package of gum.

Facing me, he deliberately made a show of putting the gum in his mouth and chewing. I shook my head and giggled as he stole a kiss before lifting me off of the tailgate. With one hand he shut it and then carried me over to the passenger side.

Once I was in the seat and the blankets were returned to the cab of the truck, Tate had us winding down the road, headed back to the reception. “Why’d you let me sleep so long?” I asked, finding courage to slide over to the middle.

His eyes shifted to watch me for a moment and then he placed a hand on my leg as I bit my lip and hesitantly weaved my fingers through the hair that was against the nape of his neck. He shuddered and smiled at my touch.

“You looked like you needed it.” He squeezed my leg. “And I liked that you felt comfortable enough with me to do that.”

“Then why’d you leave before I woke up?”

“My arm fell asleep,” he answered, and I grimaced. But he just smiled and slid his thumb back and forth across my skin. I didn’t want this to end. This trip was about to leave me in a world of hurt; as soon as we returned to the ranch, my heart would shatter. But this blissfulness that I’d been feeling left me thinking that at least it was worth it, even if in the end it was only for a weekend.

The night sped by, the two of us lost in our own world, even after we returned to the reception hall. Something had seemed off between Tate and the wedding party, like he was upset with them and they were feeling guilty. As if they knew they were in the wrong for whatever he was mad about.

But I don’t think he cared too much at the moment, nor did I care enough to ask because he spent the entire night with me, not once acknowledging anyone else. Dancing and laughing and teasing me like he always did. I could hear people whispering about us, and I think they were a little annoyed with the dancing because no matter what song, all Tate knew how to do was country swing or some two-step, but I didn’t care.

In fact, I enjoyed it.

Being this close to him, his undivided attention, the small kisses he would steal throughout the night, the fact that he seemed to always be touching me in some way or another. I liked it all.

And his singing voice. Every time a country song would come on, I wanted to dance closer to him because I would get to hear it. When the song “I Cross My Heart” by George Strait came on, we danced close, and I pressed my body as tightly into his figure as I could. He tilted my chin up to meet his gaze and sang to me.

Or at least watched my eyes the entire time he sang. I wanted it to be him singing to me, but we were in public so I couldn’t be sure this wasn’t for show. I couldn’t be sure that he really cared about me that much.

But I wanted to believe he did. And for one more day, I would pretend he shared the same real feelings I had.

Every chance I could, I wrapped my hand behind his head and twisted his curls between my fingers. It became something of comfort, I think, for not just me but him as well, and by the time Janie and Dustin had their send off, I was ready to crash.

He was the sweetest. Every time I needed to go to the restroom, he waited patiently outside the door, and now, he needed to use the facilities. I was worried to be left alone, but Matt was nowhere to be seen, so it was my turn to wait outside the bathroom for him.

And of course, as luck would have it, the one time I had to be alone, footsteps sounded beside me. Please don't be Matt, please, I begged and glanced over my shoulder to find Tate's parents walking in my direction.

His mom actually attempted a smile as they both stopped in front of me, which did nothing but confuse me. "Brexlynn, was it?" she said, and I nodded stiffly. "I think we owe you an apology."

I watched her for a moment, curious where this was going. "It's fine," I said, though it really wasn't, I was just too tired to argue.

"No, I see how happy you make him. That smile he's constantly worn tonight has been vacant from his face for years." Another smile spread across her face, and I let my cold expression dissipate from my figure. Not a smile yet, but at least something a little nicer.

"Anyway," Tate's father said. "We were wanting to invite you to Sunday dinner or something soon."

I had to do everything I could to not act shocked or nervous. Mostly, I felt disappointed, even a little heartbroken. Whatever I chose to say next would solidify that I had a mere evening and fifteen-hour drive left with Tate. There would be no Sunday dinner with his family, no "something soon" with them or Tate.

I offered a halfhearted smile. "If I'm still in town, that sounds lovely," I lied. The biggest white lie of my life. I would still be in town, but there wasn't a dinner that would be had, because Tate and I were about to go back to whatever separate lives we were living before this weekend. Despite everything I'd confessed to him, or he'd figured out.

The bathroom door swung open before his parents could reply, and Tate strutted out, pausing the moment he looked up from tossing the paper towels into the trash. "Mom, Dad, what's going on?" he asked, his voice short and the smile completely gone.

"Oh, we were just inviting your girlfriend to Sunday dinner." His mom smiled, and he shook his head.

"I haven't been to Sunday dinner in a year myself, did you think inviting her would convince me to come? Fix everything?" He sounded frustrated, not angry, but ready to get out of here.

“Tate, we haven’t pushed the subject, hoping you’d come talk to us at some point like Tessie did, gave you your space to process, but it’s been a year now. Please, son, talk with us,” his dad said, and Tate shook his head.

“There’s nothing to discuss.”

I don’t know why, but it seemed there was a desperation in his parents' voices, something I wished I had heard from mine by now, so I turned and slipped a hand into Tate’s. “Maybe you should give them a chance to at least explain,” I whispered, and he looked down at me, startled at first, and then glared.

For quite some time I could see him debating whether he should argue with me or not. I knew that I had no right to be saying any of this to him, seeing as the situation that I was in with my own parents. But there was something here that told me to continue to press the issue.

The way he’d spoken of them on our drive to Vegas, the love and care that I could see in his eyes, and the longing in his parents’, pushed me again and again to get him to continue. So I rocked forward on my tip toes and placed a hand against his shoulder so only he heard the words I was about to whisper.

“You have a chance. They are wanting to tell you, isn’t it better to know than to not have that chance at all?” Then slowly, as his hazel eyes stayed locked with mine, as he took a few breaths to think, and his expression softened.

In front of his parents, he leaned and kissed me gently on my forehead. “Explain,” he said and then faced his parents without letting go of my hand. I felt him give it an extra squeeze, tightening his hold as if to tell me that he understood. Understood that at least he had a possibility to speak with them.

His parents' faces fell in relief and a tear slid out of his mother’s eye. “A year after Thalia was born, we found out your father had cancer. And when all of the surgeries and treatments were finished, we also learned he could no longer have kids.” Her voice was soft, quiet, and Tate’s expression became one of shock and then guilt, knowing where this was going.

“You and Tessie are both from the same donor, but that donor isn’t your dad. So, although your two older sisters are biologically your father’s, you two are not,” she finished and went quiet.

My mind was reeling in such joy and excitement. His mom hadn’t cheated, his father hadn’t suffered the pain of an unfaithful spouse. Although

the cancer was a scary thing, he must be in remission now, and Tate could finally find a way to move forward with his parents.

His dad stepped forward, his eyes soft and full of love for his son. “I’m so sorry, Tate. I wish I was your father especially because you were the son I never got, but I—”

“You’ll always be my dad,” Tate interjected and crashed forward into his father’s arms. Such simple and quick forgiveness crossed between him and his father. It was a beautifully strange moment of unspoken words between father and son, a moment where all the anger and frustration and hurt dissipated in a single embrace. A moment where Tate seemed like a little kid again wrapped up in his dad’s hug. Such a blessing it was for me to see the transition between parent and child firsthand. Although I knew they had a rocky road ahead to rebuild what had been destroyed, at least both the parties wanted that.

I missed that feeling, I missed my dad, but was at least grateful I got to witness this reunion. Tate hugged his mama after that and gave her a kiss on her cheek. “I’m sorry I was so upset for so long,” he apologized after pulling away.

She reached up and placed a weathered hand against his cheek as his dad gripped his shoulder. “It’s okay, son. All is fixed now. Thanks to this beautiful woman right here,” his mom said, and she smiled so sweetly at me, her eyes misty from the overwhelming emotions.

Tate’s gaze met mine, and he smiled, that smile that created dimples in his cheeks. “Thanks to her.”

His parents both whispered to me a “thank you” and then they left us alone, both moving a little lighter and a little freer than before. But it was Tate who looked the most relieved, as if everything in his life was coming together.

“She didn’t cheat. But he had cancer,” Tate muttered as he stared after them. I stood there just waiting for him to process what he’d just learned. It wasn’t uncomfortable, either. He even tugged on my hand and pulled me into his body, wrapped his arms around me, and held me while staring after his parents.

I slipped my arms around his waist and stood there, quietly taking in the comfort of being in his embrace. Eventually, he slowly looked down at me and smiled.

“I’m ready to go,” he said.

“Me too.”

Letting go of each other, he grabbed my hand and we made our way back to the hotel. The entire way he muttered to himself about what he'd just learned, and I hummed to myself, completely content with being with him. Completely happy to be by his side, even if he wasn't totally aware of what was happening around him with being so lost in his thoughts.

We walked through the hotel doors hand in hand and approached the elevator where I pushed the button to go up and waited. Once we boarded the elevators, I leaned against him and he slung an arm around my shoulders, glancing down at me and smiling.

This smile seemed to be something he always had, so much so that I was struggling to believe his mom when she told me he hadn't done so in years. He inserted the key card to our room and we went in, doing rock paper scissors as soon as we entered on who got to shower first and he won.

So I sat on the edge of the bed while he occupied the bathroom. It felt nice to kick the heels off of my feet and lean back onto the plush mattress. I wondered how inappropriate he might find it if I asked to wear another one of his comfy shirts instead of my regular pajamas to bed. It really was like a giant, soft nightgown that smelled like him. I wanted to smell that for as long as I could.

The shower turned off, and I waited for a moment before the door opened and out walked Tate. He had on a pair of gray sweatpants and a T-shirt, a toothbrush dangling between his teeth, and he was carrying his suit. Sitting up as he passed me, he pulled the toothbrush out and kissed me quickly before heading toward his suitcase without a word.

Sucking up my pride, I dared to ask, dared feeling embarrassed. “Can I have another one of your shirts?”

He paused, crouched over his luggage frozen in time for a moment, and then resumed putting things away. My cheeks flushed red, heat rippling through me, and I quickly stood from the bed and shut myself in the bathroom without giving him another moment to answer.

Obviously, I had been an idiot to ask, or think that what he'd been doing had been something more than for show. This entire time, all of his little actions and comments toward me had all been because of this fake relationship. To make sure that he didn't scare anyone off or ruin his reputation.

But it wasn't like he needed the money, so why did it matter to him so

much? Didn't he have enough where he could support his family, too, even if his reputation or whatever got ruined?

I took my dress off, removed my makeup, and changed out the fancy dangling earrings to studs so that I could wear all of them but still sleep in them, and quickly showered.

My mind couldn't get over the fact that I'd actually asked for a shirt of his. What was this? Nothing more than a ruse and I, of course, dove in headfirst the moment it felt safe, the moment he'd shown me an ounce of kindness. I had to cool down.

I turned the water off and stepped out, wiping the steam from the mirror, and dried myself off. As much as I enjoyed wearing all of that makeup, right now, with how exhausted I was feeling, I really wanted to go bare-faced. Not because the mascara and makeup were weighing me down, but because for the first time in so long, I felt like I could actually sleep without fear—which was a newly refreshing feeling. So dumb that I had to add some coverup back on.

A knock sounded on the door and I froze. Tate was in here not too long ago, why would he need to come back in? I scrounged around, looking for something he might've left, something that he might need as Tate knocked again.

“Uh, do you need something?” I finally called out to him.

“Don't you want my shirt?” he replied, and the tension that had filled my body rushed away, drifting into the air around me and out through the vent.

I turned the doorknob and stuck out a hand. He placed something soft into the palm of it and I pulled it in before quickly shutting the door. It was a large, vibrant blue T-shirt this time, much like the black one he'd let me borrow with his horse training logo on it.

Shoving it over my head, I pulled on a pair of panties for the first time today since I'd gone commando under the dress. I braided my wet hair back out of my face, quickly brushed my teeth, took one last glance in the mirror, and left the bathroom.

Tate was laying on the couch, one arm propped behind his head, scrolling through his phone. He glanced my way, and then did a double take. I paused.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, and he slowly shook his head before sitting up.

He placed his phone down and stood off of the couch, stalking toward me before cupping both of my cheeks and tilting my head up. He looked surprised, stunned, and leaned in closer before twisting my head this way and that as if he couldn't quite understand what he was seeing.

Then he paused. "You have freckles," he breathed out in surprise, and it was my turn to be shocked. In my embarrassment and then hastiness to get out of the bathroom, I'd forgotten to recover my freckles. Good thing my brows were naturally a darker reddish brown and I'd dyed them before coming out to Montana.

But the freckles.

"How have I never noticed the freckles before?" He dropped his palms from my face, and I quickly covered my cheeks with mine. Fingers laced through my hands again and he pulled, tugging them away from hiding. "Why do you cover them?"

I sighed. "Because I don't like that girl who stayed, who stuck around despite everything he did."

"But what do freckles have to do with that?" he asked.

"She had these freckles. When I first left him, I'd look in the mirror and see that broken, hopeless, beaten, and bruised girl staring back, and that girl had these freckles."

"Oh," he said and then reached toward my face, brushing his fingertips across the flecks that littered my nose and cheeks. "Wouldn't the girl before you met your ex have had them too?"

I nodded, shivering at his touch. "I miss her sometimes," I whispered, and he slid his fingertips down my neck and then let his hands fall to his sides.

"But you're neither of those girls anymore."

I blinked.

He was right. I wasn't the young girl who blindly trusted everyone anymore. I also wasn't the girl who'd spent eight years of her life being abused. I wasn't even the same girl I'd been for the past two years, constantly looking over her shoulder and hiding from everything and everyone.

"I guess I'm not even sure who I am right now," I said as he tenderly interlaced his hands behind my back and pulled me forward.

"Would you like to know what I see?" he asked, and I nodded. "I see a very strong girl. Someone who is becoming confident in her world again, someone who is very brave, very smart, and has quite a bit of sass to her."



I rolled my eyes.

“I see someone who overcame something no one should have to go through, who was willing to trust a complete stranger and gave him one of the happiest weekends of his life. I see someone who has the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen with the most incredible, vibrant, forest-green eyes.”

I slung my arms up and around his neck, threading my fingers through his hair. “Go on.”

He grinned and leaned forward. “I see someone with the kindest heart and just enough of an attitude to make me laugh more in a single weekend than I have in years.” I rocked forward, and it was my turn to kiss him.

No rejection, no protest as my lips met his. He released his hands and wrapped them as tightly as he could around me. I reveled in his kiss, in his taste, in the velvety softness of his lips and even parted my mouth first to allow entrance for his tongue.

Both of my hands worked their way through his hair, and we eventually broke apart. I pecked him again, just once more, and he smiled. Sweet and simple.

“This isn’t my natural hair color either,” I confessed, and he shook his head.

“I noticed the roots peeking through.”

“What do you think of redheads? Like that reddish brown, not the fiery orange kind of red?” I asked, and he kissed me again.

“That fits you so much better, Brex baby,” he said against my mouth, and I stuck my tongue out at him, not thinking about how close his mouth was to mine, not thinking about what he might do.

To which he quickly licked my tongue back and then winked at me. It was strange. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before, nothing this simple this easy. He didn’t seem to get mad at me, frustrated sometimes yes, but never angry at me. I was not afraid of what he might do, but my heart was beginning to shrivel up as I realized that tomorrow would be the end of all of this.

“Would you like to watch a movie?” I quietly asked him, and he smiled.

“With you?”

I grinned and escaped from his embrace, jumping into the bed, and crawled over to grab the remote from the little nightstand. Slipping my legs under the covers, I patted the spot next to me, inviting him over.

He hesitantly walked my way, joining me on the bed, and I cuddled up against his body before beginning to flip through the channels. We found an old John Wayne movie, and I placed the remote back on the nightstand before sinking down in the sheets even closer to his body.

And that was where we stayed for the rest of the night. He slid his hand up and down my arm while I draped one lazily over his well-muscled core. I honestly don't remember how long I watched the TV before my eyes closed and I fell fast asleep.

## Chapter 20

Soft snores echoed through the room, pulling me from my dream. Faint, hazy light streamed through the crack in the curtains that draped over the window. I rolled over, or attempted to, but Tate pulled me tighter into him and I froze for just a moment before relaxing. He had his body pressed against my backside, an arm squeezing tightly around my core. So I lay still for a while longer.

I didn't really want to leave anyway, because the moment I did would mean us packing up and all of this ending. This was the first time in my life that I wanted the boy in my bed to stay there with me for as long as possible. Putting off the trip back to the ranch for one more day might be possible, right?

Despite how much I tried to convince myself of this, I knew it was nothing but a lie to try and stop some of this heartbreak. Heartbreak that was increasing as Tate pressed a kiss against the back of my neck, and another, and another, and another until I rolled to face him.

He smiled, the light hitting those hazel eyes just right, reflecting back that joy and excitement that I had fallen for. Reflecting that brightness and fullness for life that I desired. Tate rocked himself onto all fours and crept between my legs that I willingly opened for him—surprising myself.

My heart was pounding in my chest, wondering where this was going, wondering if I would be okay if this went further than the simple kissing that had already happened. There was that moment on that dresser, but that had been simply for his self-satisfaction to get me aroused and show me what that was like. At least that was what I was trying to convince myself it was, despite the longing look he was giving me right now.

Hovering over me.

There was little control I had over my limbs as I reached forward and slid a hand around his neck, pulling him toward me once again.

Kiss me, I thought. And kiss me passionately.

He did. This was much more aggressive, as my breaths began coming in short bursts between whatever small, nearly nonexistent breaks that came from his lips crashing upon mine again and again. My heart raced in my chest, feeling entirely free and experiencing this wild, adrenaline filled adventure for the first time in my life.

He bit down on my bottom lip, sucking it into his mouth as his hands slid up my sides. The fabric of my shirt rose up with his touch, baring my legs and he dove in again onto my mouth, shoving his tongue between my teeth. I didn't protest, opening wide and enjoying the feeling of his tongue against mine.

My hips involuntarily barked toward his as he began to move his mouth down my neck, sliding a tongue along the skin. My wet center crashed against his hard arousal, and he stopped hovering over my body. Everything felt so good as he slowly began grinding his hips back and forth across my core.

It elicited a feeling so unlike anything I'd felt before, even including that moment on the dresser. I arched my back and he growled in pleasure against the skin upon my neck. Whatever this was, whatever self-control I had left was completely gone. We had nothing but now, this exact moment, before the drive home, and I wasn't wanting to waste it. Not when he was asking for the same thing I was suddenly craving.

Not when he was responsible for every dirty thought that was running through my head. His fingers trailed down my side, slipping across the exposed skin just below my panty line and toward the center of my legs, toward what was dripping wet and dampening the skin around it.

He pulled his hips backwards just a little, just enough to make room for his hand, and tugged at the edge of my panties. I shuddered as his knuckles brushed against a very intimate area of skin, and I opened my eyes for a moment, locking onto his.

Short bursts of breath were escaping my mouth, matching his. He was asking for permission, actually asking if I was okay with this, okay with being touched by another man who wasn't my ex-husband. If I was okay with letting someone else explore my body.

And because it was him, I was. This weekend had already been everything different than what I had expected. He treated me right, cared about me, was patient and kind. If this was wrong, then I wanted to be wrong.

I nodded and he pushed his hand inside my underwear, his thumb

finding the spot that had created these very feelings of desire and arousal in the first place. A moan left my lips as he moved in circles, creating another strong wave of pulsing before gently sliding two fingers inside me completely.

It didn't hurt. Not one bit.

It actually felt very satisfying, and I spread my legs just a little wider for him.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head.

And knuckles rapped against the door.

Tate froze as I slammed my legs hard around his hand and arm. Very tightly.

"Ow," he breathed out, and I blushed before widening them.

The knock sounded as he gently pulled his fingers out and furrowed his brows. "Were you expecting anyone?" he asked, and I shook my head, slowly bringing my knees to my chest. Had that just...? Everything that we had just done slowly draped upon me. Which hadn't really been that much, but to someone who'd never felt things like that before, it was a lot to me. And I'd let myself lose control over someone whom I'd known from the start was only a weekend thing.

Tate pushed himself off of me and rose from the bed, telling me to stay put. He walked toward the door and peered through the peephole. Turning the knob he swung the door open.

"What are you doing here?" he asked his mama who was standing in the doorway. She made eye contact with him and then her gaze slid from her son to me and back to her son, though as they returned to Tate, her eyes looked at something lower than his face.

"Oh my goodness, I'm interrupting," she squealed and turned to leave. I don't think I'd ever felt my cheeks become this red this quickly.

Even she knew what was going on, maybe I really was a slut and Matt had been right this entire time. Especially since Tate had known this was fake all along. Maybe all of this was just him trying to get some before the weekend was up.

I wanted a shower and now. I needed to wash away everything that felt dirty upon me and the sickening twist of guilt within my stomach.

"Mama, what do you need?" Tate asked, stopping his mom from leaving, while trying to shift and hide the bulge between his legs.

"I was just wanting to see if you two would like to go to breakfast

together with your father and I, but if you say yes I will be upset. You two should spend all the time you can here. *Alone*. Before checkout.” She grinned wider and then grabbed Tate’s ear, bending him down to tell him something I wasn’t allowed to hear.

“Yes, ma’am. I am,” he said and she released him.

“Too-da-loo!” She wiggled her fingers and skipped off down the hallway.

Tate shut the door and leaned his forehead against it for a moment before turning around. What was in his pants hadn’t changed much, and I was kind of enjoying the sweats look on him the moment. But I finally understood why he looked a little uncomfortable when aroused.

I was feeling uncomfortable down there as well. Not from pain, but from excitement that was never quite fulfilled. But that time had passed, long since filled with dirty shame, and I was beginning to question whether I wasn’t anything more than some whore who would get with any guy that was kind to her.

“Are you alright, Brex baby?” he asked, walking my way. I nodded.

Lie.

“No, you’re not. What’s on your mind?” He slipped back under the blankets and pulled me against him.

I let a tear slide from my eye. “I’m exactly what my scar says. How could I be anything else if I was willing to let you do that and this was all fake?” I whispered and closed my eyes as the floodgates opened. Tate didn’t answer, not for quite some time, as the tears slid down my face and crashed against his chest.

When the tears dried up, and I no longer felt ashamed, or more likely had no more energy to feel that way, he pressed his lips against the top of my head. “Who said this was all fake?” he spoke into my hair, quietly and sincerely. “And you are not a slut. Nothing much happened, which is a damn shame too,” he finished and I tore my head up from his chest.

“What?” I asked as he wiped the tears from my cheeks and then leaned down, gently kissing me on my lips.

“I don’t regret anything that we did, nor should you.”

“But it’s all over now,” I sighed, and he pulled me back against his body.

“Not for fifteen more hours.” He attempted to reassure me, but when I glanced up at his face, I could see the anguish written plainly across it. There

was no joy, no humor mixed in with his typically teasing words.

“This wasn’t all for show?” I timidly asked, and he sighed before kissing my forehead.

He didn’t say anything and, instead, rested his chin on the top of my hair. His silence was my answer.

“Fifteen more hours,” I breathed out.

“Fifteen more.”

We packed without a sound passing between us, dread slowly consuming us. I didn’t want our last fifteen hours to be like this, but both of us understood that staying together hadn’t been part of the deal, nor would it work anyway. He had a ranch to run in Montana, and I had a life to eventually get back to in New York City. He was my boss, I was the employee, so it was definitely off limits.

I changed into a pair of jeans and buckled them tight with the only belt I brought. This time, however, when I put my long-sleeve T-shirt on, I tucked in the front so you could see the buckle.

Carrying my vest, I waited as Tate finished zipping up my suitcase for me. “You need to pack things nicer on the way home next time,” he grunted, breaking the tension that had twisted stiffly between us. He sat down on the suitcase, trying to stuff everything back in and make it all fit.

“Sorry,” I apologized, and he huffed, finally getting it shut.

“I don’t understand how you are leaving with nothing extra and yet, this barely closes now.” He turned and faced me, gripping my cheeks and roughly kissing me before lifting both suitcases up on their wheels.

“It’s one of my magical powers,” I replied, and he rolled his eyes.

“Brex baby, will you get my hat from the table?” he asked, his hands full with our luggage. I walked toward him, reached around his body and picked it up before placing it on his head.

I took advantage of the situation and left my arms around his neck, kissing him twice before turning around and leading him out of the room. He whistled at me softly, and I spun back in his direction to give him a teasing glare, but failed miserably when he winked at me first.

Despite the dread that had muffled any conversation during packing, he seemed to have thought the same thing as I did about enjoying the rest of our time together.

The valet brought the truck around, Tate tossed the suitcases in the back and climbed in. I was waiting in the middle seat, ready to go by the time

he pulled open that driver's side door. He paused for a second, the smile across his face widening before jumping in and peeling out of the hotel.

I spent much of the first half of the drive with my fingers twisting the curls along the back of his head, and he spent much of it with a hand placed upon my leg. We sang and joked and teased and chatted like old friends. Like we'd known each other a lifetime, and I did everything I could to prevent myself from thinking about the end that was nearing.

At one gas station, I snagged some snacks and took the braid out before wrapping the rest of the hair on top of my head. I wanted a comfy nap soon, and the braid was getting in the way.

When I returned to the truck, Tate leaned against the outside passenger door, smiling. He opened the door and I tossed the snacks in and placed the drinks on the seat before preparing to climb in. But he didn't let me.

Not just yet anyway. Instead, he pushed me up against the side of the truck and kissed me. His hands holding tightly around my waist, mine automatically became tangled in his hair. One last little make-out session before all of this would end. He tasted as wonderful as the first time, maybe a little better, and I leaned in closer, harder.

His lips lingered against mine, neither of us ready to let this go, desperate for time to stand still. Desperate for the circumstances to suddenly be different. Though the end was near and inevitable. He was my boss for the next few weeks before I returned to New York City. Far away from this kind of life, back to the one that I'd created to keep me safe from anything that could hurt me.

However, I hadn't imagined that the hurt that I was so desperate to run from would instead bring a different kind of pain. One of heartbreak. Tate eventually kissed me on the forehead and then released me from the side of the truck, climbing back into the driver's seat to continue our journey home.

As we passed through Idaho, my hand wrapped through his hair against the nape of his neck, I pointed out a few things I remembered from my childhood and life that I'd once experienced while living here. He listened and teased me and even asked if I ever thought about returning to visit my parents. But he didn't need an answer, he didn't need me to respond, because he knew that it would've been no.

They hadn't reached out to me in two years, they had supported Matt, there was no sign that I was wanted by them anymore. So he dropped the



subject. As the sun faded quickly, weaving through the rugged mountain range headed to Montana, my body felt tired, my eyes sluggish, and I dropped my hand from his hair.

“Tate?”

“Hmmm?” He glanced down at me.

“Hold me. Just one more time please,” I whispered, and he raised his right arm. I unbuckled, climbed over, and curled up in his lap. Yes, this was completely illegal, but we were in the backwoods of Idaho and there wasn’t a car in sight. I closed my eyes, inviting sleep to whisk me away wrapped in Tate’s embrace.

For the last time.

He stroked my hair, my head pressed against his chest. The heartbeat behind his ribs lulled me into a blissful state of asleep but still aware of what was going on. Aware enough that I heard him mutter to himself. “I wish you’d just stay. I wish you’d just not go home to New York. I wish you’d see yourself the way I do. I wish you’d let me love you the way you so deserve.”

His voice was low, quiet, desperate, and pained. And if I wasn’t so tired, I may have tried to say something in response. But I fell asleep to the low growling anguish of someone who had allowed himself to be as vulnerable with me as I had him. I knew I’d forget what he muttered the moment I drifted into the deep solace of sleep, he’d spoken it too close to that world we escaped to within our minds.

Too close to the end.

## Chapter 21

The world around me looked red as I slowly returned from sleep. A large, rough hand was slowly running his fingers through my hair, my head laying in his lap. In Tate's lap. He'd turned the music off, though when I wasn't sure. The sun was already in the sky telling me I'd slept through the entire night, wrapped in warmth and comfort. I refused to move away from his body and just shifted my gaze to watch through the window.

Large pines rose high into the atmosphere, thicker, greener, denser, and I knew we were close to the ranch. Tate's hat was tipped low over my head but must have shifted after a bump in the road to let the light pierce through my eyelids.

But I still wasn't ready to sit up from his lap. Nor lose his touch, not just yet anyway.

Except he signaled and turned off of the main road, passing underneath a sign that told me we were here and I literally couldn't stay put. A couple more turns and it would open to the massive ranch where everyone would see.

Tate slowed the truck, and I slid the hat from my head and sat up. He pressed the brakes and we idled in the middle of the gravel road in silence. It was done. We were here, returning to whatever life we'd been living before we'd escaped for a weekend. A weekend that had turned out to be one of the best and most unexpected experiences of my life.

"So," I said.

"So," he repeated.

A tear slid down my cheek, and everything I wished I'd said to him crashed through my head. But I'd lost the chance to do so long before. Tate slid a thumb across the tear, wiping it from my face. He gently turned my head to face him, his eyes pained and saddened.

But we both knew this was it. I could make an irrational decision and quit my job in New York, pack everything up, and move out here. I could ask

him if he'd want me to do that, but I didn't want him to say yes out of pity. No, I would accept this pain. It was worth it in the end.

Tate leaned forward, his thumb sweeping across my cheek, and gently pressed his lips against mine. One last kiss, one last goodbye. Two more tears slid from my eyes as I kissed him back. He raised his other hand, brushed them both away and then his lips left mine, the sweetness lingering against my mouth.

And that was it.

He clenched his jaw, put the truck back into drive and stared straight forward as we began moving ahead. I slid over to the right, out of the middle seat and onto the passenger side, and leaned against the window. We were back.

The snow was a little thinner, a little more patchy upon the ground. The trees were a little less burdened with the weight of frozen water, but I felt a different kind of heaviness. I wasn't so much burdened by secrets of a past life, Tate knew most of that. I wasn't so much weighed down by a shame that I had recently learned wasn't as shameful as I'd thought. I was now laden with the knowledge that I'd only been able to have one weekend with someone who stole my heart. Someone who'd shown me what life could be like if you shared even the most mundane of moments with someone who made you as happy as you made them.

He turned the truck left and there it was, stretching before us. The beautiful ranch that once again took my breath away. Fields that rose behind the buildings, log cabin styled homes, horses, cattle, barns, and more. Becky was out in that field, and I was ready to ride her, truly ride her as myself. Whoever I was now. But I was also torn because Tate was here and the secret that now coiled between us tugged at my heart.

Tate pulled the truck into the parking lot and turned the key over, the engine cutting off. He waited. I waited. Neither of us were totally ready to leave.

"Thank you," I whispered, and he furrowed his brows.

"For what?"

"You set me free," I confessed, turning to face him, tears brimming upon the edges of my eyes. A half-smile caressed his face but didn't reach his eyes. Those dimples didn't grace his cheeks this time and I felt heavy as he sighed.

"It was my pleasure, Brex baby." He placed his hat back on his head

and exited the truck. When that door closed, it closed on whatever he and I had been. I blinked back the tears, the heartache, the chill that had swept over me and pulled my vest on before stepping out after him.

Tate was waiting with my suitcase beside him as I rounded the back of the truck. He didn't smile as I reached forward and grasped the handle. He didn't laugh, didn't tease me like normal. All he did was tip his hat and turn around, toting his luggage behind him, walking away from me.

I watched as he reached a side-by-side and tossed it in the back, just as Jake turned into the lot on one of his own. Jake grinned, his usual cigarette hanging from his lips, and greeted Tate. They shared some words, that half-smile came from Tate, though the dimples once again were vacant from his face, and then he drove off as Jake walked in my direction.

"Hey there, Brexlynn!" Jake waved, and I attempted to greet him with a grin, it wasn't the widest or brightest, but it worked.

"Hi," I managed to utter as he reached for my suitcase.

He toted it along and down the road for me as we headed back to the bunkhouse. "Everything settled with the fam?" he asked, and I nodded yes. "Good, because your coworkers have been asking for you all weekend.

"Really?" I was surprised, I didn't think they had cared that much. They had always been nice, but I hadn't realized they'd cared that much.

"Yes! They were shocked when I told them you were headed to a family emergency since apparently you've never once mentioned them in the two years you've worked with them." He gave me an inquisitive look.

"Oh." I fumbled for an answer. "I don't typically talk about my personal life at work. This situation is just a little different than a normal office setting."

He chuckled. "Yeah, you really can't hide anything here. Everyone eventually finds out since you live together all summer."

We stopped in front of the bunkhouse and he tipped his hat at me, just as Tate had done. Stretching the handle forward, he offered me my luggage and then walked away. Leaving me once again, alone. Alone was something I'd been so used to, but now it felt empty. The comfort I'd once received being by myself was gone. It was cold here.

I felt numb as I lugged my suitcase into the bunkhouse to find it a mess. But I was too empty to pick anything up and quietly unpacked. Putting things back where'd I'd snagged them from, except that dress. I left that folded in the suitcase, there was no reason I'd wear it again. No reason to

have it out. No need for the reminder.

It felt so tiring to be here by myself, and I slumped onto the floor, leaning against my bunk and tipping my head back. What had I done? What had I created by letting myself fall for him? I was on fire, set on fire by something I'd done and chosen that was entirely off limits.

But I couldn't help and sink into memories of Tate. His smile, the sound of his laugh, the sparkle in his hazel eyes, the dimples on his cheeks, the feeling of his touch.

His lips pressed against mine.

I closed my eyes, a tear sliding down my cheek as I was suddenly back dancing the night away with him.

Kisses being stolen, words being shared, him singing, the smell of caramel and pine trees all flashed through my mind, making me feel a little less alone. And then as I blinked and I was brought back to reality, I felt even more hollow than before.

A soft knock on the door had me startled out of my frozen state upon the floor. "Why are you knocking if you live here?" I called out, confused as to why my roommates and coworkers would even bother.

Another knock and I shoved myself to my feet. "Really guys?" I shouted again and swung the door open. Except it wasn't them. It wasn't anyone I had even remotely guessed would show up to say hello.

"Tate?" I moved sideways and opened the door wider. He removed his hat and ducked through the entrance, already dressed in a warmer coat, the black collar lifted around his neck.

Softly shutting the door behind him I released the handle and waited for him to say something. Anything. He didn't even turn around to face me, it was like he was frozen and unable to process what he was even doing here.

I padded around him, softly stopping directly in front of him. His eyes were staring straight ahead, focused on something not in this world. And then they slowly dialed in on me. His chest began to rise and fall quickly, yet I wasn't sure what to do. I didn't even know why he was here, but I wished he would say something.

Tate wet his lips and then tightened the grip on his hat. "Uh," he said, I assumed still grappling with what he was doing here. And it was killing me. Every passing second that he stood in front of me was killing me, tearing me apart.

"Is there something you need?" I asked, my voice breaking, hoping to

end the stillness that felt cold and encumbering. My body screamed for him to reach for me, to hold me, to kiss me. But my brain kept reminding me that was a horrible idea. We were no longer anything more than employer and employee.

Tate blinked, his eyes mirrored the ache in my own. “Yeah, just wanted to fill you in on what you missed at the meeting this morning.”

“Oh,” I whispered, but he either didn’t hear me or chose to pretend he didn’t.

“We are going to start branding tomorrow and preparing for the summer season sooner than expected, which is fine. I’ve got the rest of the hands coming in throughout today, and you have a riding lesson with Jake this afternoon.”

My heart shriveled up and died. So formal, so cold. All business-like. But this was what we had agreed upon, and I needed to accept it.

“Thank you. Anything else? I need to finish unpacking,” I stiffly replied, my eyes falling from his face. His fingers were tightening and loosening around his hat, over and over again, and then he rushed forward, slinging the one hand that was holding his hat around my waist as the other cupped my cheek, and he crashed his lips against mine.

It was sudden, but I had been longing for it since the moment he stepped foot in the bunkhouse, and I instinctively kissed him back. Closing my eyes, I melted into him, pressing into his lips for just a moment. My fingers instinctively found the back of his neck and kneaded through his hair.

He moaned lightly against my mouth, panting. And it hit me that this was wrong. Whatever this fake or real or whatever thing had been between us was over and we shouldn’t be doing this.

I shot away at the same time that he stumbled backwards several steps. My eyes darted to the ground and he inhaled sharply, all of this settling onto him as well.

My body trembled as I refused to look at him despite the tug that was attempting to launch me in his direction again. My heart ached for him, my soul begged for him, but it was not to be, as he quietly turned around and placed the hat upon his head once more. He stepped out of the bunkhouse and disappeared through muffled voices, gasps, and girly giggles.

I placed my trembling fingertips against my bottom lip wishing that the feeling of his velvet mouth against mine would never go away. It felt so cold, so broken without him. Everything around me was a shade duller than

before.

Footsteps entered the bunkhouse, girls all giggling and gossiping, several of them shrieked and arms wrapped around me, excited I was here. But my head was with those boots and spurs that had left the bunkhouse, with that cowboy who'd ridden away with my heart. Who'd set me free.

I could hear them asking questions, I could hear them attempting to converse with me, but it was as if they were speaking in some foreign language that I failed to comprehend.

My hand slowly fell to my side, and I looked up from the floor before gently moving through the girls that stood around me and kneeled down beside my bunk.

"Brexlynn?" a voice said, piercing through the haze that was my head.

"Huh?" I asked, blinking as things came into focus. My coworkers plus Oakley were standing in the bunkhouse, staring at me.

"Did you hear anything at all?" Oakley sneered at me.

"No, sorry. What did you guys say?" I asked, turning away from the suitcase that I shoved under the bunk with my foot.

"Did something bad happen with your family over the weekend?" Gemma questioned, and I took a deep breath.

"The weekend was... interesting," I replied and attempted a half-smile.

"Then tell us what he's like!" Aubrey clapped her hands in glee. "I mean, Oakley has told us what he's like, but I want to hear it from you, since you've at least met him!"

"Is he as handsome as everyone says?" Melody added.

"Who?" I asked, confused.

"Tate Pierce, of course!" Melody, Eva, and Aubrey said in unison.

"Oh," I quietly mumbled, and Oakley stepped forward, shoving through the group before crossing her arms.

"I warned you before you left," she hissed through gritted teeth. I felt my heart drop. Shocked. I had completely forgotten that she was into him, that she'd staked her claim. It was an honest mistake, because I never planned on letting myself become involved with someone I initially thought was a jerk.

But it happened. And I didn't regret anything.

"I mean, how well can you get to know someone on a drive?" I replied, attempting to shrug it off, and all the girls groaned. Internally though,

I was screaming. Shouting that he was everything and more. But that would be the worst thing I could say.

“Is he at least handsome?” Melody sang and spun in a little circle.

Oakley grunted. “Of course he is.”

I sighed, wanting to disappear from the spotlight.

“You guys walked right past him coming in here. Don’t you know the answer to that already?” I questioned and grabbed a new shirt, jeans, and even pulled out a massive buckle I’d won. I tucked it within the clothes and faced them again.

“We did?” Aubrey gasped. “Are you talking about the tall cowboy with curly hair that was peeking out beneath his hat? As in the one that left our bunkhouse right as we came running in?” I nodded. “I thought he was just a new hand, but oh my gosh, he’s gorgeous!”

“What was he doing in here, alone with you?” Oakley snarled, but no matter how upset she seemed, how angry she was, how intimidating she attempted to be toward me, I felt nothing but numb.

“Just telling me what I missed at the morning meeting and that we’ve got riding lessons to get to.” I kept my voice even, cold, no matter how much I wanted to cry out that I was hurting. That I wanted to rewind time. Or how much I wanted to talk to someone about what had happened between Tate and me.

“Oh.” She stepped back, hopefully feeling satisfied that there was nothing going on between the two of us. Yet, there had been, and I wished it hadn’t stopped. I almost wished they’d walked in just a minute earlier and saw him kissing me. Maybe things would be different.

It had only been an hour or two since we’d returned, and I knew this would be the longest summer of my life with how hard it already was. “Which is where I’ll see you guys in a minute. I’m going to change into some fresh clothes before the lesson,” I said.

“And maybe fix your makeup. Faking freckles only works for some people,” Oakley taunted, and whether it was because Tate had made me feel more confident in myself or the fact that, if she truly knew how he felt about them, she wouldn’t be saying those things, either way, I gave her a fake smile.

“I’m not wearing any makeup. These are my real freckles, and I like them,” I coldly replied.

She scoffed. “Well, even better. That means you really weren’t trying



to impress Tate while in the truck with him. Besides, he's a classy guy, I bet he hated seeing all of those piercings."

"And yet he has tattoos, so why would he hate piercings?" I countered, and her mouth fell open along with my coworkers.

"How do you know that?"

"I mean, it wasn't completely silent during the drive," I replied, realizing my mistake and shrugged it off. Since when was I this talkative?

"Brexlynn," Gemma said, breaking through the ice that was slowly freezing between Oakley and me. Thank you, Gemma.

"Hmm?" I turned to face her.

"Since when do you have freckles or all of those piercings? We've known you for two years and not once have any of us ever seen you wear more than a single pair of earrings. Plus, you've never had freckles before." Her voice broke, noticing the death stare that came from Oakley to me.

"I've always worn makeup around you guys until now, which hid them. And I didn't think it was office appropriate to wear more than a single pair of earrings," I replied, shrugging things off and hoping that this small lie would satisfy them. No matter how daring, or bold I was feeling lately, I still wasn't ready to tell them about my abusive ex-husband. That was something that only Tate got to know.

Oakley snorted. "Why was I even worried that you knew he had tattoos? You can see them, and clearly you didn't care about impressing him." She crossed her arms in front of her chest. "I mean, no makeup, and look at your hair."

"I'm glad you're satisfied. Now, again, I'm going to go change for lessons. I don't think Jake will let me skip out anymore," I smiled softly at my coworkers. They grinned widely back.

"See you at the arena!" Eva sweetly said, and everyone except Oakley offered me confirming words before slipping back outside.

I breathed out in relief. Another moment where I didn't need to mask the pain that I was actually drowning in.

## Chapter 22

I stood in front of the mirror, debating whether or not I should do this. I'd let my hair down, pulling it into a low, half-pony so my hat would fit just above it and pin in nicely without my hair getting in my face. My long-sleeve, plum-colored button up was tucked into my high-waisted Kimes jeans. The very pair I'd worn to the NFR.

Tate knew. Well, that I'd ridden my whole life and used to rodeo. No one needed to know that I competed at the NFR, not even him, not yet anyway. He knew that I grew up in Idaho, that this life was something that I was all too familiar with. There was no harm in embracing that side of me.

Not the side that had disappeared under Matt's pressure. Not the one that had given into him to simply survive each day. Not the one that was constantly bruised like my left wrist still slightly was at the moment. No, this Brexlynn was someone new. Someone who was embracing everything she'd experienced in this life.

This girl was the one that Tate had set free.

I walked back out to the room and slid my hat box out from under the bed and clicked it open. There it was. My gray felt hat, still in pristine condition and shape. Wide brimmed, flat top—actually, the more I looked at it, the more I realized it was quite similar to the shape of Tate's hat.

Shoving down any nerves and the painful memory of him, I tucked it onto my head and pushed some bobby pins through the band and into my hair to secure it in place. Shoving my feet into my boots, I strapped on my spurs and shrugged on a thick coat. It was a brisk walk to the tack room to snag a halter and then I hopped the fence and whistled for Becky.

Becky and Brex. I kind of liked that, it was more fitting than Becky and Cara. Even better than my nickname of CeCe. I wasn't really meant to be her forever. I was meant to grow from that broken and trapped young girl.

I whistled again, and Becky came thundering down the mountainside. A half-smile that crept across my face, the first moment I'd felt any bit of

happiness since Tate and I returned earlier. My eyes instinctively turned to the right, hoping to catch a glimpse of him riding out of the forest, but he wasn't there.

Just a ghost of my memories.

Becky nuzzled against my hand, and I slipped the halter over her head before leading her from the field. We were groomed, saddled, and ready to go within a few minutes. This time I'd picked a roping saddle, ready to test out my rusty skills once more after the lesson with Jake.

But I remained still beside my beautiful buckskin. The courage that I'd felt up until this point slipped away immediately upon arriving at the barn. There was no way I could do this. What would they think the moment I rode in there looking like this? No doubt Oakley would think I was a fraud, and my coworkers would probably gawk and then laugh. Or they would think I was trying too hard.

Then one small thought shoved through all of the doubt. Tate had never judged, never thought that. He'd accepted who I was regardless of all of the things I'd been through, and seemed to understand why I'd done what I did. I could do this.

Not for him. But for the little girl that had cried when she was left alone on her wedding night in pain. But for the girl I dreamt to become. For the girl who'd made it to the NFR and was ripped of those things she wanted to achieve. For the girl whose parents had failed her. For that girl.

And for the woman I was now.

I slid my foot into the stirrup and swung onto Becky, landing softly in the saddle. She didn't move beneath me as I removed my coat, tossed it off to the side, and held my head high. My beautiful companion seemed to feel the shift in my confidence, seemed to feel how free I was becoming, and she dipped her head, showing off her beautiful topline, thick with muscle.

We trotted toward the arena, the garage door already opened wide. I could hear the sounds of hoofbeats coming from within, gentle music playing in the background, and my heart began racing as we drew nearer and nearer.

*This would be so much easier with Tate,* I thought.

And as I slowed Becky to a prancy walk before we slipped through the open door, my eyes caught sight of a palomino standing silently off to the right side. Tucked into the shadows was the man himself. His hat pulled low, his eyes focused on the chaos in the arena. Light sparkled off of his spurs for a second, and I halted my horse.

Tate didn't even know I was standing there, noiselessly and desperately crying out for him. I would do so in solitude so he would never know how much I longed for the little we had shared. I took the moment I needed, swallowed my agony and heartbreak down, and nudged Becky forward under the garage doors.

No one noticed, not at first at least. Until Jake glanced away from Aubrey, who was struggling to straighten her horse at a trot. He stopped moving atop his own mount and stared as I slowly walked Becky up to the gate and then halted her. I refused to look to my right to see Tate's face, not wanting to feel my heart break once more.

With Jake no longer yelling and his horse completely still, Oakley, Chance, and Cole turned in the same direction that he was looking at. Her sneer was expected, and she scoffed. Chance and Cole both looked surprised but hesitant. Eventually my coworkers all stopped riding and faced me as well.

Shock was an understatement as I sat tall and still upon a horse who'd earned the nickname Bucky Becky for the past five years. The arena was deathly silent, deathly still as everyone processed what was happening. I hated being the center of attention like this but knew it would only be temporary, so I waited.

It wasn't until the creak of leather stabbed through the thick, muted air that I finally looked to my right. Tate was the first one to move, and he rode forward from the shadows like a ghost materializing. Calm, cool, collected, and my heart tore even more as he rode toward me, never looking more handsome.

Quiet gasps filled the arena from those who hadn't realized he'd been there.

A crooked smile was hidden beneath the shadows of his hat. Despite the pain that I had seen earlier on his face, despite the sorrow in his eyes, there was a sparkle of pride mixed in those hazel orbs. Even though he had no claim to me, there was still admiration.

Tate stopped his horse next to mine and stared at me once more. The praise left and a longing replaced it, accompanied with that same grief I felt. I thought he'd speak, maybe announce his presence, but instead, he continued to study me in silence.

It was Jake whose voice echoed across the walls. "You're on Bucky Becky. How are you on Bucky Becky?" he asked. But I couldn't remove my

eyes from Tate. I wondered if he was already putting two and two together. I wondered if he was slowly figuring it out.

So to him, I whispered an answer to Jake's question. An answer only Tate could hear. "Because she was once mine."

Tate blinked and then his eyes flashed with lightning. He knew. His chest rose faster, sharper as the coolness in his figure left and things came sliding together, crashing like a thunderstorm on a cool spring night.

"But your name is Brexlynn," he muttered back, and I nodded. "Her owner was named Cara Carsen. Everyone called her CeCe. I remember because I once met a young girl with the name Cara who was also a redhead. I was eighteen and just starting out my training business."

He paused, his brows contorting. "She reprimanded something I was doing. An eight year old told me I was wrong. And I was. I've never forgotten it, but her last name was Phillips, so I—" And everything came together so quickly he physically shifted back in the saddle.

"We met before?" I breathed out silently, and he nodded, slowly still processing what he had just told me. Then the memory slammed into my head. "You didn't have any facial hair then, and your mullet was much longer. It was curly then too, just without the fade like you have now."

He nodded.

"I totally did correct you, didn't I? It was obviously well deserved because I, as an eight year old, was the best horse rider and trainer you'd ever met," I whispered teasingly, and his crooked smile stretched a little wider. For a moment both of us forgot that there wasn't even a fake relationship between us.

We were nothing but old friends, nothing but two lovers who'd never had a chance. "And now I know why CeCe Carson never returned to the NFR." He chuckled lowly.

"I never told you I went to the—"

"You were drunk."

I bit my bottom lip. "Anything else you'd like to tell me that I said while drunk?" I teased, feeling a small amount of my shattered heart piece together.

He shook his head, the smile widening enough to press those dimples back into his cheeks. "Not right now." He winked at me, and I rolled my eyes.

We were lost in our world until Oakley shouted across the still quiet

arena, startling me. “Well? Are you going to ride in and prove that you’re an actual cowgirl, or just remain sitting like a wanna-be who thinks she fits in.”

It caused Becky to jump a little, and I was thrown straight back into the pain of reality. The grin immediately dropped from Tate’s face and sorrow slipped into his hazel eyes. Even a little bit of annoyance and frustration as he pulled his hat a little lower and then sidepassed his horse over to the gate, opened it, and then rode through.

“Yo, boss!” Chance hollered and nodded up at Tate.

“To what do we owe the pleasure?” Cole added, and Tate stopped his horse beside Jake.

Whispers circulated amongst the group as I sighed and finally rode Becky through the gate and then shut it behind me. I trotted up next to Eva, who was standing alone, and shoved Becky’s hip over to face the semi-circle that was around Jake and Tate.

She leaned over as Tate’s stern and cold face scanned the group while speaking under his breath to Jake. “He really is something. No wonder Oakley is obsessed. When I think of a cowboy, that’s it,” Eva whispered, and I chuckled, despite the ripping pain that shot through my chest. He really was “cowboy,” wasn’t he?

Tate greeted Chance and Cole as Oakley rode over to stand beside him. “Hi!” She blushed as he glanced her way, gave her a curt nod, and turned to all of us without a word to her.

“I’ve been watching your warmups hoping that Jake’s got y’all ready for branding tomorrow. I’m also going to snag a couple of you to help me with the two-year-olds this year so I want to observe where everyone’s at. If you don’t want to work with them that’s fine, we need as many hands as we can get for the groups that are comin’ in. Anyway, I’ll be sticking around for a bit today,” Tate addressed everyone, the sweetness gone from his voice, something I hadn’t realized he only used with me.

Jake grinned. “Well, y’all heard the man! Ride your best today, but no pressure.” He turned to Tate. “Do you have anyone in mind already for the colts?”

Tate pointed at the two brothers. “Chance and Cole, obviously, if you two are interested?” he asked, a half, pained smile on his face.

“Absolutely, boss!” the two said in sync.

His eyes swung to me, pausing for a moment. Please don’t pick me, I begged. I didn’t think I could handle being around him that much, that often

this summer. Not after everything. I could see him debating something as he stared, considering what he should say.

And then he either lost or won the battle, I couldn't tell, as he tilted his head in my direction. "And Brex."

"Who?" Jake and Oakley asked simultaneously. She looked furious.

I subtly shook my head no, please no, please. This was all too much, and I turned Becky, ready to run away again. Ready to disappear from this situation and ride far, far away. Off of this ranch completely and to somewhere entirely different.

"Don't," Jake sternly commanded as I bumped Becky with my heels and began trotting her forward. I had a lot of ground to cover from the far side of the arena, and I saw Tate shoot his horse forward to cut my path off. I wasn't going that fast at this moment, but I could outrun him if I really wanted to.

"You've already missed every lesson, don't think about running out again," Jake stated and turned his horse to face me. But I was staring at Tate, who was cold and hurt.

And then Tate spoke just a few words that stopped me in my tracks. "You promised you wouldn't run anymore, Brex."

Jake dropped his jaw. "You're Brex. Ah, Brexlynn." More confusion rippled through the group. I think they were starting to realize that we shared more than just a car ride to and from some fake airport. "Wait, what?" he added.

"I like running. It's safe," I muttered, and Tate sighed, pulling his hat down just a little more, and leaned back in the saddle. Then, a mischievous grin spread across his face.

"Alright, darlin', then let's run," he stated and leaned over toward Jake, whispering something to him. Jake told everyone to leave and instructed us to follow Tate. He turned and trotted out of the arena after everyone else who was heading toward the cattle pasture.

Everyone gathered around, their horses sensing a shift in the atmosphere; even I knew something was up, and for a moment, that pain and heartbreak was gone once more. Tate couldn't seem to quite accept that our fake relationship was over. Which both comforted and confused me.

When we were gathered just inside the cattle's pasture fence, all lined against the rails with only Jake facing our direction, I started to become more suspicious of what was happening.

“Tate wants to race. If you can beat him, then you don’t have to do any chore that you don’t want to. You have full say over what trails you head out on, and on what things you do at the ranch. Plus, a fancy dinner date paid for by the boss man himself, and you get to take one person of your choosing with you.”

Jake paused, the same mischievous look that Tate held spread across his face. Something told me a catch was coming, and one I didn’t like. “However. There’s a catch.”

There it was. Subtle change in the wind came crashing toward us. “This isn’t just about speed, this is about smarts. You’ll ride to the top of this pasture, where you can see the fence, turn and ride back bringing with you a calf. It doesn’t matter which one, or how you manage it, but you have to bring a calf. And if you lose to Tate, he will get to choose your punishment, whatever that may be and however long that’ll last to be determined after the race. Questions?”

Everyone shook their heads, I could see fear and determination etched into my coworkers’ faces, but my eyes didn’t stay on them long. Sliding down to Tate, who was four horses away, I found him watching me under that hat of his. This was his idea. To run and let me run as fast as I needed to breathe for a moment before turning around and going back to work.

Oakley was right next to Tate, her eyes shifting between Tate and me, and I felt a sudden urge to really push it. The desire to whoop Oakley’s butt washed through me, not just in order to win and possibly have some say about working these colts or even maybe going home to New York early, but because she could possibly win a dinner with Tate. Not that she was competition, but then again, she kind of was, since Tate was no longer mine.

He never really had been mine. But the lingering effects of him remained.

Jake’s horse paced down and back in front of the group. I could see Chance and Cole shift in their seats, excited and ready to run. Even their horses were prancing on edge, chomping at the bit, ready to go. Tate looked cool as a cucumber, but I saw something flash through those hazel eyes.

Maybe he’d forgotten that I wasn’t his anymore either, but whatever it was, there was something playful about him again. I gripped my split reins in one hand, holding the excess in the other to provide easy access to an over under motion, adjusted the rope tied to my horn for a quick release and dally, and then sat back as I always did before a run.



Becky felt the shift in my seat and sat back onto her haunches as well. Her back legs quivered, ready to launch us forward. Her excitement and mine were ramping things up. Jake said he'd count to three and then we could take off.

And it was the longest three seconds of my life, the longest amount of time before he threw his hand into the air.

I launched us forward, dirt and mud flinging up behind all of us as we thundered forward toward the opposite end of the pasture. At first, Oakley and my coworkers stretched out in front, letting their horses run at top speed, but I wanted that energy, that level of speed closer to the turn against the fence. Tate seemed to have the same idea as he seemed to be matching my steady gallop.

About halfway between the starting point and the fence we would turn around at, I loosened my hold on Becky just a little more, closing the gap between those in front of me. Our hooves crashed across the pasture ground running free. And for a moment as I became suspended in the air with every beat of Becky's steps, I allowed myself to feel everything.

Everything that happened these past ten years from the time I met Matthew to the moment that Tate came into my life. From the moment that Matt first yelled at me to the moment Tate touched me for the first time. From the moment that Matthew threw me across a room to the time that Tate told me I was beautiful. From the moment that I caught Matt cheating to the time that Tate first truly kissed me.

And then kissed me again. And touched me, very intimately, and held me. And made me feel freer than I'd ever felt before.

I released Becky, dropped the reins, and just let her run. She raced forward, passing everyone else around us, and the thundering sounds of hooves faded as I got lost in memories that were both joyous and heartbreaking at the same time. As I got lost in the anguish that had been my life for far too long, as I got lost in a girl who had been torn to nothing and then slowly built herself back up to whoever I was now.

And I screamed.

I held my arms out wide and trusted Becky to take me where we needed to go as I screamed, and cried, and swore, and yelled, and cried again. I didn't care who heard or saw as the fence neared and I tucked my pelvis tight into the saddle, picked up the reins, spun her hind end around through that dirt and shot off toward the cattle.

This was so freeing.

*He'd set me free.*

I launched Becky forward, that determination back in my core as I barreled toward the herd of cattle on the far side of the pasture. As we neared, I slowed Becky down, unaware of where anyone else was as I calmed my horse and own heart and began sliding silently through the herd, searching for the quietest cow and calf pair.

Those that worked with the cattle before would have the advantage here, and I'd once been fairly good at stuff like this. Slowly, I released the rope from its leather bindings in preparation. Leisurely unfurling the rope, I cut through the herd and spotted a pair just off to the side that seemed to have noticed me and then not cared.

Swinging the loop twice overhead, I set it down around the little calf's neck, pulled the slack, dallied around my horn, and set Becky back to pull the rope taut. I jumped down from Becky and made my way slowly over to the calf that had laid down, uncaring of the rope that was around its neck.

The little thing looked to be just a few days old as I approached and paused, just before leaning down and gripping its legs to toss over my shoulders. Then I ran as the mama cow brayed, upset. I made it to Becky just in time as she whipped her butt around and kicked out at the cow. Causing it to falter in its path.

I tossed the calf in front of my saddle over Becky and then climbed back up in. The mama followed as I started to trot back down to the fence. As I turned to face the finish line, it was then that I saw Tate climb into his saddle, a calf over his horse as well and nudge the palomino forward.

Everyone else was still attempting to either catch one—my poor coworkers—or were just getting the calf back to their horses. It was now or never, though I had to be careful to make sure the little thing couldn't slide off. Begging that it would stay in place, I pushed Becky into a lope and pulled her back up and under me asking for the smoothest but fastest she could give me at that gait.

Tate glanced over his shoulder and met my gaze. He winked and I rolled my eyes as he pushed his horse from the trot into a lope as well. I was desperate, needing to think of something as he was just out of reach. Just ahead and off to my left.

Then it dawned on me. So I reached forward, once again trusting Becky to take me where it was necessary and fought the calf for a moment

before removing the rope from around its neck. It was even riskier because now if the little thing fell off, I'd have to re-catch it, but this was all I could think of.

Pushing Becky a little faster, we closed the gap between Tate and I just a little. Just enough that I reset my loop and swung just three times before throwing it at the calf's legs that hung off the side of his horse.

It caught, and I pulled the slack then set Becky off to the right just enough and the calf slid from his horse. I laughed as I dropped the rope, telling myself I'd come back for it later and took off again in the direction of Jake who was waiting at the end.

"Brex!" Tate hollered to which I stuck my tongue out at him as he jumped down from his still moving horse and ran after the calf that was laying on the ground bellowing for his mama. It bought me enough time that there was no one in front of me as we loped the rest of the way to Jake.

The rest of the way home.

We were a mere few feet away from Jake, from winning and my eyes caught a figure walking up to the gate. Someone that caused me to flinch and freeze up. Becky panicked as my legs slammed against her body and my fingers gripped the reins tightly pulling back. It put pressure in front of her and against her sides and she threw her head before shifting at too fast of speeds to backing up, just trying to get away from the pressure. I shot forward in the saddle, tumbling over the horn and onto her neck.

She freaked out even more and suddenly bolted forward as the calf and I crashed to the ground. Pounding hooves reached my ears as Becky barreled in circles around me, kicking out and bucking. Over and over again, she raced in a circle until her nerves settled and she finally slowed.

The rumbling of a new set of hooves became louder and then the clinking of spurs crashed beside me as someone jumped down from their saddle.

My vision spun as I raised my gaze to the railing and stared at the disgusting grin that was plastered on Matthew's face. He leaned against the top rung of the gate and lifted one corner of his mouth in sickening pleasure.

He was here.

## Chapter 23

“No,” I cried out, my voice so small, so quiet as someone’s hand rested against my arm and rolled me over onto my back. My eyes stayed focused on the man who remained against the rail, the man that was coming to destroy the little bit of freedom I’d just won back. Becky’s body came into view, blocking sight of him, and she lowered her head, snorting and sniffing my hair.

“Brex baby?” Deep, comforting, whispered words reached my ears as I felt a tear slip from my eye, and I finally let my gaze slide away from the direction of the gate to find Tate kneeling next to me.

“Not here, too,” I whispered, the tears crashing over my eyes. “Not here,” I cried, and turned away as every painful memory came rushing back in. I knew Tate didn’t understand, not yet anyway, but I couldn’t form any different words even as he kept asking me if I was okay, even after Jake rode this way and asked if I was alright or if anything was broken.

Just my soul.

My physical body was fine, for now. But my heart was forever torn to shreds. Footsteps and hooves seemed to surround me, Becky began to pace back and forth, even as I sat up and fumbled for the reins. I searched those faces that were peering down at me, praying that it had just been one of those moments my brain decided to play tricks on me.

“Brex, are you okay?” Tate asked again, his voice laced with concern. He placed a hand upon my leg, and I flinched, pulling it quickly away. My heart was racing as I slammed my eyes shut and began to count.

One.

Footsteps.

Two.

Another shadow cast over me.

Three.

I opened my eyes to the face of that wretched man feigning concern.

“Your girlfriend alright there, Tate? She took a solid tumble,” Matt asked, giving me the faintest of malicious smiles. Something I knew all too well, something that nearly no one else ever saw.

I backpedaled away from him and shot up to a standing position. Murmurs rippled through the group, asking what he meant by girlfriend. Shocked faces crossed the group, and Jake stumbled back as Tate remained crouched next to the spot I just stood from.

“What’s he sayin’?” Jake asked Tate.

“Nothin’,” Tate snapped at Jake, who shifted the cigarette between his teeth and stared at Tate. It was odd. Tate seemed to have pulled something over his previously concerned figure, one of frustration and calculation.

Matt’s eyes flashed with a vicious understanding. “They don’t know? Ah man, I didn’t mean to embarrass you. What a great first impression at my new job.”

My stomach lurched. New job? He was here to stay? Tate hired him?

Tate placed his hands on his knees and stood, ignoring Matt and everyone else. He stepped toward me, but I backed away.

“Horse fly?” he asked, and I shook my head. He took another step in my direction, and I tugged Becky with me again, backing farther away.

“Did your head mess with you again? Did you see him?” he asked, the questions soared through the silent sky and Matt, standing behind Tate’s shoulder, stared in shock. He hadn’t thought I’d be brave enough to tell someone. But he also quickly realized that if Tate knew something, yet still hired him, he didn’t know everything.

I blinked, fear crashing through me. Yes, I silently screamed. I saw him, I was seeing him right now. He’s standing just a few feet from you.

No, now he’s coming closer.

“Your girlfriend doesn’t seem to want to be around you,” Matthew said to Tate, plastering a fake innocence on his face as if he didn’t deliberately call us out again.

“I’m not his girlfriend,” I stated, slinking farther away as both men approached with another step.

“Then what about all the cozying up from—”

“That,” I cut him off with a snarl, and both of them stopped walking toward me. “Was nothing.” Turning to Becky, I swung my leg over and mounted, ready to get out of here. Tate’s eyes flashing with pain beneath that hat of his. But it was fleeting as anger coated his figure.

Tate suddenly whipped around to face Matt, his eyes red with wrath. He bolted toward my ex and wrapped a massive fist around the front of Matt's shirt, jerking him closer to his face with seething vexation. I leaned forward, gripping the reins tighter and with a trembling hand, and stroked Becky's mane. Hoping for some comfort.

Had Tate figured it out?

Matt seemed startled, even a little afraid. The first time that he seemed to recognize he wasn't in control anymore.

"Let's talk," Tate seethed through his teeth and dragged Matt toward the gate. He whistled low, and his palomino trotted after them. Once far enough away that they were out of earshot, they began speaking, a conversation that I wished I could be privy to.

But the moment they were involved in their private conversation, my coworkers approached me, pestering me with questions of concern in regard to falling off, as well as curiosity to what was going on.

Except for Oakley. She just seemed absolutely pissed. "What was that?" she snarled at me, cutting everyone else off. Loping up on her horse to stand beside me, she shoved her way through the group.

"It was nothing, okay? A horse fly and bad timing was all," I replied, using Tate's first assumption as cover for what was really going on.

"Then why did Tate seem so concerned about you?" She dug deeper, her lips pulled into a tight glare.

"Because she fell off going quite fast, obviously. If it had happened to you, I bet he would've reacted the same," Eva answered for me, inserting herself back into the conversation, and I gave her a weak smile. Grateful that someone else had stuck up for me.

As I scanned the crowd looking for an escape, my eyes rested on Jake, who was sitting upon his horse just outside of the circle that had formed, alone. Quiet observation was coming my direction, and he raised a single brow. I think he knew, or at least hadn't bought my lies.

Sighing, I swallowed the fear that was pounding through me. "Nothing is going on between Tate and I. I don't know why that guy assumed that, maybe because he had shown some concern. But honestly, the little that I know about Tate from the drive solidifies that he is the opposite of my type. All bristly and kind of a jerk," I spoke, lying through my teeth to this group, but kept my gaze on Jake. That was for him, and I prayed he finally believed something, because at one point, I really did think Tate was a closed off jerk.

His face tightened, and he tipped his hat lower over his brows, casting a shadow that obscured my ability to read his reaction. Oakley huffed beside me but dropped it, and the conversation shifted to who Matt was. The girls thought he was pretty cute, but Chance and Cole seemed to think there was something odd about him. Something off.

Suddenly, from the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of movement, and Tate was on his horse, loping toward our group. The conversation died down as he approached, his body still rigid with frustration. The hostility that exuded from his figure swamped our little group and darkened the air around us.

“Brex, come with me,” he growled. A lump formed in my throat as he stared daggers at me, an expression that had my walls thickening around me. My initial impression of him being rude was sliding back in, forming a doubt to any of the kindness that I’d experienced. Had all of that tender expression from him been for show as well? My heart began to race in my chest as he turned around and trotted away, expecting me to follow.

“Go on,” Gemma whispered on the opposite side of me.

Swallowing the lump, I urged Becky forward and trailed at a distance behind the fading form of Tate and his horse. Once we’d exited the pasture, he turned to the left and headed in the direction of the mountain path I used to observe him riding down every morning. We made it to the bottom of the hill before he whipped around and stopped his horse.

Pressure was building behind my eyes as the anger that was crashing through him hit me like a force. The tears slipped out, unable to block them from creating a salty pathway upon my cheeks. Cheeks that began to burn red from embarrassment. The confessions I’d made to him, the vulnerability I’d allowed, was all for naught.

“Brex,” Tate started, but I held up a hand. My fear was slipping easily into desperation. The small amount of trust he’d gained was gone as I now realized my body was turning back into survival mode, fighting for that peace that Tate once gave. I was once again needing to protect myself from not just Matt, but now the one person that knew way too much about me. The one person who seemed to have weaseled his way into my life.

I was already terrified to have his parents discover that it had been fake—an agreement to make sure Tate didn’t lose business. But now? My abuser—someone else who knew about what happened in Vegas—was here, and was going to be here for the rest of the summer.

“What were you thinking, Tate? Hiring him?” I finally managed to croak out.

His eyes were hidden beneath his hat, but I knew he was still angry with his stiff posture. “Contrary to what you may think, I don’t handle every little detail that goes on around here. My parents are in charge of that role,” he snarled at me, and I shrunk away from him.

“So, what now? What did you say to him?”

“I told him that we were dating in secret which is why you continually —”

“You lied again?” I shouted, exasperated and exhausted from all of the pretending.

“What was I supposed to say?” he snapped back.

“I don’t know, maybe the truth?!” I only agreed to a weekend and—”

He shook his head and cut me off. “You caused this, and if I were to tell him the truth now, I would lose all of my business.”

“So lose it. You told me you had so much money that if you were to stop working today, you couldn’t possibly spend all of it.” I lowered my voice, barely able to speak. “So lose your business you selfish jerk.” My head was swimming, and I was just so, so tired. So exhausted.

He threw his arms in the air, and I nearly toppled backwards out of my saddle trying to block myself from getting hit. Becky shuffled away, attempting to shift under me and keep me balanced. Tate quickly lowered his arms and his shoulders fell forward.

“You think I do this for me?” he quietly asked, and I just looked away. “I employ every single member of my family, remember? My parents, my siblings, their spouses. Half of my uncles and aunts and two-thirds of my cousins are all employed by either my investments or some of the businesses I run. Even my grandparents get money from my businesses. If I lose investors or partners, they’ll all be out of work.”

“So just give them money instead.”

“Do you really think I’m that stupid that I wouldn’t have already tried? Not a single one of them would touch it. Not even that asshole Jake. He ripped up every check, every written form of money. He stuffed the cash back into my house, shoved it into my shirt, any possible way to give it back. Every single one of them that I’ve offered it to told me they won’t touch it unless they’ve earned it in some way or another.”

I swung my head toward him in frustration. “Right. Every single one



of them is that honest, that self-righteous,” I jabbed.

He sighed. “Obviously not, but the ones that are deserve my best effort, Brex.”

Shaking my head, I looked down at the saddle horn. “I can’t keep pretending, Tate. I’m exhausted.” He didn’t need to know what I was really tired from, but at least it was enough of a truth that I didn’t have to lie. This couldn’t be happening. I refused to go through another heartbreak because of this man. Returning here, knowing that even the fake stuff was over had ripped my soul to shreds. There was no way I could go through that again.

“Look, I don’t know why, but I can’t seem to think logically when it comes to you, and I’m sorry for saying that without discussing it with you first. But please. He might even go to my parents if he senses a hint of doubt. I know you only agreed to a weekend, but—”

“Fine.” I stared at my saddle and fiddled with the leather. This would eventually be over anyway, because even he had to get tired of pretending soon. “If he asks me, I’ll tell him the same thing, but we aren’t going to do anything. You said you told him we are dating in secret, so there’s no need for us to even be seen together. Just let me know when you’ve decided we’ve faked it long enough to finally break up,” I replied and turned Becky away.

“Okay.” His voice broke, and I glanced up to find him slumped back in his saddle, his gaze cast toward the ground. I couldn’t figure out what he was thinking or feeling, but I didn’t care right now. Matt had returned, we were once again pretending to be dating, and I was still just trying to process everything.

Then there had been that anger that Tate had exhibited. He had yelled at me. Granted, I’d yelled back, but it was the strangest thing. Not once this weekend had he ever talked to me in such a way, or even shown an ounce of that temper toward me.

Pausing Becky, I swiveled my head back in the direction where I’d left Tate.

He remained slumped in his saddle, except for I could see smoke swirling around his hat now and the low glow of a cigarette clamped between his teeth.

And I knew that, although to Matt we were pretending to date, to Tate, whatever we hadn’t had a chance to explore was completely over. One last tear slid down my cheek, and I trotted toward the barn where everyone else was hanging out.

Making sure to wipe the stain from my cheek before arriving at the group, I plastered a fake smile on my face as Jake told us to go take care of our evening chores, and then it was time for dinner. Jake took Matt with him and, as they left, he cast me one more malicious grin that made my stomach curdle. Something was cooking in his head, something I wasn't sure of, but it terrified me.

As I rode in the bed of the truck, behind Eva and Melody, tossing hay into the fields my mind wandered. The realization that this was a vast property and Matt finding a way to get me alone became a real possibility. One where no one would be able to discover us to save me, and terror washed away any exhaustion. Maybe I'd been an idiot for telling Tate that, because it was a secret, we didn't need to be around each other. Maybe I should've just accepted it willingly and dealt with the crushing heartbreak that would come simply to make sure that I was never alone.

Having Tate around in secret would've minimized the chances that Matt would find me alone, corner me, and fall back into old habits. He'd given me the promise that he would ruin my life, and now he was here. I was fairly certain he was still determined to do that. My stomach churned as the last bit of hay was shoved from the bed of the truck and Melody turned us back toward the pasture gate.

As we drove up the little road toward the lodge, my eyes caught onto a flash of golden dappled creme. Tate's palomino was tied beside the lodge, but there was no rider. What was he doing here? Once the truck was parked, I hopped out of the back and followed slowly behind my chatty coworkers. They didn't seem to notice the distance that was spreading between us as I hung back farther and farther.

Heartbreak, combined with fear and exhaustion and the thought that maybe I'd been an idiot for not going along with his idea, swirled in my belly. And after how I'd reacted to him, yelled at him, and treated him, I had no right to tell him that maybe we should do a better job at faking this and be seen together a couple times.

Honestly, I didn't know what I was doing anymore. This was all weaving into something more complicated than necessary, and I wanted out. Somehow, finding a way to return to New York sooner than expected might be the way to go.

My feet stopped completely as I stared at his horse and watched the two girls disappear into the lodge. What did I do? What had I done? Why

hadn't I seen that it would've been a perfect opportunity for protection from Matt? I could've spent the fake relationship portion building up the walls around my heart to prepare for the shock that would come when we would fake break up, but no. I'd been in too much shock and too crushed from everything that had happened in less than a day to logically see that.

I thought it would be easier to stay away from him.

Of course it wouldn't be. This was Tate, and everything in me constantly drove me toward him. Our fates had been intertwined long ago.

## Chapter 24

A cold hand suddenly clamped around my wrist, jerking my attention away from the horse, and I yelped. My face met Matt's snarling breath. He seemed angry, and yet excited at the same time. I felt nothing but fear.

"I don't believe it," he whispered in my ear. "I don't believe that you told him about me."

"He knows about what happened to me," I replied, avoiding giving confirmation that I indeed had not told Tate that it was Matt who had done it all.

He jerked me harder toward him, increasing the already aching bruise on my wrist. "Well, then I'll just have to get a little more creative in fulfilling my promise." His free hand suddenly connected with my cheek, leaving a stinging slap across my skin. I winced, but refused to give him anything else.

"Oh, I almost forgot." He grinned and shoved me to the ground. "I really don't like you and Tate being together, but I like the idea of making both of you suffer like I did more. So, for now, you'll keep dating him, but you're not allowed to be seen with him. If he even tries to talk to you, I'll find pleasure in word getting around that he wanted to sleep with you. If he even attempts to touch you, I'll make sure that he knows how much of a slut you are. Which might not be the best for his precious reputation when rumors start to spread." The grin slipped quickly from his face, and he kicked dust in my direction before clambering back up on the wooden porch and disappearing into the lodge.

I lay in the dirt, feeling nauseous. Anything but hunger rolled through my body, and it took me several minutes before I finally found the strength to drag myself off of the ground. Instead of going in for dinner, I meandered back down the road as the sun sank over the horizon. Heading toward the bunkhouse, I sighed.

It was only fair for my heart to feel this heavy. This was my punishment for treating Tate the way I had. Now, I wouldn't even be able to

apologize. I had yelled at Tate and pretty much told him to leave me alone except when it was time to break up, which put me in a very lonely and vulnerable position to be hurt if I even set one toe out of line. Matt was out to destroy me, ruin anything I had built, and wreck the small amount of happiness I'd regained. And it was already working.

My freedom had been so quickly ripped away, leaving me with torrential buckets of crushing despair. And it was mostly my fault.

Finding my way into the bunkhouse, I crashed onto my bed after a very quick shower and fell asleep in a pool of exhausting tears before anyone else returned. Tears of agony. I wanted everything to just go away. This life was becoming too much.



It was an interesting branding day. I rode Becky, roping, dragging, numbly helping in whatever way I could. Something that used to be a competition between my brother and me, something that had once brought me so much joy, now tore me in two.

On one hand, it was liberating to be back at work doing this, distracting me from everything going on, but on the other, Tate barely looked at me, barely spoke to anyone outside of orders, and Matt wouldn't stop staring at me. As if he was scrutinizing what was going on. With Tate being mad at me and ignoring me, it seemed to work in my favor no matter how painful it felt.

We took a small break for a late lunch and then got back to it. No one dared approach me, it was as if I was taboo and going to cause issues. Even Jake seemed to only speak to me if absolutely necessary to tell me to go somewhere different or do something else.

It was such an exciting time for my coworkers, experiencing this for the first time, while this was second nature for me, and I think they also seemed to pick up on it. Whispers met my ears behind my back from them, asking each other how I knew all of this. Asking where my hat and spurs had come from, and even wondering why Tate seemed to be unusually cold to me. He was standoffish to everyone, just more so to me.

The new hands even noticed whatever tension was going on, and I heard several whispered questions about it, but it was shot down the moment Tate picked up on the rumors and tossed whoever was in offense a warning stare. A very intense glare that had most of the new workers shriveling in fear and questioning if this was what they had signed up for.

And then, just like that, the sky was darkening and Tate called it a day. He disappeared the moment he could, riding up the mountainside and into the trees, puffing on a cigarette. Everyone headed up to the lodge for some dinner, and I silently snagged a sandwich before rushing back out into the open air. Hoping to escape for just a moment. I wasn't going to let anyone else see me completely fall apart. Had I not fought for long enough to be stronger than this?

I climbed the railing and munched on my simple dinner, watching the horses graze on some hay. No sign of Tate, no sign of anyone else. I was alone, absolutely and utterly alone. Maybe now would be a good time to give Katie a call, or my brother, or my therapist. Explain that Matt was here, and maybe one of them could help me figure out how to handle this situation.

But what if that just made things worse?

Pushing the last bite of sandwich in my mouth, I sighed, and then someone shoved me off of the railing. I slammed into the ground, breaking my fall with my hands. Groaning, I rolled onto my back and clutched my already bruised and damaged left wrist in my fingers to see Matt swinging himself up onto the spot he forced me to vacate.

I fought back tears, trying to sit up, but the moment I did, he shoved a boot into my chest and forced me back onto the ground. The air slammed from my lungs, and the world spun around me. "That's a warning, CeCe."

"For what?" I croaked out, and he hopped off of the fence to crouch down in front of me as I gasped for air.

"To remind you that you weren't supposed to break up with him yet. He's acting so damn cold toward you, unusually cold. You two were all cuddly and making out, and now, he pretty much acted like you didn't exist today. Did you tell him anything?" he snarled and then pulled himself back up onto the fence and bit into an apple.

I remained on the ground, just waiting for him to disappear. "No. I haven't said a word. I've been avoiding him like you asked." I rubbed my wrist as a silent tear slipped down my cheek and then continued. "You already got out of prison early, the entire town loves and believes you, my

own parents love you and are on your side. What is the point of this? You've already taken everything from me."

"But I haven't, have I!" he spat at me, and a massive wad of snot and apple juices landed against my cheek. "You somehow still managed to make a new life for yourself, and even found someone to replace me. But CeCe, you will always be mine. And this," he waved his arms around him. "This is because you obviously didn't learn your lesson while we were married. You still put me in prison, even if it only lasted for two years thanks to your mommy and daddy."

He jumped down from the fence and dug the toe of his boot into my side, against the ribs he once cracked. "So, if I find you misbehaving, ignoring my rules even once, it won't just be you who gets hurt this time. You need to be taught a fucking lesson." He pulled up his shirt and flashed a handgun at me, and my face paled. This suddenly became more than just a way to keep me in line. This was more than ruining Tate's reputation or forcing me to take him back. This was revenge. Matt had truly snapped.

He bent down and gripped my arm, ripping me off of the ground. Squeezing hard, he dug his fingers into my arm and yanked me close to his face. "You don't fucking deserve what I gave you, CeCe. What makes you think you could find better without me?" Releasing my arm, he shoved me hard against my chest, forcing me to the ground once more, and kicked some mud in my face.

I coughed, and the world spun in circles, waving through a haze.

He abruptly turned around, climbed the fence, and wiggled his fingers at me. "See you in the morning, bright and early." And Matt was gone.

I pulled my knees up tight to my chest. Two years and a divorce later, and I felt like I was back at square one, right back into his games and forced to do as he pleased. Except this time it felt a little different. I knew how he was and had escaped once, maybe I could escape again. I needed to play his game better than he was expecting, and hopefully it would go a little smoother. Maybe I could buy myself time to figure out what to do next.

And I knew what game he really wanted to play. Every one of his threats always ended with me being deserving of no one except for him. Of me being with no one except for him. So in the end, he would expect me to break up with Tate.

Tate shouldn't have to be dragged into this. He shouldn't be weighed down by my past that was so heavy and burdened with pain. It wasn't his

responsibility to protect me, and I needed to keep him safe, so I wasn't going to tell him what was going on. Just like Matt had asked, but not for the reasons he did.

I could do this. I was stronger than the last time, no matter how much the fear still caged in my heart.



## Chapter 25

Two weeks of torture went by in a haze. The events existed as if in a time lapse video. One taken to watch how incredible nature was as the snow melted and the first spring buds pierced the ground. The only solace and joy I found came from waking up early enough, rising before anyone else, to be able to see Tate ride out from the forest. He would stop halfway down the fence, and his head would turn to where I was standing against the gate, watching him.

We would stay there for only a moment as the sky would turn a soft pink, draping a blanket over the muddy hillside, and the sun would rise over the tips of the mountains that surrounded us.

Our one, secretly shared peaceful memory to begin each day with.

Then he would be gone, and I would mindlessly go about my chores and assigned duties during the day, just waiting for tomorrow morning and hoping Matt didn't try anything against Tate. I started to rely on those early morning sightings, giving me confirmation that he made it one more day without coming head to head with Matt. He could hurt me all he wanted, threaten me however he felt I deserved, if that meant he left Tate alone.

Luckily, the boss's increasing absence during day to day functions, even shutting down anyone's help with the colts, pushed the rumors about our fake relationship to bay. Things settled into a monotonous routine, and it seemed everyone forgot what happened that fateful day.

Except I couldn't forget. Matt wasn't in the mood to let me off of his short leash either, constantly giving me random reminders of what he could do or would do if I stepped one toe out of line. I continued to try and play by his rules, reassuring him that we were dating, but also keeping my distance from the man that was turning into a recluse—which wasn't hard.

But despite my adherence to his demands, as days passed, I felt a rise in Matt's impatience waiting for me to slip up. He often found me alone when I was least expecting it, off on some chore where I thought he wouldn't

be able to bother me. But I became numb to it all. To his slaps, kicks, punches, and terrifying words. Even when he tried to rip my earrings out again. I simply stopped wearing them and moved on.

I felt so hollow, bruised, and exhausted. The only thing that continually drove me day after day was the thought that I was keeping Tate safe. And as time wore on, as Matt's scare tactics became more frequent, that mind numbing nothingness shifted to anger.

Instead of becoming that submissive, mindless zombie to his most recent method of abuse by choking me, I resented Matt and wanted to fight back. A new, and honestly reviving, feeling. I hadn't done anything wrong. I hadn't had contact with Tate. I never saw him more than once each morning, which was one more time than anyone else. This behavior was apparently unusual for the boss. In previous years, Tate was at least a presence during the day; now, he was merely a ghost haunting the hills.

Worst of all, I dreaded tomorrow. Another Saturday night trip to the bar was on the books, and Matt typically dealt his worst blows while there. And no matter what excuse I tried to give Jake, he refused to accept it. I kicked at some dirt as Aubrey and Melody walked beside me. The three of us wandered toward the lodge for dinner. They were gossiping about how one of the ranch hands was kind of cute, while I began preparing for the world of pain that was coming tomorrow.

We rounded the corner and walked into the lodge. Plodding toward the back of the building, I followed the two girls and entered what was normally a pretty lively dining area. The food smelled delicious, but it was rather quiet, even though everyone was already there. My eyes roamed the crowd, trying to understand how the three of us were the last to arrive. Then, my gaze rested upon a pair of hazel eyes set beneath a black cowboy hat.

Tate.

His face was expressionless, and he was just pushing the roast and potatoes around on his plate. Jake sat beside him with the usual crew scattered farther away on the benches. The only one daring enough to sit with those two was Oakley, something I honestly wasn't shocked to see. She was still obsessed over him.

I paused, silently staring back into those eyes that I wished to get lost in forever, and could feel my heart shattering even more. After two weeks of nothing, I shouldn't be crushed by the simple emotionless gaze of hazel eyes that used to be so full of life, so full of adoration for me.

I tried to give him a small smile, but my lips just twitched a few times before I sucked in a deep, silent breath and turned away. Plodding toward the buffet table where Aubrey and Melody were already filling their plates, a hush fell over the room as someone else's boots clunked. Chancing a glance back toward Tate, I saw he was standing up and holding a notebook and pen in his hands.

He cleared his throat, didn't even give a quick glance my way and spoke. "Alright, I was thinking for a change, instead of heading to the bar tomorrow evening, we'd hit up the rodeo that's in town this weekend." Bursts of excitement shouted and hollered through the room, several hands banged their fists on the table, and even a few whistles were given.

Yet, Tate didn't even crack a smile. His face remained stone still and cold.

Once the excited shouts died down, he lifted the notebook in his hands and addressed us again. "If any of y'all wanna enter, come tell me, and I'll make sure we bring tack and horses for those who want to compete. Give me what event you're plannin', and I'll make sure that all the logistics are taken care of. You are responsible for entry fees though, so if y'all want me to spot you, I can take it out of your paycheck. Questions?"

He paused, and it was within a matter of seconds that, of course, Oakley raised her hand. Tate gave her a curt nod, and the sickly sweet smile she offered him back made my insides curdle. But I had no right to him, so I clenched my jaw and watched the interaction.

"Are you entering Tate?" She smiled again, and several of the hands laughed at the suggestion, mocking him. Tate didn't even wince at the jabs.

Jake rolled his eyes at Oakley and then grinned. "'Course he is. I can't enter team ropin' without my heeler now can I?" But Tate just shook his head and looked down.

"I'm just reining right now, Jake. Sorry, but—"

"Nah, I ain't accepting this shit. So suck it up, and add yourself to the list," Jake interrupted him, and a chant started in the room. Low at first, just his name, but then it grew and grew and grew until the tables were shaking. It was only now that Tate's eyes slid to mine, and they were no longer hollow, but filled with something else. Something I couldn't make out, and he turned back toward the rest of the crowd so quickly that I wasn't given any extra time to try to decipher what he was feeling.

"Alright," he grumbled and cheers erupted. "Calm down, come make

a line so I can get y'all written down. Also, we leave at noon tomorrow, so I expect your chores to be finished by then.” Several of the guys stood up and rushed over, excited to be able to participate in a rodeo. Matt was one of them. His face swiveled to mine, and he tilted his head, a nasty grin coated his clean shaven face.

“So, none of the girls are going to enter? I thought at least one or two of them claimed they could ride,” he mocked me, although none of the others would understand that his words were directed toward me specifically, I knew. And he knew that I knew.

His eyes remained locked onto me and didn't notice as Oakley, waiting in front of him, spun around and shoved him in the shoulder. His eyes flashed with red hot anger, and he snapped to her, ready to hit her as he had once hit me during a play fight. Matt caught himself in the nick of time, lowering his raised fist as she clicked her tongue.

“Dummy, I'm literally standing in the line in front of you to enter.” She shoved her hands on her hips, and he chuckled, flashing that cheeky grin that had once wooed me too.

But his eyes shifted toward me once more. “So, I guess the girl that fell off the day I got here isn't as good of a rider as she thinks she is.” This earned a loud giggle from Oakley, and then she sneered at me. But it was the wink from Matt that set me over the edge.

The plate I was holding clattered to the table loudly, the little bit of food I'd already dished myself splattered against the floor, but I didn't care. I didn't want to be here anymore, didn't want to be involved in this. Matt had already taken away that dream from me all those years ago, and he was just rubbing more salt in the wound.

I spun on my heels and left the room, blocking out the whispers. My heart sank the moment Tate announced it was a rodeo we were going to tomorrow, and now I'd been called out, mocked, teased, and embarrassed in front of a crowd of people that had a bad enough opinion of me already.

Poser. Fake. Loser.

Three words that followed me out of that room, words that I tried to ignore but couldn't. I thought I was a fighter, I thought I was strong, but this entire time I'd still been burning in a fire of pain. Torture that hadn't left, hadn't faded away, even if the initial sting had long since faded away.

## Chapter 26

Morning chores went by way too fast, the few extra assignments I'd been given were done, and noon was quickly approaching. Eva dragged me behind her back toward our bunk to get ready for the rodeo. My mind couldn't focus on anything that was going on. Tate hadn't shown up this morning on his horse, riding down the mountainside, and Oakley hadn't ever come back to the bunkhouse last night.

I knew that I was being cheeky to assume, but one plus one usually equals two, and that was exactly how this was feeling. Unless something had happened to Tate. But the one time I'd even briefly passed Oakley earlier today, she had this massive grin on her face, as if she'd accomplished something. Something she couldn't share but wanted people to ask about.

"Are you alright?" Eva's sweet voice broke through my thoughts as the sun shone brightly overhead, illuminating the gravel road we were walking up.

"Yeah, sorry. Why didn't you or any of the others enter the rodeo?" I asked, turning to look at her and tugging the hem down my wrists on my long-sleeve T-shirt.

She scoffed. "Because Oakley entered, obviously. Plus, this is like one of those pro-rodeos. I looked it up. I've only been riding since we got here."

"And? Why not take the chance?" I asked, giving her a smile, and she laughed.

"Says the girl who ran out last night at the mere mention that Oakley was the only one entering."

"I don't do rodeos," I sharply replied, anger evident and her face fell. She didn't answer me, and we continued up the road in silence away from the pastures. As we turned right to head down toward the bunkhouse, she suddenly gripped my arm hard and stopped walking.

I paused and looked up at her beautiful, sweat-soaked face. "Look,

I'm not an idiot. Something about all of this bothers you, and you've been having a hard time. I may not know what, but I don't agree with how Matt called you out like that last night. He was probably just trying to bait you into entering, or make you jealous or Oakley jealous or whatever flirting tactic he was trying."

"Wait, what?" I asked, and she dropped her hand from my arm, running her fingers through her ponytail. "You think Matt likes me?"

She shrugged her shoulders up toward her ears, the collar of her T-shirt rippled with the movement. "He barely stops looking at you, and you are quite pretty, Brexlynn. Why is it so hard to believe that a guy might be interested in you?"

It made sense that she would think that was why Matt stared at me all of the time. I wasn't going to correct her either, so I simply forced a smile. We both continued walking toward the bunkhouse.

"And who is it that you find cute?" I asked her, teasing and shifting the attention away from me as her cheeks went bright red.

"How'd you know?" she said and stepped up the couple stairs to open the door.

"We are with these guys every day, it wasn't hard," I answered, and she giggled.

I followed her into the bunkhouse and bent down. Unbuckling my spurs, I tossed them onto my bed and then kicked off my boots. I wanted to wear the same pair to the rodeo, but there was no need for metal to clang with every step I took while there.

"I think Chance is really cute," she finally said, and I grinned at her.

"He is a very talented cowboy, I approve," I replied, and she giggled.

"Isn't he?"

There wasn't a chance to answer as the door swung open and in rushed the rest of my coworkers, still minus Oakley.

Melody jumped up and down first. "Oh my goodness! It's rodeo time!" she squealed, and everyone clapped their hands. For a moment, I let myself enjoy their excitement and mindlessly pulled a clean pair of jeans down from the closet.

"What is everyone going to wear?" Aubrey said next and began frantically digging through her drawer of clothes.

Gemma smiled. "Well, our boots for one! At least we can go to our very first rodeo with some evidence of experience in the western world! Plus,

this will be good for our research.” She grinned and pulled out a nice pair of skinny jeans.

My hand grabbed a black button up with purple trim along the hemlines and small cowboy boots patterned along the fabric down from a hanger. “Not those, Gemma,” I softly replied, and all the girls stopped moving.

They stared at me as I held the high-waisted Wranglers and long-sleeve pearl snap shirt in my hands. I remained still, as well, wondering what I had done wrong. Except grins began to spread across the faces of my coworkers.

“She speaks!” Aubrey exclaimed, and I rolled my eyes.

“What’s wrong with these jeans?” Gemma said and shoved them in my direction as the rest of the girls resumed looking for clothes.

I walked down from the shared closet space and headed in the direction of the bathroom. “They’re skinny jeans, and you said you wanted to wear your boots. Wear a pair of bootcut jeans that go over them.”

Gemma face-palmed herself and then smiled. “Right!” She quickly dropped the pair she was holding and began searching for a different pair of jeans. All four of those girls had bought new jeans and actual boots since being here, at the guidance of mostly Oakley, but also me during one of our excursions to town Saturday night.

Closing the door behind me, I turned the knob on for the shower and undressed. It had to be quick as we were short on time and my mind was still racing. After the shower, I once again out of habit just pulled on my clothes and blow dried my hair. The roots were showing horribly now, so I never went anywhere without a hat.

One thing that had at least remained after the adventure with Tate was that I was confident enough to wear my cowboy hat. It was seeing the sun again; it was enjoying time out of the box. Stepping out of the bathroom, I found that all of the girls had already left. Quickly tugging out a belt from my suitcase, I grabbed the box that I’d shoved the buckles in and sifted through them.

It was a moment before I realized what I was wearing. What I was doing.

“What are you thinking?” I muttered to myself and stared at my hand that held one of my largest, square shaped buckles I’d won. The buckle that had earned me enough points to qualify for the NFR and put me eighth in the

world that year. I glanced at my phone to see the time. It was already noon, I was late, so there was no time to change from my outfit, and these pants had to have a belt or they would fall down.

Clicking the buckle onto my belt, I grabbed my hat, snagged my boots, and ran out of the bunkhouse. Barefoot, I flew across the gravel, the rocks piercing my socks, but I didn't care. At least I'd put a little bit of mascara on before running out of time.

Pounding down the road, I rounded the corner and sprinted up toward the crowded parking lot as quickly as I could, my belt still draped over my arm. Using my one free hand, I tucked in my shirt as I turned right and came to a halt. Panting, I leaned forward to catch my breath and give myself a moment. They hadn't left yet.

Ahead of me was a nice Dodge Cummins with a massive fifth wheel horse trailer hitched and already loaded. A few other trucks were pulled up beside it and most people were leaning against their vehicles, waiting. Even the rest of my coworkers, including Anthony, were lingering about a red truck.

Tate was perched against the driver's side door of the Cummins, puffing on a cigarette, and wearing a very nice dark-blue button up with white stitching and pale cyan circles patterned across it with Oakley standing near him, once again looking very pleased with herself. Cole and Chance were arguing about something just beside those two, and Jake appeared around the nose of the truck. His eyes locked onto me, and a scowl filled his face. He was headed in my direction.

Shoving my feet into my boots, I half-hopped, half-ran toward Jake to apologize. It was an awkward shuffle as I attempted to keep my pants on my waist, but also tug them down over my boots, and not drop my belt. So much so that when I got in front of Jake, he actually snorted in laughter at me.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, and he shook his head, rolling a cigarette between his own teeth.

"Put your belt on and get in the truck." He shook his head and waited as I fed the belt through the loops and went to buckle it. His eyes locked onto the buckle, and he furrowed his brows. My heart dropped to my stomach, and I froze.

Panicked. Of course I should've thought about the fact that he and everyone else was going to see the buckle, one that I got from winning a rodeo. In barrels.



My brain went into flight mode, and I quickly covered it with my hand and spun away from him. *Get in the truck!* my mind shouted at me, so I ran away from him, past Tate who had just stomped on his cigarette and dashed around the front of the truck. Instinct kicked in as I scrambled to make sure that no one else saw the buckle, and I ripped open the front passenger side door of Tate's truck and dove inside.

Pulling myself into the seat, I slammed the door behind me and let out a heavy breath. Closing my eyes, I shook my head. Why did I choose this shirt? Why did I choose these jeans and this buckle? I knew that I just went through the motions of getting ready for a rodeo, but I wasn't competing, I wasn't riding in it. So why couldn't I have been like my coworkers and picked an outfit that was more like a buckle bunny? That would've thrown them off my trail, but no, and of course Jake saw the buckle up close too.

Suddenly the truck rocked sideways, and a voice spoke to my right. "You're in my seat," Jake said. I swiveled my head toward him and opened my eyes. I looked at my surroundings, finally realizing where I was and what I'd done. My cheeks flamed red as the truck rocked again and the door to my left creaked.

I glanced that way to find Tate climbing in. His lips twitched and then he closed the door behind him.

Turning back to Jake, he chuckled and shook his head. "Slide over." He gestured toward the middle seat, and the red that was already tinging my cheeks flamed even hotter.

"I don't bite, darlin'. Most of the time," Tate whispered.

Everything stopped.

Tate's voice was quiet, barely loud enough for even me to hear, and I was the closest person to him. He spoke to me. Maybe even flirted with me. But he'd acknowledged me for the first time since that fateful day. I slowly turned my head toward Tate to see that he was watching me, his hazel eyes looked pained. Pained, but at least not empty. The back doors opened as I timidly slid over into the middle seat, close to Tate. So close I could smell him. He was wrapped in a thick scent of smoke, but there was that faint hint of caramel and pine trees once more.

My heart leapt out of my chest as Jake hauled himself in after me and closed the door. Chance and Cole climbed in the back, followed by a pouting Oakley, who glared at me the moment she caught my eye. I hadn't purposefully taken her seat, but it did feel a little good that she wasn't the one

sitting directly next to Tate.

The truck rumbled to life, and Tate checked his mirrors before putting it into drive, and off we went. The first twenty minutes were absolutely silent. Awkwardly silent, and I kept myself as far from Tate as I could. As we turned onto the main road, the truck jerked from a pothole, and Jake's leg rammed into mine.

I yelped and shot away from him. Jake lifted his hands to apologize, and I flinched, instinctively diving toward Tate. My hands curled up against his shoulder, seeking protection from the fist that was coming. Blood pounded in my ears as I tucked myself tighter behind his shoulder and arm, against the seat. Closing my eyes, I braced for the inevitable pain that was about to come.

Shaking, my breaths became sporadic as I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Soft whispers pierced through the stiff air from the back seat and then the warmth of the muscle I was curled up against shifted. I blinked. Here I was with my face buried between Tate and the seat, my hands clamped tightly against my chest. And my cheeks flamed red hot with embarrassment as I realized what I'd done.

Slowly, I moved away as Tate lowered his right hand from the steering wheel and picked up my hat that my convulsing movements shoved off.

"I-I-I'm sor-sorry," I stuttered out and moved away from Tate. He glanced my way and set the hat back on my head before returning to stare forward and gripped the steering wheel without a word. His knuckles were turning white, and I saw him clench his jaw before I returned my gaze to Jake beside me.

He remained absolutely still with his hands frozen in the air. His face contorted in absolute confusion. "What was that?" he finally said.

"Yeah, that was super embarrassing and weird," Oakley interjected from the back, and I took a deep breath, looking away from Jake.

"Pothole," Tate answered before I had a chance. I glanced toward his face, his jaw still set tight under his hat, that mustache even longer and starting to curl upwards at the end. A vein was slowly popping out against his neck which drew my attention to those beautiful, silky black curls along the nape of his neck.

I wanted to touch them, twist them around my fingers one more time.

It was as if he sensed that, because his right hand left the steering wheel and brushed against the back of his neck, spinning a couple curls for just a moment. Just a moment, and then he lowered his hand. Lowered it toward the seat.

“Yeah, when she bumped into Jake, that was from a pothole. Not when she dove against you.” Oakley said again, and suddenly Tate’s fingers brushed against the side of my leg. I wasn’t sure if he did that on purpose, but it was brief, and then his hand was back onto the steering wheel.

My gaze remained locked onto Tate’s face, where he raised a brow and widened his eyes. But not at me, he was staring at Jake, wordlessly communicating something with him.

Jake sighed. “I accidentally shoved back pretty hard after the pothole. Brexlynn here is lighter than I thought, and it pushed her against Tate. My mistake.” I silently thanked Tate. He didn’t have to do that, but for whatever reason, he was still protecting me.

Tate looked away from Jake, glanced at me and then out the front window. I slowly exhaled in relief. Relaxing in my seat, I found myself not moving any farther away from Tate, and grateful that Jake had figured out what he was trying to say. Even after everything, Tate still protected me.

Chance’s voice piped up from the back, the first time someone took my side who wasn’t Tate. The first time someone stood up to Oakley. “You know, I don’t get what you’ve got against Brexlynn.”

“I don’t have anything against her. She just doesn’t share much about herself, and I want to get to know her.”

“Not everyone has to be your friend,” Cole replied, lifting his hat and running a hand through his hair.

“Like you?” she replied.

Both Chance and Cole laughed. “Girl, how long has it been since we first met?” Cole asked.

Oakley grinned. “Too many damn years.” She chuckled, and the mood shifted in the truck. “How about some music up there?” she added, and Jake reached forward and then paused as he neared me, glancing at me. I smiled and mouthed “thank you” to him. He gave me a quick nod and then finished moving.

Flipping on the stereo, Tate pulled out his phone and then, without thinking, he handed it to me. I stared at his outstretched hand, unsure what to

do. My heart thumped. Glancing up from the phone, I met Tate's eyes.

"You are in the middle seat, which makes you the DJ," he explained and shook the phone at me again. "I'm feeling some Brooks & Dunn, what about you?" He gave me a subtle wink before looking back at the front. Timidly, I pulled the phone from his hand and opened it. Shifting through his playlist, I found My Maria and turned it up.

Immediately, Tate began to sing, and I smiled to myself. Hearing that sweet voice again was something I'd been longing for. But it was the silence from everyone else that made me giggle. So, as soon as the chorus came on, I joined in. Just as we had done on the drive.

Jake's jaw dropped. Chance and Cole reached forward, gripping Tate's shoulder, and then whooped and hollered.

"He's back!" Chance said.

"She sings! Brexlynn sings!" Cole shoved my shoulder lightly. I tensed up at the touch, but swallowed sharply, reminding myself that Matt wasn't in this truck, and Tate grinned. He leaned toward me and sang loudly at the chorus again. I placed a hand over my heart and joined in, feeling like, for just a moment, we were back on the drive.

"What the hell is going on?" Jake muttered beside me, and I laughed out loud at that comment as Tate finished singing the song.

"Just go with it," Tate replied with a grin, and then his eyes met mine. The grin softened to a longing. One that I felt along with him. And then he cleared his throat and looked away, and my heart cracked once more. This was over, I had to remember that this was over before it had even begun. But at the same time, I wouldn't mind experiencing just a few more minutes of that with him.

"One more time?" I whispered in Tate's direction as the next song blared over the speakers, drowning out my words to everyone else. They were loudly singing along with whatever song was playing, off key, but enjoying themselves.

His hazel eyes glanced toward me, that pained look back in his eyes. "We don't want the ride to be boring for everyone else, now, do we?" he quietly replied, and I knew at that moment that just a few more minutes of sharing something with him wasn't going to happen. Not how I wanted it to. But he agreed, in his own way, for one more time. Simply to make sure everyone else enjoyed the ride.

After he finished singing the next song, the rest of the cab fell into

conversation with each other, joking about who was actually going to win and who wasn't. Apparently, Chance and Cole were also team roping. It was fun to listen to, but I couldn't focus as we turned into the fairgrounds and in front of me were familiar rows of trucks and trailers.

The arena was off to the right, the stands rising high into the sky, bleachers covered by a large roof that blocked the entire arena from most of the elements of the outdoors. Toward the far end of the arena were several smaller pens that were available for competitors to warm up their horses in.

The opposite side of the arena held a small carnival, rides attracting hordes of people. Tate pulled the trailer up beside another fairly large bumper pull and put the truck in park, shutting the engine off. I sat still, waiting for either Tate or Jake to leave so I could get out.

We were here.

The first time I'd been back to a rodeo since the NFR, and everything in me was pounding from fear and anticipation. I honestly hadn't ever thought I'd be back to one, but here I was, sitting in the middle of a truck hitched to a horse trailer, ready to watch people I knew and cared about enjoy something that had once been my life's dream to become the best at.

## Chapter 27

Everyone left the truck before me; I even felt the familiar shake of horses being unloaded from the trailer. I watched my friends, my coworkers all run toward the carnival or arena or off to explore and experience this. But I remained still in the truck.

Luckily, Matt had been dragged away by one of the other guys to go pay entry fees, so he hadn't been able to catch me here alone.

He hadn't been able to shove another moment of fear into my soul. But that didn't change the fact that I was frozen, battling demons in my own mind, and entirely exhausted.

The truck swayed once more, and the door creaked open. I shrieked and tried to shove myself away from the driver's side door, but the seat belt caught me. Frantically pressing the release button, I failed in my frenzy and glanced up at my unexpected companion.

Tate's face fell in concern, watching me for a moment, and then he climbed inside, shutting the door behind him. He pressed the lock button and leaned back against the seat.

He didn't speak, and I didn't move as time ticked by. The lot was filling up fast, the stands were bubbling with people, and horses were slowly entering the warmup area.

Finally, he moved. He looked at me and then extended his hand, something dangled from his fingers. I hesitantly looked his way and saw my spurs in his grasp. "I left those on my bed," I quickly said, and he nodded.

"I know."

"So, why do you have them?" I asked, and he pulled his hand back.

"I grabbed them after your bunkmates left."

"Why?"

"Because you're going to need them," he answered and extended them once more.

"What for?" I screeched out, and he sighed.

“Brex, will you quit and just take them? You’re not going to have time to warm up Becky if you keep stalling.” He swung his head toward me. “Plus, I’ve gotta go get ready too and wouldn’t mind some company.”

“What are you talking about?!” I shouted, and he dropped the spurs in my lap.

“I signed you up for barrels.”

My jaw fell open. “No. No. Absolutely not,” I answered and grabbed my spurs, shoving them back into his lap.

“Brexlynn Phillips, put the damn spurs on, and go tack up Becky,” he commanded, his voice deep, dropping the spurs onto the seat, and then he unlocked the door and left me alone.

He had to be kidding me. Just like that, he was telling me what to do. Acting like he hadn’t been ignoring me, as if he hadn’t been giving me the cold shoulder. Plus, despite the brave face I’d been putting on, this was a barrel race I’d be running in front of people. In front of Matt. Which resulted in me in the hospital last time.

There was no way I was doing this. I crossed my arms and sat still, angry at him for even thinking that this was something I was going to do. He didn’t know me.

Rolling my eyes, I huffed again and looked out the right window. Just as Oakley went walking by with a massive grin on her face. She was leading her sorrel horse away from the trailer toward Tate, who was talking with someone I didn’t recognize.

But he recognized her. He smiled. No dimples yet, but still offered a small smile to this woman, who was holding a little toddler on her hip. She was simplistically beautiful. Kind, big brown eyes. Thick lips, cream-colored hair and curves. I wouldn’t ever be able to achieve that. The effortless ability to be confident in myself, to think that someone like Tate could truly be interested in me.

Oakley stopped beside them and gingerly ran a hand down the back of Tate’s arm.

Whatever doubt I had in my soul was shoved out by an unexpected and intense roar of jealousy. I’d never been jealous of any of the girls that I’d seen flirt with Matt in front of me, or even the ones that I’d caught sleeping with him. But here I was, jealous and upset that Oakley was touching Tate. A simple gesture, but more so that he didn’t shake her off.

That confirmed to me that something had happened between them last

night, after I'd run out of that dining room like a baby. Like a chicken. That wasn't me. I was strong, and I needed to show Tate that. Even though things between us were truly over, I deserved to prove to not just him, but myself, that I was strong. That I was worth that weekend for him.

Even if I didn't win, at least Tate would know how hard it had been for me to just get out there. Maybe he'd even be a little proud of me. Maybe I'd be able to at least break free of one of the tethers that Matt still had on me without my consent.

Unbuckling the seat belt, I let it fling back and slid over to the passenger side door. Pulling the handle, I shoved it open and plopped myself to the ground, spurs in hand. Quietly shutting it behind me, I felt a surge of energy and excitement as the smells and sounds of the arena met me once more. Damp dirt, horse sweat, and cattle hit me strong. Even the faint wisp of hay drifted through my nose.

Kneeling down, I buckled my spurs on as a pair of boots stopped directly in front of me. My heart began to race, adrenaline crashing through me as I took a couple deep breaths in preparation to meet Matt's snarling face.

But when I glanced up, it wasn't Matt. It was Jake staring down at me, a rope in one hand with a cigarette back between his teeth. I slowly stood up and tilted my head, confused as to what he was doing.

"Look, I don't know why he did it, but Tate said he entered you in barrels," Jake started, and I nodded. "Do me a favor?"

"What's that?"

"Knock Oakley down a peg."

My mouth fell open. "What?" I asked, stunned by what he said.

"I'm not stupid, Brexlynn. You ride like you were born in the saddle. Plus, on Becky no less, and you missed every one of my lessons. So obviously you can ride well, and that buckle says you've won before. In barrels." A wicked grin slowly spread across his face.

"Okay, so you caught me." I threw my hands in the air, and he chuckled. "The real question is, why do you care about humbling Oakley a little?"

He rocked the cigarette between his teeth. "Because I don't like how she's been talking to and about you. Whether someone's ridden three times or three thousand times doesn't give her that right."

I glanced toward where I last saw Oakley, but both she and Tate had



disappeared. I gritted my teeth. “Why does she think she can put her hands all over him?” I muttered, staring at the ghost of where they’d been.

“I knew it!” Jake shouted and my eyes widened in shock as I clamped a hand over my mouth. My eyes slowly drifted to his face where he was grinning. “Go kick her ass, please. And then fix whatever shit happened between you and Tate, I’m over his pouty attitude.”

“But-but-but how?” I managed to ask, and he grinned even wider.

“We’ve been best friends since we were in diapers, and ever since you guys came back from that little weekend thing, he’s not spoken a word to anyone outside of what he has to. Tate leaves me a note on my porch every morning with instructions and, once in a while, if I’ve got time, I make my way over to the two-year-olds to see him tirelessly working. But that’s it.” Jake pulled the cigarette from his mouth. “Even after Megan he wasn’t this bad.”

I stood there quietly, both enraged and feeling sorrowful. And then, in an instant, the sorrow was ripped out of me. All of the self-pity that I’d been clinging to, all of the fear, everything that had made me a whiny, self-conscious weakling fled. Ran as far as it could, and whoever I was before Tate, that girl I’d been hiding was absolutely dead.

And she could rest in peace.

The girl that Tate set free finally burst from the chains that had locked her away for the past couple weeks. I felt like myself again, at least in this moment; that confidence that had been growing shoved some trauma away.

I’d had enough.

My eyes shifted to Jake, who took a long draw on his cigarette. He furrowed his brows as I let the corners of my mouth lift. Time to ride. I nodded at him and then moved around the tall cowboy, heading straight to the side of the trailer.

There she was, Becky. Tied and standing silently, patiently waiting. I knew she could sense where we were, as her ears were forward and her eyes wide. But she was calm, holding steady and waiting for me. I smiled and spoke her name as I approached. She danced in place for a couple steps, and then we got to work.

I couldn’t remember the last time I groomed her quite like this, or the last time that I made sure I dusted off all of the tack before putting it on. Before wrapping her legs or making sure that they matched her beautiful black stockings. By the time we were done, I realized that Tate had saved the

exact tack, the very saddle that I used to rodeo in.

He'd bought it with Becky and kept it all of these years. The very same saddle that I'd run in the NFR with, he'd brought. Maybe to him, this wasn't completely done after all. Maybe he still had some hope that I would let him back in.

That was a matter to deal with later, because right now I needed to get Becky over to the warmup arena. Somehow, I'd been drawn for performance and not slack, which meant I'd go in the middle of the rodeo, while all the fans were here, not after. And the rodeo was already in full swing. Team roping was right before barrels, too, and Tate had said that he wanted some company while warming up his horse, so maybe there was a chance that I wasn't too late.

Gripping tightly to Becky's reins, I slowly made my way toward the far side of the arena. The power and strength I'd felt just minutes prior was quickly being replaced with nerves. My first rodeo in years, and I couldn't believe I was doing this. That I was actually going to ride in front of all of these spectators.

The sweat was turning my palms into clammy, slippery hands, and I was beginning to feel sick. If I turned around right now, no one had to know that I was doing this. Everyone was already in the stands or practicing for their run. I also hadn't seen Matt since we got here, which was a relief, so he wouldn't know.

But you know what, no. Taking a deep breath, I decided that I could worry about him later. About all of that later.

Right now, it was time to get on Becky and loosen her up. It was time to prepare for my first official barrel run in years. The open warm up arena was approaching, horses pounding over the dirt, and voices piercing the cooling evening air. The sun was slowly setting, and the lights flicked on in the arena. I jumped slightly at the sound and then halted in front of the railing.

There were so many people crowded in this area, some standing off to the side, others riding in circles. I scanned the area, looking for Tate's bright palomino. He had to be in here. Somewhere.

Footsteps sounded beside me, along with the clang of spurs, and a horse sneezed. I swiveled my head and found the very man I'd been looking for approaching me. He raised his brows and studied me. I bit my bottom lip and then let a small smile form on my face.

“I think you should apologize for how you spoke to me,” I teased, and smiled a little wider.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Listen the first time, then, and I won’t have to talk that way.”

I stuck my tongue out at him, and he chuckled, a grin spreading across his face. “Why though?” I asked, and he lifted his hat, ran a hand through his curls, and then replaced it. He looked away, chewing on what he was going to say.

“I miss you,” he finally said, and then led his horse into the arena.

My heart jumped. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe this didn’t have to be over, it wasn’t over. At least I now thought that we had a chance. That he still cared about me more than he let on. It would’ve made more sense for him to walk away completely, though, so I was struggling to understand why he was giving me another chance after I’d shut him down so harshly. But I was always shocked by how kind he was. By how forgiving and understanding he was. Hope bubbled up within me, a new sensation that drowned out the exhausting fear.

My eyes tracked him as he mounted his horse and flexed the beautiful animal's neck. Dipping my gaze to his fingers, I stared at the gentle way his hands barely applied pressure to those reins. How deliberately, but delicately, they slid across the leather, and something new roared low in my stomach. A sensation that only he had ever elicited from my body before.

I wanted those fingers back on my skin.

He pushed his horse forward, toward where I was still standing. His hat tugged low over his eyes like normal, begging for me to lift my gaze to his beautiful hazel eyes, but I couldn’t look away from the thick veins that ran across the back of his hands. Or the powerful thighs that hugged the sides of his horse, or what I knew sat between his legs.

He was so close, I could just reach forward through the rails and run a hand across his. If I just climbed this railing, I could grip those curls and—

“You’ve got a little bit of drool there.” Tate’s voice broke through my ill-timed dirty thoughts, and I shook my head.

He was literally standing in front of me.

Oh my gosh, he was standing directly in front of me. Looking at me.

That had not been me staring.

Tate grinned, and finally, I saw those dimples. My cheeks burned red hot, and I quickly looked away. Dragging Becky into the little warm up arena

to distract myself, I rapidly swung myself onto her back and finally glanced back at Tate. He was smirking, very satisfied with himself.

“Jerk,” I muttered, and he threw his head back, laughing. “Stop. You are giving me a headache,” I whined, flexing my mare’s neck, and then asked for her to walk forward.

“How so?” He jogged his palomino beside us.

“You’ve literally avoided me these past two weeks, and then today you go and act like this.” I gestured toward him, and he glanced in front of him as I asked Becky to stretch farther and pushed her into an extended walk.

“You’re the one that said no contact.”

“I’m aware.” I gritted my teeth. Though, I had also regretted that and wished to change it nearly immediately after. But couldn’t.

“There was no way I would be able to keep myself from doing something dumb that crossed that boundary if I saw you,” he said as we rounded the arena and then changed directions. “I know that it was all fake and didn’t mean anything to you, but I just...” His voice trailed off as we pushed our horses into a nice, collected trot, flexing and bending as we went.

“It meant something to me,” I whispered and looked away. It was silent between us as we continued around in both directions, eventually pushing our horses into the lope and through my usual warm up routine before my run.

“So, what do we do now?” he finally asked, breaking the stillness that had formed thick and heavy. I wanted to scream that I wanted him, wanted to be with him, but there was Matt in the back of my head, reminding me that if I were to do that, it would drag Tate into the center of all of this mess.

Which reminded me of that gun that he had flashed at me. What would happen if Matt became extremely pissed or jealous because I was actually seeing him secretly? Several times he said I didn’t deserve anyone but him. That I couldn’t be anyone but his. So, if I admitted that I wanted to be with Tate, and he found us together at some point, how much more pain would he inflict?

It was a no-win situation.

“I’ll take your silence as an answer,” Tate grumbled again.

“No, please. Just give me a minute to think,” I begged, and Tate slammed on the brakes. His horse skidded to a stop.

“You need a minute to think? We’ve had two weeks, Brex. Two weeks where you’ve had plenty of time to think.”

I jerked Becky to a halt and spun her around to stare at him, a little angry. “I’ve thought for the past two weeks that you were done with me. Completely done. I mean, technically nothing really ever began since it was fake, but you get what I’m saying. So do you really think I’ve had a moment to process any of what’s happening right now?” I shoved Becky forward, closer to him. “Honestly, I don’t even know what’s going on right now.”

“What’s going on right now is I’m asking you to date me. For real. No fake thing,” he said, his chest rising and falling fast. “I have real feelings for you. Genuine attraction and desire to be with you despite the fact that you constantly shove me away. Despite the run around bullshit answers you give me half the time when I ask questions about you. Despite the fact that I know there’s so much more going on than you’ve let on, I still care about you. I can’t get you out of my head. Do you not see that?”

My lip trembled as I stared at him. “Tate,” I said, and he clenched his jaw, shaking his head. “I just don’t know if we can,” I whispered, my heart snapping again.

“Why the hell not?!” he shouted, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

“Because of everything that I haven’t told you, that I don’t know if I can tell you.” I looked down at my saddle horn, slumping back in the saddle.

“For fuck’s sake,” he muttered. “Well, thank you for at least being honest about that. At least I didn’t have to dig that out of you.” He whipped his horse around and pulled the rope off of his saddle.

“Tate!” I called out, but he shook his head and loped off in the other direction.

## Chapter 28

I stared after his fading figure, the rope swinging around him. Jake met him at the far end of the arena, and I was left alone. He had every right to be mad at me, but I wished for one more moment that he could just be a bit more patient. I just needed to figure out how to deal with Matt, and then we would be fine.

There was this pent-up energy that was waiting to explode. Anger bubbled up in my belly as I thought about our conversation. You know what, yeah, I was grateful he made it clear that he truly was interested in me. But what about last night with Oakley? What about these past two weeks of practically being rude to me? Or what about the fact that he was aware I had a massive fear of men and being vulnerable?

Mostly though, I was still angry about last night with Oakley. How dare he go from sleeping with her to telling me that he's interested in me. That he wants to date me for real. It's not like we could anyway—I would eventually leave for New York, and there was also the fact that he was my temporary boss. But really?

No, screw him. Let him go pout and be whiny. Jake can deal with his annoying crap, not me. No longer. Right now, I needed to focus on warming up and crushing my first rodeo back. It was just my horse and me.

Leaning forward, I patted Becky against her neck. "It's just you and me against the world, girl. Just you and me." She nickered, and I felt the energy shift below me. So, we got to work. I lost track of Tate. My focus shifted to a proper warm-up for Becky. Which we accomplished, and then I slowly pushed her toward the arena gate to watch the last few runs of team roping before it was my turn. I had been drawn to go third, so I was going to be out there quickly.

Bringing Becky to a halt in front of the gate, I recognized the horse that was calmly moving into the box. I recognized the black curly hair that sat beneath Tate's black hat.

The cowboy in the other box, I knew him as well. That malicious grin of excitement etched across Jake's face.

Both of the boys were wearing the same button up. That dark blue color, matching in fashion as they should. The announcer was hyping them up, and I could see the crowd staring at the man that was in fact, as I first had assumed, a jerk.

Jake backed his horse into the corner of his box, Tate bumped his palomino's rear into the corner of his side, and then I saw this shift in the man that I had fallen for.

His face that had been tight with frustration became loose, almost cocky. The tension left his jaw as he tucked his head down and his eyes locked onto the cow that was rocking in the chute. The rope flopped over his shoulder, and he gave a very subtle nod. Jake's grin widened, his head turned toward the calf and he nodded next.

The chute crashed open, and the calf shot out. Jake left the box, rope swinging overhead. Just a couple turns and that rope landed around those horns. A quick dally and he whipped that calf to the left.

Tate was right on its heels, the rope already in motion. The calf's back feet flicked up then down, and Tate laid that rope directly in front of them. The moment he stepped into that loop, it was pulled tight and dallied around his horn. Jake flipped his horse around and faced Tate, pulling that calf tight, and the two of them locked in their run.

I may be mad at Tate right now, but that was impressive. They finished in four-point-nine seconds, putting them apparently in first place. Tate loped toward my end of the arena, following Jake—whose rope was still around the steer's head.

Tate wound up his rope, not completely paying attention to what was going on around him for a moment. Finally, he looked up, and his eyes met mine. But he simply shook his head and quickly looked away.

Whatever. I turned my horse away from the gate and pushed it out of view behind the stands, not wanting to deal with him as he came out of the arena. Even if I wanted to tell him how great of a job that was. It didn't matter. All that mattered was crushing my barrel run.

After a quick google search, I discovered that the arena record here was fifteen-point-two seconds, so I set a realistic goal to keep my run under sixteen seconds. I didn't need to break the record, or even match it, but you can bet I was going to push Becky and myself to the max. No tipping a

barrel, no mistakes. The only way I would ever run another pattern after today would be if it went well, because I knew that my confidence couldn't handle something going horribly wrong.

Channeling my frustration and anger toward Tate and the situation, I watched as the very man and his friend exited the arena. Only to be met by Oakley herself. She was fawning all over him, and he didn't shake her off. Didn't push her away. He even gave her a small smile. Which made me even more mad. You know what, staying away because I needed time to think was no longer an option.

He had no right to tell me what he did and then go and be all flirty with Oakley.

Knowing that what I was about to do was immature, I still didn't care. Pushing Becky forward, I rode up directly toward the three of them. Jake looked a little annoyed, Oakley was smiling and giggling, and even Tate was halfway entertaining the idea.

"You promise you'll wait right next to the gate for my run?" she said as I got close enough to hear the conversation.

Tate gave her a smile as Jake glanced up and tilted his head seeing my approach.

"I'll be running second. So, you need to be right there, okay?" she reiterated as I brought Becky right next to her.

"I'll be right here," Tate replied, and then the smile left his face as both him and Oakley turned to look at me. Her mouth fell open as her eyes scanned over the fact I was sitting on a horse.

"Brexlynn," Oakley said, her lips pulled tight.

"I hear you're running second? Good. You'll be able to tell me how the footing is," I said, giving her too nice of a smile. Her mouth fell open again, and she looked between me and the two boys. Jake looked down to cover his face, but I could see the smirk across his lips. Tate was glaring at me.

"I'm sorry. What?" she said.

"Good luck out there. I hope you do the best you can." I smiled once more, nodded at her, and then glared back at Tate. Shaking my head, I turned and rode away. It felt so good, so empowering to have some confidence back. No matter how cute Tate was, I didn't need him or anyone else to tell me what I should feel. Although, there was a small alarm going off in the back of my head, because I hadn't seen nor heard from Matt since being here.



I parked Becky near the gate as the truck left the arena with an empty bed, all of the barrels in their rightful places, and the announcer let us know that the first rider was up. Time ticked closer and closer to my run. Toward what would determine the next steps in my path.

My stomach churned with adrenaline, both from excitement, as well as nerves. Maybe I'd pretended to be too confident back there. But how could he go from treating me like I didn't exist, to sleeping with Oakley, to telling me he wanted to be with me. And why couldn't I get it out of my head? That sorry attitude he'd given me. He had forgiven me quickly for shoving him out. But maybe he'd only done that because he'd slept with Oakley and was feeling guilty.

Maybe that kindness was just from regret. Regret was a big motivator and, of course, my ability to trust him was gone again.

The first girl finished in sixteen-point-nine seconds, and Oakley's name was called. Apparently, this wasn't her first rodeo, and she had won the last one she'd been at. Although, this was her very first pro performance. Part of me was proud of her for trying this, for doing this, because I knew how hard it could be to find the courage to run in a pro race.

Technically, I shouldn't really be mad at her, either, since she didn't know about Tate and me. Even though there wasn't anything to know, so she wasn't really to blame; I shouldn't be so petty. I was just being a possessive, jealous, child. Jealous because someone who'd made me feel so safe had crushed me so deeply. Not just because he had so easily accepted my request to not have any contact, but because he'd chosen her over me. She wasn't at fault, only Tate was.

As well as myself.

Yep, it was just Becky and I against the world. Have at her, Tate.

Turning my focus back to the arena, I watched as Oakley entered on her sorrel horse. She shot in, barreling down the alleyway. First turn on the barrel to the left, she swung a little too wide, and the footing seemed to stick on that one. Around the second barrel, she overcompensated for the first turn, but managed to not knock the barrel over. The third one was a perfect turn and she sped home.

Sixteen flat.

That was going to be tough to beat, and I knew it.

"You got this," a voice said beside me, and I jumped in my saddle before swiveling to see Jake.

“That was fast,” I replied, turning Becky toward the alleyway, where my eyes met Tate, who was sitting on his horse, waiting as he’d said he would.

“But you’re faster. Just run clean and you’ll be fine,” Jake said.

“How do you know? You’ve never seen me run,” I teased, and he chuckled.

“Because Tate wouldn’t have bet on you if you weren’t good.”

We neared the entrance as Oakley came out of the arena.

“I’m sorry, bet on me?” I questioned, tugging my horse to a stop.

Jake nodded, pulled a cigarette from his pocket and stuck it between his teeth. “He and I placed bets on who would win, you or Oakley.”

“Why would you do that?” I stared at him. “When did you do that?”

He smiled again. “Just after Oakley was called to run. When we had a moment without her. And because I’m trying to figure out what’s so different about you that Tate is acting like a bullheaded seventeen-year-old.”

I snorted and then pulled my lips between my teeth. Jake nodded his head toward the side of the alleyway, and there was Tate still sitting there on his horse, even though Oakley was done.

Frustration coated his eyes, but also something wicked. I furrowed my brows, but he remained as still and stoic as ever, pretending he didn’t see me. But I knew he did. Then, I heard my name. The announcer was calling me.

“Next up we have a first-time rider. Brexlynn Phillips on her horse she calls Becky. Give it up for a rookie who’s not only entering her first rodeo ever, but also entered her first pro rodeo and didn’t draw slack!” The crowd went wild as the alleyway gate opened. It was a clear shot for me to run.

Becky snorted beneath me. Her breathing began to increase as I stared ahead. It looked nearly the same as the alleyway at the NFR. We were outside instead of in an indoor arena, but the entrance was underneath some seats. Into a covered area where there were more seats.

Just as it had been at the NFR.

“I don’t think I can do this,” I stuttered out as I struggled to fill my lungs with air. All I had to do was trust Becky, like I’d done hundreds of thousands of times. Send her forward, let her do her job. Who cares about beating Oakley or everything else?

Closing my eyes, I tried to kick her forward. I knew the window was closing before they would disqualify me, but I couldn’t do it. My hands were

shaking. My heart was pounding. I was seeing double of everything.

My skin was hot, I was hot. Sweating.

“Brex baby.” A calming voice pierced the haze directly next to me. Opening my eyes, I found Tate right beside me.

“Go away,” I whimpered. He softly shook his head.

“You once said you were strong. I didn’t need you to tell me that to know that you are. But you need to believe that too,” he said, and I stared at him, shaking my head. It didn’t matter what he thought. What anyone thought. I couldn’t.

Tate reached forward and grabbed my right rein, then bumped his horse onward. He tugged on the thin piece of leather and Becky lurched after him. I could feel her excitement growing as Tate slowly walked us down the alleyway.

“Let. Go. And run,” he whispered, and then released the rein. Becky kept moving steadily forward as I took a deep, shaky breath. We were so close to the end of the alleyway where I needed to send her.

No matter how mad I was at Tate right now, he was right. I had to let go. Let go of all the fear that I was holding tightly to. Let go of the desperation I had to figure out how to be a different version of myself than the girl that loved this life.

I still loved this life. Still loved barrel racing. This was what I desired most was to finally be free to be me. Brexlynn Phillips: cowgirl. A better and stronger version of CeCe Carson, because this girl was free. Free to love who I wanted, to do as I wanted. Being free didn’t mean free of heartache or free of pain. It meant free to be exactly who I wanted to be.

I’ll be mad at Tate after this run. Right now, it was time.

One more step and I shifted my weight. Becky felt it as I drove my heels into her sides. And she launched forward.

The wind crashed against my face as I raced toward that first barrel on the left. Knowing I wasn’t going to slide, I whipped Becky around as tight as I could. Rocketing forward after our first turn, I grinned. Wicked cheers met my ears. Chaos that I was feeding from. The energy only increased as I asked for a lead change and then sat back in the saddle.

Using my legs, I shoved her around the second barrel, listening and in sync with Becky’s body. Every muscle in her tensed as we shot off toward the third barrel. Covering ground faster than we had ever before, we ripped around the third barrel, my eyes focused on the ending point of our turn.

As her hips came under and she sat back on her hocks to shove us forward, I lifted my eyes from between her ears to stare at the gate. Sitting on his horse next to Jake, waiting, was Tate. Time to send her home.

I rolled my heels as fast as I could up her sides and then just let her run.

Which she did. With everything in her body, she blazed forward taking me with her. The milliseconds ticked on the clock as we raced toward the finish. The cameras came closer and closer. The finish line inching its way toward us.

And then we crossed it, and I sat back, asking Becky to slow down. She dug in her heels and rolled to a nice sliding stop, like we'd practiced once forever ago when I'd started her on reining training.

I was breathing hard, matching Becky's big gasps for air. Her nostrils flaring hard as I pushed her into a trot to head down the alleyway oblivious to everything but her beneath me. I didn't even care what time they announced. Or what place I earned. That felt amazing and freeing. Everything in me that had been so broken and bruised up to this point felt like it was beginning to heal.

The gate opened, and I made my way down the alley, passing Tate and Jake without even a glance. I just needed a moment to feel this. To let myself process that I'd done it. After all this time, I'd run another barrel pattern. I'd been a part of another rodeo. That the little girl inside me who had screamed for years to let her out had burst outside the safe cocoon I'd wrapped around her.

Becky continued to wander forward. I honestly didn't pay attention to where I was going, and then at some point, she stopped, and I let myself feel proud. Proud that I'd done it. A few tears slipped over the edges of my eyes, brushing across my cheeks. What a ride it had been to get here, but I was here.

It was beautiful.

Liberating.

Freeing.

I didn't need my parents to do this. I only needed myself and Becky. We could do this again; I could try for the NFR again. The possibilities were endless.

"Fifteen-point-three." a voice said behind me along with slow claps, and my heart dropped. The bliss that had entered my body immediately

dashed away, hiding in the safe shadows of my mind.  
Matthew.

## Chapter 29

I didn't turn around to face him, didn't acknowledge him. Now I was pissed that he'd ruined my moment of bliss and pissed that Tate was being a jerk.

"You're in first place now," Matt continued and stopped beside me. He placed a hand against my leg. My body wanted to flinch, to react, but I refrained, biting down on my cheeks instead.

I was strong.

"But," he said, and then slid his hand up to my thigh. I blinked, trying to ignore the sickening dread that was filling my stomach. "You didn't break the arena record." He clicked his tongue several times and then dug his fingers into my skin. I opened my mouth in a silent scream, begging silently with myself to not give in, but feeling the pinching pain.

Then, suddenly, he whipped out his pocketknife and drove it into my leg. Searing agony crashed through my body. I couldn't stifle the sound and cried out. "Such a shame that a big time NFR star still couldn't be the best." And he dragged me off of Becky yet again. I slammed into the dirt, shoving the knife even deeper into my leg. My hands shook as I reached for the hilt, but Matt crouched down beside me and snatched my wrists into one hand. "I thought I told you to leave your boyfriend alone. I can't imagine how embarrassed you feel knowing that he bet money on you," he hissed in my ear, and then ripped out the knife and left.

That was it.

Shoving myself upright, I clutched my injured thigh, ignoring the sharp pains that were shooting through the entire left side of my body, and felt some tears slip down my cheeks. The blood slowly seeped through my jeans, turning the blue denim a dark nasty brown. Trembling, I attempted to apply pressure to the wound, and bit back the whimper as I pushed my hand down hard.

It was excruciating, and the world began to sway. Red, iron liquid oozed between my fingers, my left palm doing practically nothing to slow the

bleeding, and I knew that staying here, hidden and alone, was only going to seal my fate.

I wiped some sweat from my brow, blinked the blurriness from my eyes, and shifted toward Becky. Shaking, I reached a now bloody hand upward, and I gripped the stirrup nearest me.

Dragging myself off of the ground, I winced and paused. Panting, I waited as the wave of excruciating agony jolted up the left side of my body and threw an arm over the saddle. "Please stay still, girl," I whispered to Becky, and jumped off of my right foot.

I slammed into her ribs as my bloodied left fingers wrapped underneath the d-ring on the far side of the saddle. Groaning in pain, I grabbed the saddle horn and slowly dragged myself up the rest of the way. Laying my belly down across her back, I managed to kick my right leg over Becky's side and sat up in the saddle.

A red stain of blood trailed down my left pant leg and along the leather of the saddle. With every pulse of my heart, a spurt of blood bubbled out of the wound, and a stab of pain rushed through my body. Inhaling sharply, I placed my left hand over the wound again, clutched my bruised thigh, and guided my foot into the stirrup.

I prayed that this would hopefully hide the injury until I at least got Becky unsaddled.

Gritting my teeth, I bit back the pain and tingling numbness and asked Becky forward. The instinct to bump with both heels shot pain up my left leg, overriding the inability to control anything at the moment, and I cried out.

She listened and walked forward, once again being the most amazing creature, as I crumpled forward in agony. I barely managed to hold onto the reins. It was my horse that gently led me back toward the trailer as my vision slowly tunneled. I was barely aware of what was going on around me.

Becky continued weaving around the other vehicles without my guidance, and finally, amidst the blackening haze, Tate's truck finally popped into view.

There was a crowd around it, my coworkers, some of the other ranch hands, and Oakley were all huddled around the trailer. I couldn't go there right now, not like this. Tugging on Becky's reins, I asked her to stop, and she relaxed below me, halting her movements. I simply stared forward at the throng of people. Where else was I supposed to go?

More pain shot through my body, and the world spun around me as

my palms started to sweat. Especially the one on my leg that was plastered against my warm thigh, and the salt stung the open wound. I groaned and dropped the reins. Rocking forward, I clenched my queasy stomach, praying this would pass. Praying that the crowd would go away so I could untack Becky.

But as luck would have it, the opposite, of course, had to happen. Eva casually glanced in my direction and suddenly locked eyes with me. She squealed, pointed her finger, and everyone turned to look in my direction.

Everyone except for Oakley began shouting, clapping, whistling, and calling me over, not realizing how much pain I was in. I didn't care that she was scowling.

Right now, I needed someone to help me. But there was no getting out of this, so I picked back up the reins with my right hand, jammed my eyes closed for one second to clear my blurry vision, and bumped Becky forward.

My mistake.

Another wave of fiery agony shot through my left leg, and I couldn't hold myself up any longer. My numb left foot slipped out of the stirrup, and I swayed, before falling off to the right. Crashing hard onto the ground.

Everything was swimming. My head was pounding, or maybe it was the footsteps rushing in my direction that echoed in my ears. I wasn't completely sure. But the last thing I saw before the world faded to black was Tate's face. Those beautiful hazel eyes, filled with concern, looking down at me.



I blinked, my skull feeling like it was going to burst at any moment as I tried to sit up. But something pressed gently against my right shoulder, leaning me back onto the soft clouds I was laying on. Except these clouds were a little stiffer, smelled a little like horse sweat and dirt. And man, my neck ached.

Blinking once more, my crusty eyes finally opened, and I was met with the clear night sky. What was going on? Where was I? I turned my head sideways and found Tate squatting to my left, running a hand over his face.



“What’s going on?” I hoarsely choked out.

“You fell off Becky and passed out,” he replied, and brushed a strand of hair from my face. I frowned. I may not know what had completely happened, but I remembered enough to know that I was pissed at Tate.

“Don’t touch me,” I snarled at him, and he sighed but didn’t seem mad. “Where am I?” I tried to sit up, but he once again leaned me back down.

“The back of my pickup.” He gestured around him, and it was only then that I recognized something similar to the truck bed we’d once taken a nap in. I was, however, on the same blankets as before.

“Where’s the trailer?” I asked.

“I unhitched it. It’s not hard to hook it back up,” he answered and this time helped me slowly sit up.

I rubbed my temples, the pounding in my head much like a horrible hangover. “Why didn’t you just use one of the other truck beds?”

“Because I sent everyone back. There’s only bulls left, and nobody entered.”

“I don’t want to be alone with you!” I shouted at him and tried to shove him away, but that only increased the dizziness again. Gripping my head, I groaned. I shouldn’t be alone with him but, even following the rules, I’d gotten hurt.

“Look, I may not know why you’re pissed at me but—”

“Seriously?” I cut him off without looking up. “You can’t think of a single reason why I’d be mad at you?” I asked him, leaning forward.

“Can you just be mad at me later? There are more pressing things right now,” he said, and I whipped my head up, too fast. Nausea hit me hard, and I quickly leaned away from him, vomiting what little I’d eaten this morning. Mostly stomach acid and bile came out, and I felt horribly embarrassed, but I couldn’t stop.

Calloused but gentle hands wrapped around the loose strands that had escaped my braid, holding all of my hair back while I threw up all over the side of Tate’s truck. Finally, after a few dry heaves with salty tears running down my face, I slumped backwards. Landing directly against Tate’s chest.

Closing my eyes, I let myself forget why I was mad, why Matt was mad, and he held me.

Tenderly stroking my cheek, he gently slid me backwards into his lap and just sat there.

I needed this. Wanted this. Craved this from him. Letting him take

care of me right now was okay, simply because no matter how mad or hurt by him I was, I still cared about him.

“Did I win?” I whispered after the tears had dried up, and I kept my eyes closed.

His chest vibrated against the back of my head. “Of course you did. Just like I knew you would. Your buckle and check is in the cab of the truck, Jake snagged them for you.”

I smiled.

“Now, you need to tell me who the hell did this, because I’m going to kill that son of a—”

“You can’t,” I quickly said. “This isn’t your problem, your burden to bear. It’s mine, and mine alone,” I added, still unwilling to open my eyes.

“Do you seriously hear yourself? After everything we’ve been through, you still won’t tell me?”

This incited the anger I’d been shoving down, and my eyes snapped open. Glancing down at my leg, I could see that there was a tight cloth wrapped around the wound, stained a little red, but the bleeding had stopped. Tate had created a bandage and even cleaned it up the best he could without taking my pants off.

He shook his head. “I just don’t understand why you’re still protecting that bastard.”

“I’m not protecting him,” I snarled at Tate and pushed away from him. Facing Tate, I glared at him. Done. “I’m protecting you. Which I don’t understand why I am still doing that after everything that’s happened. I don’t understand how you can sleep with someone else, flirt with someone else, and then go and tell me that you’re actually interested in me. That you have real feelings for me.” I shook my head and slowly began to drag myself toward the tailgate.

“Sleep with someone else? Flirt with... What are you talking about?” Tate said and took a few steps after me. I hoisted myself up and over the gate, perching myself on the ledge.

Of course he would deny it. “Whatever,” I snapped. “Just take me home.” And I dropped from the tailgate.

“Brexlynn!” Tate called out as I slammed into the ground with my right foot first. But it didn’t matter that I took the brunt of the weight with my uninjured leg, because the moment my left foot hit the ground, a sharp pain radiated up my leg once more, and I collapsed to the ground.

Tate's boots crashed into the dirt beside me, and he bent forward, sticking his arms beneath me, he lifted me up bridal style. "What were you thinking?" he scolded me as he gently carried me around to the passenger side door. I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my face in his chest.

"I'm thinking that I'm tired of feeling so out of control," I breathed into his chest, that familiar scent of smoke, caramel, and pine enveloping my senses. Inhaling again, I sought comfort in him.

"Well don't go jumping off of the back of a truck for a bit. You have a concussion, and somebody stabbed your leg, so you're going to need some rest," he replied, and then somehow managed to open the truck door. Pulling it ajar, he gently placed me in the front seat and rested his hands against the top of the doorframe, leaning toward me. I couldn't help but swoon at the sight. Strong, broad shoulders on a muscled frame, I could just imagine the veins that ran down his forearms right now.

Stupid, ill-timed dirty thoughts.

Tate watched me for a moment and then shook his head, the black curls swaying beneath his cowboy hat. I couldn't help but smile at the movement. He looked so kind and hot right now.

"Did you and Jake win?" I asked, and he rolled his eyes but smiled.

"Yep. Got a shiny new buckle and everything."

"Is everyone upset that I ruined things?" I finally asked, and he lowered his arms.

"Brex, you didn't ruin anything. Everyone is concerned, but I think most of them are just absolutely confused about how you ran a fifteen-three on your barrel pattern but, you know, come from New York City," he jabbed at me, and I clicked my tongue. Tate leaned in even closer, his warm breath caressing my face. "Whoever stabbed you in the leg was the one that fucked shit up. And I'm pissed that you won't tell me who it was."

"There's no reason for me to. I can handle this myself," I replied, crossing my arms, and he shoved his hands against the seat on both sides of me.

"But don't you get that you don't have to?"

"Again, you don't get to just go from ignoring me, to confessing that you have real feelings for me after hooking up with another girl, and then thinking you have a right to me!" I snarled at him.

He shook his head. "Where are you getting this idea that I hooked up

with another girl? And I only ignored you because you asked me to, and if I didn't, I would—”

“Blah, blah, blah. You said that all before,” I interrupted him. Yeah, it sounded like a good reason to have ignored me. I asked him to and, if he didn't, apparently he wouldn't have been able to respect that request. So honorable. Where was that honor when he decided to sleep with Oakley last night? I was frustrated.

Tate closed his eyes and then pushed himself out of the truck. I twisted, not so gracefully in my seat to face forward, and he slammed the door shut. I ignored him the entire time he hitched up the trailer, which was impressive of course, because he didn't need someone to help.

I ignored him as he slowly pulled out of the arena.

I ignored him as he turned music on and began to sing.

I ignored him as he stopped singing and looked over at me.

I ignored him until we turned off of the main road and were heading back toward the ranch. Honestly, it was easy to ignore him as I watched the beautiful scenery pass by with the moonlight illuminating the forest in an incredible silver glow.

Okay, I lied. It wasn't easy.

Sighing, I finally spoke. “Thank you for taking care of me back there.”

He didn't answer.

“Thank you for helping me down the alleyway. I kept seeing the night at the NFR...” I stared out the window as he slowed the truck and then came to a stop before we emerged from the tree line.

“Brex, this ex-husband of yours was at the rodeo tonight, wasn't he,” he asked, more as a statement than anything else, and I glanced his way. He was gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles and fingers were turning white. I nodded but didn't speak.

“I know him, don't I.” Once again, it wasn't much of a question, as he stared straight ahead, so I didn't answer. He already knew. Maybe not who it was exactly, but he knew. We remained idling in that spot as whatever was running through Tate's mind consumed him. I sat there, tired, dizzy, and in pain waiting for him to come to some conclusion so we could continue forward. But he was taking forever, and I was feeling nauseous again.

Not wanting to throw up in his truck, I said the first thing that came to my mind to get him to resume driving. “I don't see why you care, though;

you've got someone else waiting for you. So can we please go?"

Even the air around us stopped moving at my words. The breeze outside the window froze as my harsh statement permeated the crisp, stale air. Tate barely twitched, his chest didn't seem to rise and fall from a single breath.

And then he jammed the truck into drive and roared us forward.

As quickly and carefully as he could, Tate whipped the truck onto the straight, gravel road and then shoved it into park once we were next to the path that led to the bunkhouses. He was pissed, but I didn't really care to fix it at that moment. I threw open my door and practically fell out onto the gravel road, retching up more vomit.

Nasty thick liquid shot up my throat and onto the rocky dirt, as I knelt on all fours, trying not to pass out. The pain in my thigh was still there, but I was getting used to it. The nausea from my concussion on the other hand was awful. Boots crunching across the pavement met my ears as I heaved up some more bile, and Tate's feet appeared beside me.

He bent down, and I saw him reach forward to grab my hair but I rocked myself backwards onto my heels before it was necessary. An enormous amount of pain ripped through my thigh at the abrupt movement, and I cried out.

Tate quickly lifted me from the ground, once again cradling me in his arms, but spoke not a word as he carried me toward the bunkhouse. I could hear the screams and giggles from the girls inside before we were even walking up the couple stairs to the door. The amount of energy it was going to take to face those girls felt overwhelming.

He stopped and gently set me on my feet at the doorstep. "One second," he gruffly said, and then jogged back toward the truck. I waited until he returned, handing me the buckle and check that I'd won.

I slowly took it from him, knowing that we were going to part ways once again on bad terms despite the fact that I wanted so desperately to figure this out.

"Tate," I said as he turned away. He paused but didn't look back at me. "Uh, do you need help unloading?" I scrambled to find anything to say, and of course I came up with something so entirely stupid.

It took him a moment to respond, but all he did was shake his head and then continue down the path. I stared after him, hoping and praying that he would just turn around and glance my way.

But he didn't.

He did, however, stop walking and pick his head up for a moment. And then spoke. "I didn't sleep with Oakley last night. And I wasn't flirting with her 'cause I like her," he said, and then jogged away before I could say anything else.

That was it?

"Tate!" I yelled, attempting to hobble down the stairs, but I heard the truck engine whir and he was gone. "You jerk!" I shouted again and kicked at the ground. Which hurt. "Ow," I softly whined, and then hoisted myself back toward the bunkhouse that awaited me. Full of girls with questions. Questions that I didn't want to answer.

## Chapter 30

Drawing a deep breath, I turned the knob to the bunkhouse and stepped inside. The girls were all sitting on the floor in a circle, giggling. It fell silent the moment I entered, all five pairs of eyes staring at me. Oakley was shooting daggers with her gaze while the rest seemed merely curious and concerned.

Eva shot up from the circle. “Let me help you!” she said and tucked her arm around my waist.

“I’m alright. Thanks, though,” I said, trying to get her to let go but she refused.

“Stop acting all tough. Aubrey will get you your clothes, and I’ll help you into the shower.”

“I appreciate it, but I can manage a shower on my own,” I answered, although it was really relieving to have her supporting some of my weight. Tossing the buckle, check, and my phone on the bed, she set me down gently beside it and then bent down to take off my boots. “Eva, I can do that—”

“Shut up. You’re injured, so let me help. Let us help,” she said and pulled off my other boot.

“If she wants to do it alone, let her,” Oakley snarled from the floor and leaned back. All of the girls were in their pajamas, hair tied back in buns or ponytails and completely clean.

“Just because you lost to Brexlynn, doesn’t give you the right to be rude to her.” Gemma chastised her, and Oakley hung her lip, pouting. “Although, you have some explaining to do,” she continued, looking at me now.

I sighed, knowing this was coming. “Let me shower, and then I’ll answer whatever questions you have,” I replied, giving myself time to come up with more ways to skirt around the answers. That seemed to satisfy them as they all returned to their gossip.

Except for Aubrey. She had pulled a large T-shirt from my drawer in

the dresser to bring to me and was staring at it. A T-shirt I'd forgotten I'd packed in my suitcase and had mindlessly shoved into the dresser upon returning from the Vegas trip with Tate.

"What's this?" she asked and held up the shirt. The one with Tate's training logo on it.

I dove forward off of the bed, forgetting that I was injured, and before Eva could catch me, I crashed to the floor. "That's just a shirt." I groaned in pain and sat up on the hardwood. This couldn't be happening.

"With the training logo that Tate uses? And it's clearly too big for you," Oakley sneered at me.

I closed my eyes, and a thought popped in my head. "It was my brother's that I stole from him during the weekend I had to see my family. He couldn't get over the fact that I was working for Tate and showed me the shirt he'd bought. I forgot pajamas that weekend. I assume you can figure out the rest," I quickly said, and all the girls except for Oakley shrugged their shoulders, accepting the answer. She pursed her lips but didn't say anything.

Eva lifted me back to my feet as Aubrey grabbed a pair of shorts from the drawer and then both of the girls helped me toward the bathroom.

"Hold on to Eva, and I'll undress you," Aubrey instructed.

"Oh, no. I can manage from here. Thank you," I quickly replied, there was no way that I would let them see the scar along my torso. Absolutely not.

"Stop protesting and let us help," Aubrey said as she crossed her arms in front of her and Eva grabbed my waist.

"I really appreciate it, but—"

"We all have the same parts, now off."

"Will you stop please?" I snapped at her. "Just stop!"

The girls in the other room went deathly silent. I'd never spoken to my coworkers like that before. Honestly, I'd never acted like this toward any of them or almost anyone ever. Except for Tate. And he was the one person I wanted to see right now.

He'd already seen the scar, and I'd seen him naked. So, who cares if they found out that we'd spent a weekend together. He could stay pissed at me right now, I didn't want an explanation, but I needed help getting in the shower, and these girls didn't need to see that scar. There were enough questions they had without adding to the list.

"Can you help me get my phone please?" I finally sheepishly asked. Aubrey nodded and then scurried off to the other room, quickly returning



with my cell.

I tapped on the screen so it would light up and then scrolled through my contacts to Tate's name. Of course, I hadn't had a need to use it yet. Of course, it had to be today of all days that I would call him, but here we were. Tapping his name, I pressed the phone to my ear and heard it ring.

It rang, and rang. And rang.

Sighing, I pulled it away from the side of my head to press the end button and then heard the call engage. Quickly returning the phone to my ear, Tate's voice pierced through the speaker.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Eva and Aubrey stared at me, watching the phone call even though I'd managed to keep the screen hidden from their view so hopefully they had no idea who I was talking to.

"Yeah," I said.

"Alright. Good night then," he quickly replied.

"Wait!" I shouted before he could hang up. There was muffled breathing on the other end as I waited, hoping that he wouldn't end the call. "I can't take a shower because I can barely put weight on my leg."

"So have one of the girls help you."

My voice broke as I answered. "You-you know I can't do that."

Silence. Just breathing and some shuffling on the other end of the phone. Maybe he didn't remember seeing the scar, or everything that had happened. Calling him was a mistake, but it was the only thing I could think of doing.

"I'll be there in a minute," he finally said, and then the line went dead. Sliding my phone down from my ear, I gave a timid smile to the two girls balancing me.

"Um, I've got someone coming. Do you mind helping me back to the bed until then?" I asked quietly, unable to look at either of the girls.

Eva sighed but shifted beside me and then guided me back out of the room. Aubrey placed the clothes onto the mattress next to where Eva set me down, and then the two girls joined the others on the floor.

Oakley shook her head. "I can't deal with this pity party," she said and then stood up. "I don't understand how you did it, but I'm out. I'm going to go for a walk or something."

"I grew up in Idaho on a ranch," I said as she turned away. She paused, and my coworkers froze. "My mom practically gave birth to me in a

saddle. I had a horse before I could walk, learned to rope before I could count and say my ABC's. That was my life. I rodeoed and was really good at it too. That's how. And this isn't a pity party."

Oakley remained still in her spot, staring away from me while everyone else shared confused glances. "Well, at least now I don't feel so bad for losing to a city slicker," she finally stated, and then threw on her boots and stormed out of the bunkhouse. I looked at the girls all sitting on the floor, staring at me, and knew that I'd somehow betrayed their trust.

"I should've said something before we came here, but I was scared," I finally said, trying to fill in the holes between us that this tension was creating.

"I'm not sure if I believe you, honestly," Melody said, pushing her thick, sleek hair behind her ears. "Prove it."

"Prove what?" I asked.

"That you barrel raced before? Or just something from that life. Beginner's luck is a thing, so tonight could've been a fluke," she said.

Sighing, I slowly unbuckled my belt and pulled it through the loops. Reaching forward, I stretched it out to hand to Gemma, who was sitting the closest to me. She hesitantly grabbed the belt from my hands and then looked down at it.

"That buckle was the last one I won before things went really sideways for me. I have an entire box full of those in my suitcase below the bed and even more back home at my apartment. I won money and ribbons, and Becky was my horse before Tate bought her," I explained as the girls passed the belt around. No one said anything as they studied the buckle, chewed on my words, and even more questions formed in their minds.

Suddenly, everyone was asking something all at once.

"What went sideways?"

"Why did you sell Becky?"

"Why wouldn't you tell us this?"

But it was the final question that Aubrey timidly asked that made the room go silent. "What were you so scared of that you didn't think you could tell us about all of this?"

All four girls stared at me, waiting. Maybe just letting them know that I was in an abusive relationship would curb the questions. But it would most likely open another massive can of worms and, if Oakley came back before I was able to explain it all, she would learn of it, and I could only imagine how

much damage she would do with that vulnerable information.

A knock sounded at the door before I had to answer. Saved by the knock. Melody stood from her spot on the floor and walked toward the door. It creaked as it opened, and then she stumbled backwards at the sight of the towering figure standing in front of her.

“Um, hi?” she quietly said. “Come in.”

Melody moved out of the way, and in walked none other than Tate himself. He pulled off his hat as Melody shut the door behind him, and his eyes met mine. He was wearing a black zipper hoodie and a pair of gray sweatpants that were halfway tucked into his boots. Tate had already gotten home and was ready for bed by the time I called him.

“I’m sorry, I thought you were still down at the barn,” I sheepishly said.

He sighed and hung his hat on the railing to his right. Bending down, he kicked off his boots and looked back up at me. “Jake helped me unload, so it went really fast.”

“What are you doing here?” Aubrey interjected as he shoved his hands in his pockets and went to take a step forward. His eyes swiveled to the other girls and then back to me. I sucked in my bottom lip and then looked at my feet. Explaining that Tate had already seen me in a bikini would also open up a whole other can that I didn’t know how to approach.

Luckily, Tate knew that explaining things would only cause issues. He headed in my direction once more and asked a question, changing the subject. “Where’s Oakley? Girls aren’t supposed to sleep in someone else’s bunk just as the guys aren’t supposed to sleep in someone else’s bunk.”

He stopped in front of me and bent forward, gathering the clothes from my bed with one arm and extending his other. I reached forward and grabbed it, and then hoisted myself off of the bed. My fingers dug into his forearm as I steadied myself.

“Uh, she said she was going for a walk,” Aubrey replied.

“Except I’m aware she didn’t sleep here last night,” Tate said, and then slowly helped me limp toward the bathroom.

“Honestly, we have no idea where she was last night or where she is now,” Melody informed him as we stopped at the bathroom doorway.

Tate turned his head toward the rest of the girls, and I glanced up from my wobbling and exhausted feet. They were staring, wide-eyed with their mouths hanging open at the two of us.

“Let me know when she gets back and if you find out where she’s been,” he said, and then guided me into the bathroom, closing the door behind us.

## Chapter 31

Tate placed the clothes down on the small shelf that was mounted above the toilet and helped me sit upon the closed porcelain lid.

“I didn’t know who else to—”

“I get it,” he quickly interrupted me and then stopped moving. We both knew what was coming next. I had to undress. Even though he’d already seen me in a bikini, even touched me, I wasn’t sure I was ready for him to see all of me. After all, things were rocky between us right now because he was mad I wouldn’t tell him it was Matt, and I was a little upset that... Well, honestly, the whole reason I’d been mad before had kind of been debunked now that I knew he hadn’t slept with Oakley. But he had one hundred percent flirted with her.

So okay, that was why I was mad at him.

“Can you maybe, look away or something while I do this?” I quietly asked, breaking the silence.

He licked his lips and then turned around. I began to unbutton my shirt, my heart jumping into my throat. This wasn’t sexual, this was anything but that. This was simply to help me shower, because I couldn’t on my own. He was the only one who’d seen the scar besides Matt, but obviously I wasn’t calling the man who’d given it to me to help take care of me while injured from his stab wound.

I pulled my arms out of the sleeves and dropped it onto the floor. Next was my pants, I was saving my bra for last, hoping that, somehow, I could take it off facing away from him and he wouldn’t see anything.

“You know,” he spoke as I undid the button to my pants and unzipped them. “It might be easier for you to take a bath than to shower.”

“Yes, but as you can clearly see, there is only a shower in here,” I replied and shimmied the pants off of my waist.

“Obviously, dork.” He shook his head. “I have one at my house.”

“Well, that would’ve been more useful ten minutes ago before I was

already half-naked,” I said, and rocked forward on the toilet seat to try and slide the pants past my bum. But a wave of pain shot through my leg as I accidentally bumped my foot against the ground.

“Ow.” I winced, and Tate spun to face me. “Turn back around!” I shouted and tried to cover my bare torso with my arms.

“Brex, I’ve seen you in a skimpy bikini that exposed more than your bra shows. Stop,” he said and then knelt down on the ground. I glared at him for a moment and then lifted myself up off of my butt with my hands so he could pull the pants down for me.

His fingers brushed against my newly exposed skin. His face and body were so close to mine. Tate paused and looked up as the pants sat around my thighs just above the wound. He gripped the waistband tightly, and those hazel eyes stayed locked onto mine, holding the anger at bay. This felt a little familiar. Not this exact thing, but the fact that he was taking care of me.

Even though I didn’t remember him taking care of me, because I had been drugged. Even though I had no idea what actually happened at the pool or after, this still felt familiar.

“Tate?” I asked.

“Hmmm?” he said, and then his eyes shifted to the makeshift bandage he’d created. His fingers began slowly working at the knot to undo it.

“What happened?”

He furrowed his brows. “Huh?”

“That night I ended up drunk and drugged. What happened? I know you cleaned off all of the chlorine from my body and changed my clothes, which is why I know you’ve already seen this scar.” I gestured toward the word engraved into my skin. His eyes briefly flickered toward it and then back to the bandage he was working on.

“Janie held your arms above your head while one of the bridesmaids took my shirt off of you. Thalia told me they wanted to see the bikini you borrowed from my sister.” He finally managed to undo the bandage from my leg, and he slowly peeled it off. The dried blood cracked, tearing at my skin and I closed my eyes, breathing through the sharp pain. “Sorry, Brex baby. I don’t mean for this to hurt.”

“I know,” I whispered, and then he dropped the bloodied cloth to the bathroom floor. “Where were you when that happened?”

Tate sighed, his eyes glazing over, lost in a memory. “Playing a stupid

game of chicken with the groom to be. Winning, I'll have you know, but I left you alone. After you asked me not to, after I told you I wouldn't, I left you alone."

His fingers gripped the waistband of my pants once more. "This will probably hurt a little," he gently said, and then began peeling it off of my leg. I opened my mouth, ready to cry out in pain, but bit back the sound as I'd become so accustomed to doing. The ripping of denim tearing away from sticky skin was something else, like two sheets of plastic being shredded apart as the bloody pants left my leg. A massive bruise was already forming along the side of my leg I'd fallen on, plus circled around the stab wound. There were also swollen, discolored indentations of fingertips from where Matt had gripped me so hard.

"That piece of shit," Tate began as he saw the other wounds, and then cursed several more times under his breath. "I'm going to kill him."

The pants finally fell from my ankles and landed upon the ground. He took my socks off next, exposing my left foot that was entirely bruised and a little swollen. No wonder it had hurt so badly to put any sort of pressure on it.

He stood up and reached forward ready to lift me off of the toilet, but I needed to say something first. So, I raised a hand, and he paused. "It's not your fault, you know. None of it was or is. Just like you told me not to blame myself, you can't blame yourself for leaving me alone either."

Tate ran a hand over his face. "Well, now I get why you seemed to not have actually listened to me when I told you that first." And I found myself smiling a little. He smiled back, not a huge smile, but a little one. Something that at least cracked the iceberg that had crystallized between us.

"Here," he said, and tucked his hands very politely under my armpits. I gripped his very large biceps and, with his help, I was able to stand up. Now it was time for the tricky part. Somehow, I needed to stay standing to shower, without him seeing any of me and without him getting too wet. This wasn't going to work.

I think he was trying to figure out the same thing, because neither of us moved, and then Tate suddenly turned me back around and sat me down on the toilet again. I brought my brows together in confusion and then stared at him in shock as he pulled the sweatshirt up over his head.

Leaving nothing but his sweatpants on.

Oh, how I'd been wanting to see that again. Those tattoos and his very strong body. Not super chiseled but hardened with muscle from years and

years of work with that sprinkle of chest hair on his pecs.

Now was not the time, Brexlynn, I scolded myself, and then he reached into the shower and turned it on.

He lifted me once again, this time my hands rested directly against his skin, and I couldn't help but feel both excited and calm at the contact. Without thinking, he pulled me closer to him so we could swing around in this confined space and paused. I was so close to his frame I could practically hear his heartbeat. It was racing, nearly pounding out of his chest.

Or that was probably mine, but I didn't care. His body heat engulfed me, hot waves of his breath washed over me, and I stared at his bare chest, gripping tightly to his arms. Cautiously, my eyes made their way up toward his. Hazel orbs that were already waiting for me to look.

The most handsome eyes, the most handsome face, just staring back into my own green gaze. Seeing everything about me like he always did and not being afraid. Being anything but. No, he was mad that I wouldn't put him in harm's way and tell him more. He was mad at me for not sharing more of the dark stuff with him that should scare him off.

His eyes shifted toward my mouth and my own gaze moved down toward his. That silly mustache sitting above full luscious lips. Something that I wanted to kiss, to feel against mine again. Slowly, his face inched toward me.

If I didn't want this to happen right now, I had to say no. Had to turn away at this very moment because, otherwise, they would connect, and I would become a puddle in his arms.

Except I didn't want him to stop. This was the first moment we'd had alone, and I couldn't care less that I was still mad at him, I just wanted him to kiss me. The same thing he wanted.

Tate slid his hands from my armpits to my back and tugged me against him. Which broke the spell as my thigh bumped into his body. I yelped, and he cursed and then hurried and shifted my weight away from the left side of my figure, his hands back beneath my armpits.

"Let's get you in," he quickly said, ignoring what had almost happened, and then slowly helped me turn around.

I was frustrated. Wanting him to kiss me, mad that I'd let myself cry out in pain this time, and just upset at the situation in general. He slid the curtain open to the shower and then went to move me inside but paused.

"Uh..." he said.



“Maybe if you just close your eyes and continue to hold me like you are, then I can help you guide me into the shower without you seeing anything,” I suggested, and he nodded, quickly shutting his eyes.

It was now or never. Praying that he kept his eyes closed, praying that I could trust he wouldn't try anything, I unsnapped my blush-pink, lacy bra, and slipped the straps down my arms. Up until this point, Tate had been so respectful of what he'd seen, so there was no reason to doubt he'd change now. But I'd never been completely nude in front of him.

Grabbing my underwear, I shoved them down my waist and then wiggled enough that they dropped to the floor. Which was a struggle in and of itself. Shifting so my left foot wasn't touching the ground, I managed to slide them out from under that side of my body and then sighed.

The dilemma now was to figure out how to get them off of my right ankle without putting weight on that left foot that looked so nasty.

“Tate, without opening your eyes, can you literally lift me up off the ground and then take one step forward before putting me back down?” I asked.

“What?” he said, chuckling.

“Please,” I groaned.

“You sound desperate. Do tell why?”

I glanced over my shoulder to find his eyes jammed closed but a massive grin on his face.

“Tate,” I whined, and he clicked his tongue.

“If you want me to proceed, Brex baby, you must oblige to my request,” he said.

“When did you become so posh and speak like that?” I teased, and he laughed.

“I have an education, my dear.” He added a horrible English accent to those words, and I couldn't help but giggle.

“Fine. But no making fun of me.”

“No promises, darlin'.” He grinned even wider with his eyes still rammed closed.

Sighing, I shifted my weight slightly. “My panties are stuck around my right ankle and, since I need to step forward into the shower, I figured we could kill two birds with one stone.”

He burst out laughing, nearly rocking forward off balance. “Tate!” I said.

“I didn’t promise,” he answered with a grin, but did exactly as I asked. Lifting me higher into the air, the underwear fluttered to the floor, and then he took a large step forward, placing me into the shower.

The water felt relieving as it crashed down upon my body, washing away much of the dried blood. By the time I was finished, the wound had opened up a little, but not terribly bad, and Tate’s fingers were becoming wrinkled from holding me upright in the water for so long. Turning the shower knob off, the water stopped spraying, and Tate gave me a soft smile, his eyes still closed.

“I can’t believe you didn’t peek even once,” I mumbled as he slowly took a small step backwards to help me out of the shower.

“Oh, trust me, I was tempted to,” he replied, and I clicked my tongue. “What? I was just being honest.”

“One more step back,” I said, and he took another small step so I could completely exit the shower.

“Well, thank you for not giving in,” I continued, and then scanned the towels hanging from the pegs to the right.

“This isn’t how I want to see you naked for the first time anyway,” he mindlessly replied.

“I’m sorry, who says you’ll ever get to see me naked?” I jabbed back, wondering why my peg was empty. I didn’t remember removing my towel I’d used before the rodeo.

“Ahhhh,” he whined.

“Besides, what’s wrong with accidentally seeing me naked in the bathroom?” I scanned the rack again as he laughed.

“Are you suddenly upset that you saw me naked that way?” he asked, and then stepped gingerly back until his legs bumped the toilet and sat down, still holding me upright.

“If you could see me right now, I would be rolling my eyes at you,” I responded.

“Of course you would.” He grinned as I groaned. “What?”

“My towel is not in the bathroom,” I sheepishly answered.

“Brex,” he scolded me and then stood from the toilet. “Help me get you sitting on the toilet and then tell me where it is. I’ll go get it.”

Slowly, we shifted in a circle so I could gently be placed on the toilet. I hadn’t washed my hair, so at least it wasn’t dripping down my back, making me even more cold as I sat down on the porcelain soaking wet. I unfurled it

from the massive messy bun on top of my head to let it drape over my breasts just in case he accidentally caught a glimpse.

“I thought it was in here, but since it’s not, it’s most likely in the top right drawer of the dresser on the left. I must have thrown the one I used earlier in my dirty clothes bag, so just grab a new one.” I covered myself as best as I could and helped Tate grip the doorknob before he quickly shuffled out of the bathroom.

## Chapter 32

My bum was turning numb as I waited patiently for Tate to return. I could hear muffled voices through the wall but didn't bother to listen closely. I'm sure the girls would inform me of whatever they discussed once Tate was gone. Eventually, a knock sounded, and his voice penetrated the frame. The knob twisted, and in walked Tate with his eyes shut tight.

He stretched forward one hand that was holding a towel and kicked the door closed behind him. Quickly drying myself the best I could without standing up, I finally wrapped the towel around the front of my body and smiled.

"You can look now," I said, and Tate opened those intense eyes of his. He winked at me and then knelt down in front of me, placing some unexpected things beside him.

"What took you so long?" I pressed, watching as he opened up a pack of gauze.

"Finding first aid stuff. You should probably get stitches, though," he said, and then applied some ointment to the wound, blotting at the small trickle of blood that had begun.

"No. I'm not giving him the satisfaction of going to the hospital," I answered, and winced as Tate applied a little too much pressure with the gauze he was taping down.

"Sorry, Brex baby," he muttered, and then added another strip of tape. "You got stabbed with a knife. I'm pretty sure going to the hospital would be the logical thing to do."

"Cause stabbing someone is something that logical people do?" I questioned. "You can't reason with him like that, and the hospital staff would ask questions."

He raised his brows and pulled his lips into a thin line. "True. But how am I supposed to expect my best employee to come work the two-year-olds with me tomorrow if she can't put weight on her left foot?"

I sighed as he applied the last piece of tape to hold the bandage in place. The invite apparently still stood, and everything in me said to go with him. To train those colts and spend that extra time in his company. But I knew that if I did, I'd fall even harder for him. Not hold him accountable for his actions concerning Oakley, and maybe even tell him it was Matt.

"You're not. I can't do that, even if I were to get stitches, but you should let Chance and Cole come. They were really disappointed when you changed your mind."

He nodded but didn't smile as he backed away. Tate grabbed the shorts from the pile of clothes above me and handed them to me where I slowly began to pull them up my legs. I knew he was upset that I was still saying no, but I had to. For my sake and his. We both were interested in each other, but if being around him meant I would open myself up more and more, then that also left me vulnerable to Matt. Plus, he still had flirted with Oakley, and in front of me too.

"Help me get these over my butt, please," I grumbled, frustrated that no matter how much I tugged and worked at them, I couldn't get them on while trying to hold the towel in place. Tate gave a soft chuckle, placed his hands under my armpits, closed his eyes, and then raised me completely off of the toilet.

I pulled the shorts on all the way and then let him know that he could set me down. It was much easier getting the massive T-shirt on. He leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, waiting for me to tell him he could look again.

"How are you going to get around tomorrow? Or dressed?" he asked.

"I don't know. I'll probably ask one of the girls to help me with my pants. I can do the shirt fairly easily on my own. You're good."

He raised a brow as his eyes scanned my figure. "That's a good shirt. You should wear that—" I lightly slapped his arm. "Ow," he said, and rubbed the spot, but the grin never faded from his face. What was happening? I liked how easy and simple these interactions between us were right now, but I knew it couldn't last. This was something that was only happening because of odd circumstances. That was it.

"Will you exercise Becky for me until I can ride her again?" I glanced up at Tate. He was studying my face, watching me, and thinking who knows what. But he nodded slowly and then pushed himself off of the wall.

Bending down, he raised a hand and brushed some hair back away

from the side of my face. “I thought so,” he mumbled.

“Thought what?” I quietly questioned as his finger whispered over the edge of my ear. His touch made my heart soar, the yearning in my soul increased even more. I didn’t want him to leave, to remove his hand. He needed to keep touching my skin, being this Tate toward me again. Not the one that had literally crushed me, shredded me to pieces and left me in agony.

“That you removed your earrings. Put them back in,” he demanded, and I swatted his hand away.

“No. I don’t need them getting ripped out of my ears or used as weapons against me,” I replied.

He picked up his hoodie from the ground. “Then tell me who it is so I can make sure that doesn’t happen.”

I shook my head. “Then you’ll kill him.”

“Exactly,” he growled, and my insides turned over as he pulled his shirt over his head. Not because it scared me, but because this possessive protection he was exuding made me feel excited. I liked that he was acting like this, even if I knew it was only temporary.

“I can’t have you going to jail, Tate,” I said, and he rolled his eyes, mimicking what I normally do.

“Why ain’t this guy in jail?” he asked me, and then reached forward to help me stand.

“He was,” I replied, hopping on one foot closer to Tate. He felt comfortable, warm. Being this close felt safe, and I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply. It smelled of smoke and caramel and pine trees once more.

Suddenly, he pulled me into his body and wrapped his arms tightly around me. This time, I was more aware and avoided bumping my thigh into him. At first, I remained rigid, wondering what he was doing, but after another deep intake of oxygen, I relaxed into his embrace.

My cheek rested against his strong chest, his hands holding me firmly, as if he was terrified to lose me. Just like when we’d danced before. Or when he’d held me that final night in Vegas. This felt like home. A place I never wanted to leave, even if I feared how badly it would tear me apart.

“How’d he get out?” Tate asked, placing his chin on top of my head.

“Good behavior, and my parents testified for him apparently,” I spoke into his chest, twisting my hands tighter into his hoodie. Maybe if I squeezed him tight enough, I’d smell like him after he was gone. And I pushed myself against him even harder.

“That’s right. I remember you mentioning that your parents took his side,” he muttered, burying his face into my hair. And he held me, supporting my weight tightly against his body. I refused to let go too. My arms wrapped around his waist, desperately clinging to this final moment before we were to head back out and he would go home for the night. I wished he would just take me with him, but that would arouse suspicion and every type of question possible.

Plus, we were technically still mad at each other.

“What’d my roommates say when you went out there?” I asked, keeping my face buried against his chest.

“Nothing. They literally stared at me and then whispered amongst each other until I asked them if they knew where any first aid stuff was,” he answered, his breath tickling my scalp.

I giggled. “You didn’t put a shirt back on before you left, Tate. They were probably gossiping about that.” I giggled again as he shook his head.

“Well, I wasn’t exactly able to look to find my shirt now, could I?” He pulled away just enough that he could gaze down at my face and grinned at me.

“Could’ve asked me to hand it to you.”

He tilted his head. “I had other things on my mind than where my shirt was.”

“Like what?” I questioned, and his eyes twinkled. He winked, a very mischievous grin caressing his effortless features, and I didn’t even need him to answer anymore. “That’s inappropriate,” I said, and stuck out my tongue at him.

He leaned down and before I had time to retract it, he licked it.

Just like he’d done before.

Both of us froze.

Tate had just licked my tongue. Physically expressed some sort of attraction to me even though things were completely complicated between us right now.

My cheeks flamed bright red, matching the same shade that his were turning. He stared at me, flustered.

“I-That-It-I-It...” he stuttered, and then slowly backed away from me, while still holding me upright.

“It’s fine,” I quickly said, and removed my hands from around his waist. He looked away from me and closed his eyes.

I oddly found it a little funny. Also, kind of cute that he was feeling so flustered about it, but mostly silly that instinctively he thought the best reaction was to lick my tongue.

He shifted me to his right side, still unable to look at me as I stifled a laugh. Which turned into a snort, and then a giggle. Tate stopped in the middle of turning the doorknob and finally moved his hazel eyes in my direction once more.

“What are you laughing about?” he said through gritted teeth.

I chuckled again as he continued to stare at me, bewildered. “It was kind of funny.”

“No, it wasn’t,” he said in desperation.

“Think about it. It kind of was,” I said again and snorted. He paused. Raised an eyebrow. Tilted his head. Then a slow smile spread across his face.

“Okay, maybe it was a little funny,” he said, and then shook his head and chuckled. Finally, he reached forward and turned the doorknob, guiding me out of the bathroom. “Really, though, what are you going to do tomorrow?”

I shrugged my shoulders, hopping on one foot slowly out toward my bed. “I’m not sure. Maybe bum around in a side-by-side, go check some fencing.” We rounded the corner to find all of the girls in their individual bunks and pretending not to watch us. I leaned toward Tate and lowered my voice. “Probably have to have you help me shower again.”

He rolled his eyes. “Next time it’ll be a bath, because holding you up that long sucked.”

“Are you calling me fat?” I teased, my voice returning to its normal decibel, and he gently helped me sit on my bunk.

“Ginormous.” He winked at me.

“Jerk.” I fake glared, not ready for him to leave just yet. He let me go and stood up, which left a chill where he’d been so close to me before. He remained still for another moment, simply watching me. Those hazel eyes swept over my frame one last time and that look crossed his face. The same one that told me whatever thought he’d just had, had been dirty.

Then, it quickly changed. That gentle kindness caressing his features once more. My hand twitched, wanting to reach out and slide it across his cheek, tangle it in his curls.

Those silky curls that I really wanted to touch once more.

“Night,” he softly whispered, and I gave him a tender smile before he



turned around.

All the girls pretended to shove their noses back into their phones that they were definitely not paying attention to.

“Let me know what time Oakley returns please. And find out where she went,” Tate said, walking toward the front door. He pulled his boots on, grabbed his hat, and then was gone.

I sat still on my bed, gazing after his long since disappeared figure. The Tate that I’d fallen for was back, if even for just that brief moment, he’d been back. It wrecked me though, knowing that it was a fleeting thing. Tomorrow morning, I could almost guarantee that he’d become a ghost in my life once more.

## Chapter 33

“Sooooooooo,” Gemma said, drawing me back to the present, and I looked around at my coworkers. Eva was hanging over the edge of the bunk staring down at me, the other three girls had positioned themselves to be able to see me from their own beds.

“Sooooooo,” I copied, and pushed myself a little farther onto the mattress. Hissing at the stinging pain, I took a deep breath and then exhaled and leaned back against my pillow.

“When you said you called someone, the *last* person I had thought it would be was Tate,” Eva said.

Aubrey nodded. “Exactly. Like why in the world would you call the very man who literally hasn’t interacted with a single one of us since we’ve been here?”

The silence was deafening as I stared at the girls around me. Something better come into my head quickly to get out of this, because I was not about to admit to them Tate’s and my history. It was kind of endearing, though, that they thought he was so cold, so standoffish instead of the quite sweet and caring man he really was. I bit back a smile as the image of him smiling tumbled through my mind.

Stop it, you need to come up with something. I scolded myself.

Melody took a deep breath. “Besides, you also need to explain how you got stabbed, because people don’t just get stabbed randomly.”

“Or why it didn’t seem to shock Tate,” Gemma finished. “You two seem way too comfy cozy. I would’ve never had the guts to call him for something like that. He saw you naked.”

“He kept his eyes closed the entire time, so he didn’t see me naked.” I quickly shut that down.

Melody clicked her tongue. “I would’ve let him see me naked.”

“What?!” The rest of us exclaimed, and she shrugged her shoulders.

“He’s extremely handsome. You can’t blame me.” She leaned back

against her bunk, and I bit back a smile as the shock eventually wore off from the rest of the girls.

“How were you comfortable with him being in there and not any of us? We are all girls, he’s a guy,” Aubrey asked, gesturing around her and leaning forward.

The idea I’d been waiting for finally crashed into me, and I breathed out in relief. “He can literally pick me up like I’m nothing. It made it easy to shower and undress and whatnot, because all he did was keep his eyes closed and hold my weight off of my left leg. It would’ve been a mess trying to fit three of us in that shower.”

Eva nodded in understanding. “Yeah, that makes sense.” Then she furrowed her brows and flipped her head over the edge of the bunk again. “Wait, why didn’t you call any of the other guys? Like Anthony? You’ve spent way more time with him.”

Gemma’s face tensed up and, as much as I didn’t want to be the one to break the news that we were aware of their relationship, it was the only explanation I could come up with. I gave Gemma an apologetic smile.

“You know I can’t call Anthony for something like that. Even though it was nothing intimate, that’s crossing a boundary I’m not willing to,” I replied, and all the girls nodded.

“True. Sorry, Gemma,” Eva said, turning toward her. Her face went bright red.

“You guys know?” she sheepishly asked, and all of us vigorously nodded. “For how long?”

Melody giggled. “Since like the beginning. It’s not like the two of you are good at hiding it.” Gemma groaned and buried her face into her pillow while we smiled and laughed. It felt freeing to be having this kind of girl gossip with my coworkers.

“Okay, but still. How were you comfortable calling Tate like that? And when did you get his number anyway?” Aubrey shot at me, and everyone swiveled their attention toward my predicament once more.

I swallowed slowly, giving myself a minute to get my story straight. “Oh yeah, that. Uh, well I did end up spending some time alone with him during that weekend he drove me for my family emergency, remember? The ride wasn’t silent the entire time. That would’ve been weird, and I have his number from then too.”

No one said anything for a moment, and my heart raced as I prayed

they would believe me. Prayed that my lies would suffice right now and keep Tate and me out of this mess. Keep them far, far away from knowing anything that even hinted at my past. Matt had to remain someone that they never discovered.

Finally, Aubrey leaned back against her pillow. “I forgot that you’ve spent time with him like that.”

“Why can’t I have a family emergency so I can ride in a car alone with him?” Melody whined and flopped down upon her bed. Gemma tossed a pillow at her, and everyone giggled.

“Don’t deny that you think he’s handsome too, Brexlynn,” Melody said when she noticed I’d rolled my eyes.

“He’s our boss, guys.”

“He’s handsome, young, and technically only our *temporary* boss,” Aubrey said, grinning with heart eyes. She laid onto her belly, kicked her feet up behind her, and placed her chin into her hands.

“Still, boss,” I reiterated, and Gemma clicked her tongue.

“Girl, if you don’t admit that he’s attractive, I’m going to start thinking you aren’t into guys, because that really was a kind gesture,” Gemma said, and giggles rounded the room.

“Come on, Brexlynn. At least admit you think he’s cute. Especially after the fact that he so respectfully helped you tonight. You said he kept his eyes closed the entire time,” Aubrey said, that dreamy look still in her eyes.

“He did come all the way from his house just to help,” I admitted, and all the girls clapped in glee.

“See? Scary boss man went out of his way to do something nice for you.” Gemma grinned.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “He is kind of cute.”

All four girls squealed and screamed in excitement as I felt my cheeks flush red hot. It was interesting to admit that out loud. To gossip with these girls, as this was not something I’d ever done before. They giggled a few more times and then Melody changed the subject.

“By the way, how’d you get stabbed anyway?” She stared up at the ceiling, as exhaustion was slowly settling on my body.

I looked away from the girls, not having a good explanation for that one. Not wanting to even bring up any sort of clarification that could spark more curiosity. A stillness settled over the group for a moment before I sighed.

“That’s a story for another day. Oakley might walk back in at any point, and I don’t need someone who’s been nothing short of rude to me knowing anything too personal.” I had always been good at avoiding speaking about myself, and luckily it shut down the topic again.

The girls all turned back to their phones, getting lost in social media or whatever else they were looking at, while I stared at the wooden slats from the bunk above me lost in thought.

My hand brushed against something hard, and I slid the box that contained my new buckle out from beneath my right side. Just another one to add to my collection, but this one I felt prouder of than almost any of the others I’d won. This one was a symbol of my bravery, of the hope that my dream might not be completely crushed.

Pushing myself upright, I shifted so I was sitting with my back against the wall and opened the lid from the box. This buckle was round, had the year engraved on the silver background with massive gems lining the rim. A cowgirl turning a barrel was etched into the middle with the word champion scrawled across it, pulling the design together.

Gently lifting it from the box, a small piece of paper fluttered out from behind it. It was folded, tucked against the piece of metal as if someone didn’t want me to find it until at a specific moment.

Picking it up from my bed, I unfolded the small piece of paper to find a handwritten note. Just a few words in oddly neat writing.

*Someone still owes me buckles.*

That was it.

I giggled and shoved the note back in the box, running a finger over the buckle. Of course he hadn’t forgotten. What a turd, thinking he was entitled to them when he hadn’t played me a song on his guitar yet nor sang it. This brought a small smile to my face. Next time I saw him, I would remind him of such a thing.

“Is that the buckle you won?” Eva interrupted my thoughts once more, her head flopped over the side of the bunk. She’d pulled her hair out of the bun, and it splayed around her face like peacock feathers.

“Yes, ma’am! Would you like to see it?” I asked, and she grinned, stretching out her hand. Placing the buckle in her grasp, she lifted it away and disappeared over the top of the bunk.

“Odd question, but the announcer said it was your very first rodeo. But you used to run barrels and win. How does that work?” Melody slid

forward in her bunk, catching everyone's attention.

Dark memories, hurtful reminders rushed through me, and I closed my eyes. Run after run where I'd won but Matt still found something wrong. Bruises and tears flooded my figure, and I felt the same, fresh, wet stains rush down my cheeks.

Wrapping my arms tightly around myself, I realized how much grief was rushing through me, and I wanted Tate to hold me. I wanted that warmth and comfort he always provided. Safety that exuded from the simple smell of him. Tucking my nose into my shirt, there was that lingering scent of smoke and caramel. A hint of pine trees mixed in. Tate.

My place of comfort. My home.

It was in that moment that I let go of the anger I'd been holding on to that was directed toward Tate. This was the perfect moment to start over, even if it was in the middle of fire. I still couldn't tell him that it was Matt. Tate knowing would probably get him seriously hurt or killed. But flirting with Tate was harmless, wasn't it? I mean, technically we were still fake dating in Matt's eyes anyway, and I'd been hurt regardless of following the rules or not.

"Brexlynn?" Aubrey cautiously said, and I quickly wiped away the tears.

"Sorry. Uh," I paused, catching the gazes of the girls around me. Ones of caution but also compassion. "I used to rodeo under a different name. Brexlynn technically is my middle name."

Gasps resounded around the room. Clear looks of shock drifted my way. "Another story for another time," I added, seeing the looks of curiosity coursing through them. All of the girls were puzzled, all of them had questions bubbling up. I guess I somehow knew that at some point this would happen, that someday they would slowly learn these things about me.

But not today, and eventually the girls returned to gossiping as we continued to giggle amongst each other. I, once again, mostly listened. The exhaustion was settling in even more. Combined with the radiating pain that was making me nauseous once more, I leaned back against my pillow and turned to face the wall. Sleep quickly overtook me.

## Chapter 34

My feet dangled over the edge of the bed as I patiently waited for one of the girls to finally be dressed. They had agreed this morning to help me put my pants on before we headed out. So, I was sitting in a long-sleeve, green shirt with a vest over top, waiting in my pajama shorts. It was going to be uncomfortable going commando, but no panties had been brought into the bathroom last night, and that was going to be an entirely massive fiasco that they didn't need to help me with.

Oakley also never returned last night, nor this morning, and my curious self who was feeling an overwhelming high amount of confidence, really wanted to know where she'd been. If only to ream her for it by telling Tate.

A knock sounded at the door as Gemma exited the bathroom, the last of the girls to use it, resulting in it finally being my turn next. Eva shuffled toward the entrance while Aubrey dabbed more mascara on her lashes. Melody was humming to herself while doing her hair. It was Sunday morning, which meant that us girls got the mornings off from chores. Despite not needing to wake up before the sun, I had wanted to get out there early enough to see Tate ride down. And clearly failed.

"Oh, good morning," Eva said, her voice a little higher pitched than normal. "What brings you by?"

"Just wonderin' if Oakley ever came back last night." Tate's voice pierced through the little bunkhouse, and I shifted sideways, wanting to catch a glimpse of him. But the angle from here was cut off by Aubrey and Gemma, both of them skipping toward the door, crowding around Eva.

"No, she never did," Aubrey replied.

"Alright, thanks ladies. How's Brex doin'?" he asked, being the ever-polite cowboy that I was learning he really was.

"I'm fine!" I shouted from my bunk, and the three girls crowding the door stepped back slightly, gesturing to allow him in. Tate's head ducked into

the bunk, and he removed his hat. Work jeans already splotted with a little bit of dust hugged his legs. He had on a similar style to what I was wearing with a bright blue, long-sleeve button up beneath a black vest. It made his broad shoulders look thick, and he filled the doorway.

“I’m plannin’ to run to town today to grab some feed that shipped in yesterday. I can pick you up some pain meds if you need?” he asked, and I clenched my teeth, not wanting to show that I was actually in quite a bit of anguish.

“All good here,” I politely replied.

He shook his head. “I’ll grab some ibuprofen and more gauze pads. You got stabbed, don’t need to act like a tough guy.” I rolled my eyes, and he ran a hand over his face, covering up the smirk that quickly passed across it.

“Alright, well, anyone need anythin’ else before I head back out?” he asked, looking at the other girls around us.

Melody shook her head, Aubrey just stared with dreamy eyes, but it was Gemma who spoke up.

“Not us, but Brexlynn still needs help putting her pants on.” She tossed a thumb over her shoulder at me.

My mouth fell open. “I can manage on my own,” I quickly said, shooting down the idea.

Gemma spun around and shoved her hands on her hips. “Right. Which is why you’ve been sitting there waiting for us to finish getting ready so we could help you into the bathroom to put them on.” I glared at her. How rude of her to call me out like this, when in fact, I did need help putting them on. But not by Tate, I mean, right? How could the one little comment I’d made last night about him being kind of cute lead that woman trying to set us up?

“I’m fine, really,” I said again, and Gemma clicked her tongue. It was like she put on a pair of mom pants as she whipped back around to face Tate. He may be the boss, but she was about to tell him exactly what he was supposed to do.

“Tate, go help Brexlynn get her pants on this morning. But take your boots off, we don’t need mud tracked through the bunkhouse.” She smiled at him as his eyes widened, and he raised his brows. She gestured at the rest of the girls, glaring at Melody who quickly put her brush down.

“Right, we have a few things to still do and don’t want to make Brexlynn wait any longer,” Melody said from the floor and picked up some



hair gel.

Eva quickly slipped away from the door and grabbed her makeup bag. “I forgot to do my eyebrows,” she said, zipping it open.

Aubrey stuttered out a few incoherent words and then climbed back over to her bed. Gemma smiled once more at Tate and then grabbed his arm, pulling him forward before slamming the door behind him. I closed my eyes and looked down at the mattress. I was both appalled and excited by her behavior. Another moment to be alone with Tate, I shouldn’t be upset by that. Or protesting it.

Glancing up from my sheets, Tate sighed and placed his hat on the railing once more before tugging off his boots. Sliding them over to the side, he padded across the floor in his socks to stand in front of me.

I mouthed “sorry” to him, but all he did was shake his head and then grab the pair of pants that I had laying across my lap. Gently wrapping an arm around my waist, he hoisted me up from the mattress and then helped me hop around the corner, back into the small sanctuary that was the bathroom.

Plopping down on the toilet, I looked up at Tate’s face. It seemed like he hadn’t shaved this morning and the stubble around his jaw and chin was thicker than usual. He knelt down in front of me and began to unfold my jeans. He was so close to me that I couldn’t help it. I reached out and ran my fingers across his cheek, brushing the prickly facial hair.

Tate froze.

And I went immediately still as my mind caught up with what my hand had done. Quickly retracting it, I bit down on my bottom lip and looked away. Staring at anything but Tate. My heart raced in my chest, the burning desire to just lean forward and collapse in his embrace was slowly drilling any sense of self control away from me. All ignited because I simply touched his face.

“Do that again, please,” he whispered.

I hesitantly turned my eyes toward Tate. His gaze was not on me, but cast downward, yet he hadn’t moved away. Do it again. He wanted me to touch him again. That simple request to return my fingers to his face swirled between us, dancing through the thick air of anticipation.

Slowly, I extended a trembling hand and, this time, instead of just brushing my fingers across his cheek, I laid my palm flat against the bristles. He closed his eyes and leaned into my hand. I let it linger there, soaking in the warmth of his skin and the coarseness of his facial hair.

The temptation to just scoot closer to him and slip my hand around the back of his neck began to drum through me. Lulling me toward a place where I would absolutely be crossing an invisible boundary between us. But I wanted to feel the silky curls twist between my fingers. To express to him that every part of me still desired him.

So I gave in.

It wasn't the most graceful slide forward on the toilet, but it was quick and gave me the half an inch more I needed to reach around and grip his curls. My fingers kneaded through the hair, brushing back and forth across the nape of his neck, and he leaned his head in my direction. His forehead bumped against my chest as he raised his arms and encircled them around my hips.

The comfort I was seeking from him wasn't just for me. Something was going on that had increased his stress levels as well. Abandoning all restrictions we'd placed on ourselves, or that I'd placed upon us, I wrapped my other arm around his head and pulled him into my body.

Tension fled his figure as he practically collapsed against me. He shuddered, and I buried my face in his hair. The strongest wave of caramel scent hit me from the fresh wash and style he'd done. His fingers gripped my hips harder, desperation seeping through, and I finally let go of any restraint I was bound by.

"I'm scared, Tate," I whispered into his hair, and he squeezed me tighter.

"I know, baby. I know," he replied, not lifting his head from my chest.

"Does that make me weak?"

He shook his head gently. "Quite the opposite, Brex."

Tate began to run his fingers back and forth across my hips, offering me more comfort despite whatever was bothering him. "Are you upset at me?" I hesitantly asked, praying that his mood wasn't my fault.

"No," he said, and then pulled his head back so he could look up at my face. "I'm upset you won't tell me who it is."

Sliding his hands across my hips and along the outside of my thighs, he moved himself into more of an upright position. I removed my fingers from his hair and set them in my lap. It killed me to not tell him, but I couldn't lose Tate. Not by Matt's hands.

"I can't." I looked down at my hands.

“Why not? You know I’ll eventually figure it out, even if you don’t.”

My eyes shot up to his face where I found him not looking at me with frustration, but the longing and gentleness that eased my fear.

“I know you will. But Tate, when you do, promise me you won’t confront him. At least not until talking with me about it first,” I pleaded with him, and he removed his hands from my legs, returning to the pants he’d dropped on his lap.

“When I figure it out, he’ll be dead by morning.”

“Or you will!” I shouted.

The pants fell into his lap once more, and he looked up at me. “What do you mean?”

“One, I need help getting my shorts off first,” I sheepishly said with a small smile, and he rolled his eyes but gave me a returning grin. Reaching forward, I raised myself off of the toilet and he pulled the shorts down over my bum and slid them off. My shirt barely covered my nether regions, but at least it still covered it.

The moment my bare backside hit the cold toilet lid, I yelped.

“What hurts?” he quickly asked and began checking the wound and the bruises along my left leg.

“The cold toilet against my bare ass,” I replied, and he stopped moving for a moment. His frame went rigid, his eyes glued to a single spot on my leg, and then he spoke.

“Are you saying you don’t have any underwear on?” His voice quivered for a moment.

“Do you remember helping me put some on last night?” I asked back, and he shook his head, still refusing to look away.

“You can’t see anything, numbskull.” I teasingly pushed his shoulder, and he rocked back and forth but still didn’t stop staring off at that one single spot.

“You aren’t wearing any panties,” Tate muttered under his breath.

“Tate. Those are some very inappropriate thoughts running through your head right now,” I bantered.

He slowly nodded, still not looking away. “Very much so, Brex.” I rolled my eyes. “And I’m assuming you’re rolling your eyes right now?”

“Tate Pierce,” I chastised. He chuckled and finally, *finally* blinked. Bringing his eyes to meet mine, he gave me a wicked grin.

“Now, we have two options. You can go commando all day or I can

go get—”

“I’ll go commando, thank you very much.” I quickly shot down his offer to go find a pair of underwear for me. “You still have my thong you shoved in your pocket from Vegas. I don’t need you discovering what more of mine look like.”

He grinned, and I clicked my tongue as he began to bunch up the pants and shove my right foot in the first leg.

“Brex?” He gently maneuvered my left foot.

“Hmmm?”

“What did you mean that I might get killed?” My foot slipped into the hole, and he began to slowly slide the pants up toward my thighs.

Telling him about the gun might break whatever barrier I was creating to keep him safe. If he knew about it, that fear might go away, and I could give Tate a real chance. Or it wouldn’t make the fear go away, but at least he would be aware that his life was in danger. That was the right thing to do. No matter how Tate reacted to this information, I needed to tell him, because regardless of what I’d already tried to do, he had always been in the middle of this, and I’d been hurt all along.

“He brought a gun, Tate. Flashed a nine-millimeter, I think, the second time he confronted me to tell me I’d better not step a toe out of line. Threatened you because it would hurt me,” I mumbled. His hands stopped moving, the pants rested against my thighs, waiting for me to lift myself up again.

Tate didn’t say anything as I hesitantly hoisted myself up once more and he wriggled the jeans over my butt cheeks and up onto my waist. Once I plopped myself back down, he stood up and ran his hand over his mustache and face. His mind was spinning, I could see the thoughts just crashing through his head and decided it was best to leave him to his thoughts.

Zippering up my pants, I buttoned them up and then waited. This was worse than I thought it would go. Now he wasn’t talking to me. He could be mad because I probably should’ve shared that information sooner. Or he could be mad that, in general, someone was here on his property with a handgun, threatening my life and his. Or did he even realize that my ex was on this property? I’d never explicitly told him that.

Suddenly, he mumbled under his breath. “Should be fine, I’ve got a bigger gun than him anyway.”

I giggled. “That’s not the only thing you’ve got that’s bigger,” I said

without thinking, and slammed a hand over my mouth as his jaw dropped open.

Tate's eyes swung to meet mine as my cheeks burned red hot. That had just come from my mouth. Not once in my life had I ever made a dirty comment like that before. Said something so bold and completely unfiltered.

"Did you just...?" Tate asked, bewildered. My hand stayed clamped over my mouth as I refused to answer. The surprised expression on his face slowly left, that mischievous grin quickly replacing it. His eyes twinkled as he pulled his lips between his teeth and stared at me.

"You just said something very naughty," he spoke, and I let my hands fall from my mouth, grimacing.

"Good girl," he quietly growled.

I blinked, dumbfounded, as everything in me began to roar hot. A blistering excitement of fire blasted through me, and I couldn't look away from him. Tate let the grin slide away, to be replaced with something possessive and powerful. My heart was pounding so hard I could've sworn that he could hear it, see it jump from my chest.

There was no use in trying to speak as I shoved myself up off of the toilet, putting the majority of my weight on my right leg. He needed to kiss me and kiss me now. I steadied myself by placing a hand on the wall, waiting for him to close the gap between us.

And he did.

Tate took a step toward me, his body slamming into mine, and then his eyes widened. "Shit," he said, and we were both crashing to the floor. Arms wrapped around my entire figure as he managed to spin around so his back rammed into the wall and toilet, breaking the fall with his body.

I landed in his lap, awkwardly smashed between some of him and some of the wall, narrowly missing the already injured left leg.

For a moment, we both stared at each other, and then I just couldn't help it. Clutching my chest, I roared with laughter. He leaned his head back against the wall and chuckled lightly at first and then joined me in my uncontrollable fit. I was wheezing, barely able to catch my breath by the time we both began to calm down.

"What-What-happened?" I spluttered out, and he groaned, coughing a few times.

"My foot caught the base of the toilet," he said, one hand beginning to mindlessly stroke my back while the other flopped onto the toilet lid.

“You need to be more careful. I can’t hold you up the way you can me,” I teased, and he shook his head, closing his eyes and feeling flustered.

“We should test that theory just in case,” he grinned, and I lightly pushed him in the shoulder. My stomach suddenly made an awful gurgling noise, and he finally pried one eye open. “Was that you?”

I glared at him as he blinked both eyes wide and chuckled. “Let’s go get you some breakfast.”

## Chapter 35

Wicked grins from my coworkers met Tate and me as he helped me hobble back out of the bathroom. He gently set me down on my bed, informed the girls that he'd leave the side-by-side so they could drive us over to the lodge for some breakfast, and then ducked out of the bunkhouse.

The moment he disappeared, all four girls swiveled on their bunks and grinned. Staring at me as if they had a secret to share, or one they needed to be told. Pursing my lips into a thin line, I waited for one of them to break the silence.

Gemma inserted herself first. "What happened in there? We all heard a massive bang and you took a while to just change into pants."

"Tate tripped," I quickly answered, grabbing my belt from the bed and sliding it through the loops.

"Oh," she replied, looking extremely disappointed.

"Okay, but there has to be something more to it. You guys talk a lot when you're in there," Eva added, climbing down from the bunk and heading over to the row of boots. The other three girls joined her there and began pulling them on for the day. I shrugged my shoulders, feeling like an answer wasn't completely necessary.

"Come on, give us something!" Aubrey whined before she and Eva made their way over toward me with my boots in hand.

"It's not like we can hear what you guys are saying, but we can tell when it's you versus him talking, and you seem really comfortable around him. You say a lot more with Tate than you've ever spoken with us," Melody added. It took a moment to get both of my feet into the boots before we were ready to go. Eva and Aubrey each tucked one arm under mine and hoisted me up. Slowly, we made our way out of the bunkhouse and into the Razor.

They plopped me down in the front passenger seat and then squished themselves into the other seats before Gemma drove us up toward the lodge.

"I guess he is fairly easy to talk to," I mumbled.

Melody clicked her tongue. "That's all we get?"

"That's all there is," I answered. Gemma put the side-by-side into park, and I waited for one of the girls to help me out. It was Melody who helped me this time, and we limped our way into the dining hall.

Breakfast had long since passed, but the smell of pancakes lingered as the girls took to the fridge and reheated some hot cakes. It was sweet of them to bring me some so I didn't have to hobble around on one leg. Thick syrup oozed from the bottle on top of the delicious meal, and it practically fell off of my fork before making it to my mouth.

"You want to know what I don't get," Aubrey said, pushing her ponytail behind her shoulders after we'd mostly eaten in silence. I leaned back on the seat, my belly full, and began to twist the end of my braid, adjusting a few of the strands that had gone a little haywire.

"What's that?" Gemma asked her.

"How Brexlynn has gone two years without any hint of drama or men, and then coming here, she's been wrapped up in all this mystery. She gets stabbed and has two very hot guys fawning all over her," she answered, and I nearly choked on my own spit.

"What two guys?" I quickly replied.

"Tate and Matt." Aubrey grinned while I closed my eyes.

"You have no idea," I muttered under my breath, and the girls gave me confused glances. Eva opened her mouth to say something, but footsteps entering the dining room had her quickly ramming it shut.

"Hey ladies," a male voice I'd heard too many times spoke and sent ripples of fear through me. I stiffened in my seat.

"Speaking of," Gemma whispered, and winked at me before everyone turned to face Matt and smiled. Everyone except for me. I refused to turn around to acknowledge him, remaining frozen forward wondering how this could happen.

Luckily, the girls were here, but all the same, he was still here and would interact with me.

"Enjoying your breakfast?" Matt asked, coming closer.

"We are just wrapping up," Melody sweetly said, and then body heat caressed my exposed right side. Horrible timing to be sitting on the end with Eva on my left. Matt plopped himself down next to me and gave me a wide grin. I still refused to look directly at him.

He let the grin fall quickly from his face. "What a shame. I was



coming in to grab a snack and saw that you girls were here. I was kind of hoping for some company before going back out to work.”

“Oh, well we can wait with you if you’d like,” Aubrey cheerily said and then glared at me. She was sitting directly across from me and couldn’t figure out why I was barely moving.

Matt let a smile erupt over his face. “Would you? That’d be wonderful!” He pushed himself off of the bench and scurried off to the kitchen.

“What’s wrong with you?” Melody hissed from beside Aubrey. I glanced her way, but Matt was back before I had a chance to answer. He pushed some blonde hair away from his face and tucked it under his white cowboy hat before once again sitting down next to me and shoving a sandwich down his throat.

He made small talk with the girls, flirted a little, and flashed that dashing smile over and over that had won me once upon a lifetime ago.

While everyone else seemed happy and relaxed, running around in my head the entire time were monsters, screaming at me to fight and to kill. To desperately escape this situation. I couldn’t focus, however, knowing that I was trapped, unable to defend myself with this injured leg.

But instead of fear, those monsters were feeding off of the budding confidence that had grown inside me lately and were fueling my rage. They were almost protecting me, reminding me that I was no longer in his control, that I was allowed to live a life free of him someday and that I could survive. An overwhelming stench of anger rolled through me as he brushed an arm against mine.

His black long-sleeve shirt left a few strands of thread behind against my top, and I quickly brushed them off without acknowledging him. The flirtatious smile that he’d been wearing quickly disappeared and, for a moment, if the girls had been paying close attention, they would’ve seen the rage that coursed through him from my dismissal.

And then he was finished eating.

“We should get going,” Gemma said.

“I can help Brexlynn out, if you’d like? It’d be easier for me to carry her,” Matt said, his eyes sliding toward me, cold and empty.

“We’ll be fine,” I seethed out through bared teeth.

But the girls had something different to say.

“That’d be wonderful.”

“Thank you, that would help us out a lot.”

“How kind of you to offer.”

“Sounds good to us!” They all blurted out at the same time.

So, of course Matt ignored my comment, everyone did, and the four girls were sliding themselves off of the benches, ready to exit.

Matt grinned maliciously at me, a disgusting hunger in his eyes. “I need to hit the head really fast. Brexlynn and I will meet you guys out at the side-by-side right after. I’ll be quick,” he said, and my heart dropped. Matt scurried off toward the bathrooms that were just down the hall as the girls all smiled and left the dining room.

I was alone. Utterly alone with no one near, time ticking closer and closer to Matt returning and doing who knows what. Glancing around the dark brown room, the thick tables lined with hand crafted benches matching the exquisite dark wood floors, panic laced my soul.

Panic but also some courage. Time to get out of here.

Pushing myself up off of the bench, I attempted to take a step. The moment my left foot hit the ground, searing pain radiated up my leg, and I stumbled forward. Catching myself on the bench, I began to half walk, half drag myself toward the end of the table, praying I made it out before Matt returned.

Inch by inch, I staggered forward, my heart racing faster and faster in my chest. My stomach felt heavy and sick as my breathing increased. This bum leg was really starting to piss me off, holding me back from the escape I was desperately reaching for.

Once I made it to the end of the table, I shoved myself to the left, grasping for the wall on my right.

As Matt’s face appeared in the archway, blocking my escape.

“Now, where the hell do you think you’re going?” he sneered at me and rushed into the room. I backpedaled as fast as I could, but he slammed a hand against my chest, and I crashed to the floor.

“How’s that leg of yours today, CeCe?” he snarled, leaning down toward my face, and then dug a thumb on top of the bandaged wound. I cried out, unable to stop myself, and clutched at the leg as he shoved me with the toe of his boot.

“I saw Tate leave your bunkhouse this morning and late last night. Have you forgotten what I can do? Cece, I—”

“I’m not CeCe!” I snapped. “I haven’t been in a long time.”

He rammed me with his foot, kicking me on the side of my left leg, and then squatted down beside me again. I coughed, trying to stop the swimming sensation that had begun in my head as pain shot up my body.

“Don’t you dare speak to me like that,” he snarled, and then tipped my hat off my head. Pushing it with his toe, it slid away from me, and then he grabbed my braid. Jerking it hard, I yelped and reached for the base, scraping at his hands, trying to get him to release me.

“I thought this would be the best way to make you and Tate suffer, CeCe, but I don’t like it,” he snarled and then shoved my head against the floor.

“And—” I coughed a few times and gripped the sides of my head. “And what makes you think I care what you like or don’t like?” Through blurry vision I saw Matt lean away from me and then stand up. He placed his hands behind his back and smiled, very slightly. Pacing away, I watched him with my head swimming, reaching for his waistband, and then suddenly he ripped right back next to me and shoved the tip of the gun against my forehead.

Right between my eyes.

I stared at him, refusing to cower, refusing to give in. The rage that was burning behind his cold eyes was unlike anything I’d seen before. His skin was tinged red, and the stench from his hot breath made me nauseous.

“Do it,” I snarled at him, matching his rage-filled energy. “I accepted my death a long time ago, so do it.” I sat up, shoving my forehead into that gun even harder. Something inside me had turned wild, a little wicked. Self-preservation was completely gone, and I was ready to accept that this was how I went out. Especially since it meant he would go to jail for murder.

“What makes you think I won’t?” he snapped, clicking the safety off, and I tilted my throbbing head backwards.

“Because Matt, you aren’t stupid.” His hand wavered, faltering in his conviction to pull the trigger right here. “Because you know that if you were to kill me now, that you would go away for the rest of your life.”

The gun tipped a little downward, the rage in his eyes not quite as hot. My stomach flip flopped, a little bit of bewilderment coursed through me. Disbelief that I was being this forward with him.

“There are witnesses that know it’s just you and me in here, so even if you were to leave and no one sees you leave, the moment they find my body —”

“Shut up, bitch!” he snarled, but clicked the safety back on and holstered the gun into his waistband. Covering it with his shirt, he shook his head. “You—”

Suddenly, he stopped talking and immediately hoisted me off of the ground. Footsteps crashed into the dining room, and I glanced over Matt’s shoulder to see Eva flouncing back into the hall, unaware of what had been occurring but saving me from another moment of torture.

“I was coming to make sure everything’s okay, you were taking a while,” she said, smiling innocently.

“She tripped, but all is good now,” Matt responded, flashing a bright, flirtatious, and misleading grin back toward Eva. Keeping his arm tightly around my waist, I ended up practically walking through air as he quickly carried me out to the Razor that was waiting.

It was warm today, the sun blistering above us as he settled me into the back seat and waved us away. But despite the warmth, I felt a chill shiver through my spine as Gemma drove us toward the fences that we were in charge of checking. We’d be moving the cattle up to higher ground at the end of this week, so there were new fences to patch up after sitting all winter and being left to the creatures of the wild.

My heart was racing both from astonishment and a hint of pride. I’d stood up for myself, defended myself. Matt had been thrown off guard by my reaction that was no longer cowardly. Surviving this summer just became a whole lot easier as I realized that, all along, I’d been strong enough to win, not just run away.

Running away had helped keep me from getting killed, but now, I was willing and able to fight back to break free of those bounds. I wanted to live, wanted to enjoy my life, and wanted the ability to love freely with no fear. That’s what I was working toward.

What I wanted with Tate.

There was something gnawing at me, though. Something that had been slowly growing like a seed buried deep beneath the soil. Light hadn’t been able to filter through until now, now that I was feeling excitement and joy.

Concern. Concern that the only way I’d ever be completely free of Matt was through death. But whose death, I wasn’t sure, and that’s what truly terrified me.

## Chapter 36

Lunch couldn't come soon enough. Boredom was something that I had yet to experience while being here, but being cooped up in the side-by-side created that new feeling. I texted Katie and my brother a couple times, but the conversations with both of them seemed halfhearted, like they were both distracted with something else, which was fine. We were all adults here.

Finally, the girls finished the section of fencing that was broken with my help holding the wire and equipment, and we made our way down the side of the mountain. Out of the beautiful trees that kept the blistering sun off of our backs. It smelled fresh and free, much like Tate, and I enjoyed the simplicity of the moment, despite the boredom.

This life was something I could get used to again.

Gemma sped down past the cow pasture where several of them mooed loudly. My eyes scanned the beautiful scenery, something golden catching my eye. There was Tate, loping back up the side of the mountain on his golden palomino, and then he disappeared into the tree line.

My curiosity was increasing every day to see what his home looked like, since I assumed that's where the trail led. It had to be something exquisite, I could only imagine the amount of money he'd spent on the place simply because he could. But he also wasn't one who liked to flaunt his wealth, so maybe it was more humble than flashy. That fit him better.

Gemma slowed the vehicle, letting us soak in the peaceful stillness around us. The hum of the engine drowned out much of the other sounds, but it still felt free. Or there was a possibility that this newfound release in life had come from something that had nothing to do with being here. And everything with ripping out of the binds that had once held me.

Once we made our way up the long drive, she came to a stop beside the lodge and carefully turned the vehicle off. Matt strutted out of the building, his eyes resting upon mine. That evil grin stretched upon his face, and he quickly paced across the walkway, headed in my direction.

Of course. Annoyance and adrenaline dripped through me as I tried to hoist myself from the side-by-side without help. The girls saw his advances and leaned away, allowing him to come near as I hopped on one foot, grasping the black metal frame.

“Need some help?” he asked. I shook my head.

“I’m fine, thank you,” I jumped forward, gingerly balancing myself the best I could, and released my hold on the frame.

“No, I can carry you.” He took a few more steps toward me.

“Matt, I’ve got this on my own,” I seethed out, and he chuckled as the girls rolled their eyes beside me. All they thought was that I was refusing the help from someone interested in me.

“Oh, come on, let me help. Can’t let you hurt yourself—”

“She said she’s fine,” a voice growled low behind me, cutting Matt off. The man in front of me immediately stopped moving, red hot anger flashed through his eyes as they met the gaze of the menacing cowboy behind me. Spurs jangled, boots crunched across the gravel, and then halted directly beside me.

I didn’t have to look to know who it was. I’d recognize his gravelly voice anywhere. That smell of smoke and caramel and pine was unmistakable.

Tate.

Matt clenched his jaw. “Stay out of this, man,” he snarled at Tate. From the corner of my eye, I saw Tate cross his arms in front of his chest and roll a cigarette between his teeth. He took a long draw on it and then blew some out of his nostrils.

“Is that supposed to intimidate me or something?” Matt said again, and Tate raised an eyebrow but kept his posture the same. “Come on, Brexlynn,” he added, and stepped toward me.

“I wouldn’t,” Tate growled again, and I felt stuck. Did Tate know that Matt was my ex, or was he just being protective because I’d refused a few times?

Matt leaned back and laughed, then stalked forward and wrapped a hand around my left arm. “Let’s go, CeCe,” he seethed under his breath into my ear and aggressively jerked me forward. I stumbled, grasping for anything that I could latch onto, and my right hand connected with Tate’s outstretched arm.

He stepped into my fall, wrapping his other free arm around my waist,

and steadied me, preventing me from crashing into the ground. Matt immediately released me from his grasp, recognizing the mistake he'd just made.

Fumbling for words, he stumbled back, glancing at everyone around us except for Tate or me.

"Are you alright?" Tate tenderly asked, helping me stand. I nodded softly, looking between him and Matt. Once my balance was in place and I'd gotten a hold of my rapid breathing, he lifted my left hand and had me grab a hold of the front of the side-by-side. "Wait here."

He walked toward the driver's side of the vehicle, pulled his hat off, and tossed it onto the seat. He ran a hand through his curls before turning back around. Matt stared at Tate, who had this fury in his gaze I'd only seen a time or two before. And then Tate launched himself at Matt. Tackling him to the ground, he landed a nasty right hook across the blonde-haired boy's face.

Blood and spit spewed from his mouth as he raised his arms to protect himself. "Do you like hurting women?" Tate snarled at Matt, straddling him and pummeling him in his side. Several hard blows to Matt's rib cage had the girls around me screaming to stop, but Tate wasn't holding back.

His fists wailed into any exposed portion of Matt, he didn't care if it was his face or his body. Things were turning bloody, and quickly, as Tate's knuckles shredded open along with Matt's mouth and eyes.

They swelled up, becoming puffy beneath Tate's blows, and Matt's hands slowly became limp, blocking Tate's punches less and less.

Suddenly Jake darted around the corner, drawn to us by the screaming girls, and grabbed Tate. Jerking him off of a bleeding and bruised Matt, he pulled him away as Tate struggled to get back to the writhing body on the ground.

"You have no idea how long I've been wanting to do that!" Tate screamed at Matt who collapsed into the dirt. He spat at him. "You piece of shit! STUPID MOTHERFUCKER! Put your hands on a girl again and next time, I'll—"

"Tate!" Jake cut him off, spinning him around and shaking him a little. Tate's curly hair was coated in a thin layer of dust, his knuckles dripping red, his chest rising and falling sporadically. His eyes were wide, crazed as he stared at Jake as if he didn't recognize him.

Then he blinked.

His shoulders eventually sagged, and his balled-up fists slowly

relaxed.

Matt flopped around on the ground, groaning as Tate gradually spun to look at his victim lying on the dirt.

Gemma and Eva quickly shuffled to Matt's side, extending a hand to help him up. "Don't," I squeaked out, but it was too quiet for anyone else to hear.

That was when I realized Tate knew who it was, and had known who my ex-husband was for most likely a while now. My gaze shifted from the bloodied form on the ground to the man who stood above him, heaving heavily with split knuckles, beside Jake to my right.

He was staring at Matt in the dirt, unaware of anything else around him. I wondered how long he'd been fighting against his urge to punish Matt for what he'd done to me. What he was doing.

What concerned me now was that Tate had gone from a silent bystander to one that Matt would seek out. Tate had become just as much of a target as I was, exposing that he knew, and Matt would find whatever leverage he could to annihilate him.

"The hell was that, Tate?" Jake finally asked him as his steely glare remained fixed on the figure slowly standing from the ground with the girls' help. Tate dropped his cigarette that had somehow survived the fight to the ground and stomped it out.

"That was a warning," he loudly spat in Matt's direction.

Matt lifted his swollen face toward Tate.

And laughed. A cackle much like that of a hyena, he laughed. "This just got fun," he cackled again, and leaned against the two girls for support. "Stay away from her, or you won't like what fucking happens."

My coworkers' faces were full of fear and confusion, disbelief over what was occurring and uncertainty for their safety.

"She's not yours," Tate responded, stepping threateningly toward him.

"It's either me, or no one," he snarled and shook off Gemma and Eva. His swollen eyes swiveled toward me, that cold, black and empty gaze having returned. "Now, let's go to lunch, CeCe," he commanded.

"Who's CeCe?" Gemma said beside him.

"What is going on?" Melody whispered, and her eyes met mine. I gave her a subtle shake with my head, letting her know now was not the time.

"She's going to town with me to get her some pain meds for the stab



wound that *someone* decided to give her,” Tate cut in and walked toward me. I stared at him, his hazel eyes finally meeting mine and that fiery rage quickly flamed out. Replacing it was a concern and a slight possessiveness.

As he neared me, I slunk away, not even sure I wanted to go with him. He’d shown a sense of uncontrollable anger, all because Matt had touched me. I was nobody’s toy, not even Tate’s.

However, the moment that Tate saw me flinch, he immediately stopped walking forward. A softness befell his figure, that familiarity from every tender moment I’d shared with him erupted through my figure, and I blinked back a wave of exhaustive tears. Maybe that rage hadn’t been so uncontrolled. He only went after Matt, and only after he openly displayed some aggression toward me.

Finally releasing the stress and apprehension that had consumed me, I forgot that my left leg didn’t work. I let go of the side-by-side and took a couple rushed steps forward and then winced, reaching out desperately for Tate. He bolted toward me, seeing my mistake and wrapped me up in his arms as I collapsed to the ground. His knees crashed to the dirt, stopping me from hurting myself, and pulled me into his lap.

He cradled me against his body and then he stood up. I buried my face in his chest, blocking out what had to be faces of bewilderment and expressions of confusion.

The rumors that were about to exude from this would be unstoppable, unexplainable, but I didn’t care. Right now, all I cared about was the fact that Tate had been there. He’d been patiently waiting for me to tell him in my own time but refused to let me get hurt again by that man. He’d waited for as long as he could.

Tate reached into the side-by-side, placed his hat on top of his head, and walked away without another word. Carrying me silently to his truck. He didn’t even care to share with Jake what had just happened. Matt would most likely paint him as the bad guy to everyone else, but it seemed to be the last thing on his mind.

Getting me out of there was his priority.



He drove in silence. We picked up a few things from the grocery store, and some pain killers, without a sound. I knew how dorky it had looked to see this grown man carrying around a grown woman, but his arms were the safest, and I wanted to be nowhere else. He cleaned up and bandaged up his knuckles, and then we were off toward the feed store.

“Tate?” I whispered, breaking the silence as he pulled into the lot. A large, red, barn-like building rose to the left of us with different farm supplies displayed out front. Half of the parking spots were taken up by different panels or other equipment. Thick, dark-green forest trees encompassed the far side of the building, opposite of the main road we’d come from.

Shoving the truck into park, he turned the engine off and stared forward. “Hmmm?”

“How long have you known?” I wrung my hands in my lap.

“Since you told me you were Becky’s owner and he arrived at the ranch.”

“Why didn’t you do anything sooner? Or tell me that you knew?”

“Because you deserved to be in control, Brex. I wanted to give you the time you needed to find your own strength and courage.” He lifted his hat and ran a hand through his slightly disheveled hair.

“You knew he was hurting me this whole time?”

He nodded and closed his eyes. “And it killed me to not stop it.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because you told me over and over that this was your problem, your fight. You’re strong, Brex. You proved that again and again. Plus, I also knew how frustrated you’d get if I stepped in before you were ready.” He opened his eyes and looked at me. “Though, I did do what I could to keep him away from you. But seeing him grab you like that, after stabbing you, I couldn’t contain it anymore.”

I turned back toward the front of the truck, staring out the windshield.

“I’m sorry for scaring you,” he added.

Whipping my head toward him, I shoved him in the shoulder.

“What was that for?” he cried out, glaring at me. I was upset that he’d done all of that behind my back, and known this entire time, but it also felt freeing. Quickly unbuckling, I scrambled toward him to the best of my ability and slung my arms around his neck.

He blinked, hesitating for a moment, and then wrapped his arms tightly around me. Holding me close.

For the first time in years, I felt truly safe, like no one could touch me again. He was that one in a million find. I was willing to give him everything; anything he asked for from me would be his.

I squeezed tighter.

He buried his face in my neck as I leaned into his chest even closer. Gentle lips pressed into my hair, and I closed my eyes.

“What do we do now?” I whispered against his chest.

“Win,” he replied, kissing my head again.

“How?”

“I have no idea, *yet*.” He emphasized yet. “Now, wait here, I’ve got to go get the feed.”

“I want to help!” I begged, pulling away from his chest, and he looked down at me.

“Brex baby, how are you going to help when you can barely walk?”

“I can ride on the big flat cart and keep you company.” I grinned at him, and he rolled his eyes. “You know you love having me around,” I teased, and he shook his head, a small smile caressing his perfect features.

“Fine, but it’s not my fault if you get squashed by the feed bags.” He chuckled and then pushed open the door.

## Chapter 37

The feed store employees gave us the strangest of looks, but I couldn't help feeling joy as Tate pushed me around the store on one of those flat carts you can load with really heavy things. He grinned, dimples a constant companion upon his face, as he teased me, laughing and ignoring the judgmental glances from people who knew Tate. He even got a running start and then jumped on the back, and we raced across the parking lot a few times.

For a moment, we left every moment of pain behind and just existed.

For a moment, I felt absolutely free.

For a moment.

Then, the feed sacks were loaded in the back of the truck, and I gripped the rails, pulling myself off of the cart. Bracing against the tailgate of the truck, I slowly limped around toward the passenger side as Tate pushed the carts that we'd used back toward the store.

It had been an absolutely perfect memory shared with the one man who knew everything about me and still hadn't left me.

Yanking on the handle, I swung the door open and then prepared myself to hop in. But jumping on one foot wasn't as easy as I'd thought it'd be to clear the amount of height necessary to hop onto the seat. My belly bounced against the edge of the cushion, and I flopped back out, several times. After a couple more tries, I managed to catch myself with my chest and slowly began to pull myself into the truck.

It was a painfully slow process.

Until a pair of massive hands gripped my waist and lifted me the rest of the way in. Tate gently flipped me around onto my back, and I lay down panting.

"You could've done that sooner," I teased, and he shook his head but grinned. I bumped his leg with my right foot and sat up. Placing his hands above his head, he braced against the door frame and leaned forward.

Simply to look at me.

His hazel eyes danced with dreams. Imagined moments of riding through a forest on horseback and emerging at a lake. Just him and I.

Picnics in the middle of summer beside a river.

Cuddles beneath the stars.

Long naps beside a fire while a snowy storm raged outside.

A never ending gift of comfort and love.

Staring at the clouds, naming the shapes and stealing cupcakes at weddings.

His arms wrapped around me as we slowly danced.

Chasing cattle together and running one more barrel race.

Brave dreams caressed my soul, feeding me hope and courage, so I leaned forward and pressed my lips against his mouth without warning.

For a moment, he hesitated.

Then he gripped my cheeks and dove into the kiss.

Deeply. Passionately. Delicately. Pulling me tighter into the sweet taste of him. My hands snaked around his waist, and I gave him a gentle tug. He broke the kiss, left his lips hovering just above mine as he tenderly climbed into the truck. Leaning me down against my back, he pulled the door shut behind him.

My head pressed gently against the seat as he crawled between my legs and kissed me again.

He tasted sweet, like honey at autumn time coated with a sharp fresh mint leaf. Crisp and home. My hands fisted the sides of his shirt, desperately begging for him to not release me as his lips moved against mine.

Desperately. Tenderly.

I slid my hands from his waist, caressing his chest, and then placed one palm against the nape of his neck as he braced himself beside my head and upon my right hip bone. His fingers wrapped tightly into the side of my shirt while mine weaved through the curls that brushed against my skin like the kiss of a fairy.

My heart did not race. My palms did not prickle with sweat. I was at peace.

Parting my lips slightly, he slipped his tongue inside my mouth as my back arched in innocent desire. It raised my vest and shirt ever so slightly that his thumb, resting against my hip, brushed against the exposed skin. Tingles erupted across my body and everything felt warm.

Except he quickly removed his thumb away from my skin.

“Please,” I whispered against his mouth, and he paused. “Touch me.”

My breath puffed out, a confession dripping across the web we were entangled in. Tate slowly backed away from me, but I didn't feel embarrassed or worried. His hazel eyes searched mine for a moment, and I let my fingers wander to the front of his shirt. Quietly, I began working the top button undone on his own pearl snap then continued downward.

He untucked it and then leaned forward, just enough that he could unzip my vest. Slipping a hand beneath my body, he pressed his palm against the small of my back and raised me enough that he could slide the vest off of my arms just as my fingers undid the last button of his shirt.

Exposing his naked torso, I brushed my hands against his abdomen and then glided them around to his back. Gazing tenderly into his hazel eyes, I smiled.

“Touch me,” I whispered once more as his thumb found the hemline of my shirt. Brushing against my skin, he finally slid one hand underneath the top and around to my back. I shivered upon the contact as those fingers found the clasp to my bra and he unhooked it. It took a minute, but he realized that the straps unhooked as well, and without much more wrangling, he pulled it out from beneath my shirt.

One more gaze into my eyes as he tossed the bra away with his hand that wasn't supporting me, making sure this was okay, I nodded. He gently laid me down against the seat and brought his hand around to the front of my figure. His lips danced against mine, over and over again as his fingers began to explore my bare skin beneath my shirt. His touch was gentle and patient, taking his time.

And a groan of pleasure escaped his lips as he finally allowed himself to palm the most intimate place he'd been working toward. Tenderly at first, keeping the contact brief, and then he grew a little hungrier, and found my raised peaks between his fingers. My hips involuntarily barked into his, and I felt his hard desire for me.

His hand slid out from under my shirt, and he pulled his lips away from my mouth. I opened my eyes, wondering what had happened and why he'd stopped, to simply find him smiling the sweetest of smiles. He brushed away a few wayward strands of hair from my face, took his hat off, and tossed it into the back seat where mine joined his.

I wanted something more from him. This was the most innocent and desirable intimate moment I'd shared with a man. More so than anything ever

before simply because everything in this moment was free of any carnal desire. Only holding pure, raw love.

My fingers slid along his waistline, my thumb brushing across his belt, and then I paused at his buckle. His eyebrows twitched, and he sat himself up just enough to undo his belt. Permission. But no pressure. Simply the gesture that if I wanted to, I could. Then, he leaned back down and kissed me.

His lips slid from my mouth, along my cheek, and then down toward my neck. I lifted my chin as his hands once again slipped under my shirt. Touching me again, just how I never knew I wanted until he'd done it. I was trembling as my fingers found the button to his pants and undid them. He lifted his hips to hover above me as I pulled the zipper down slowly.

Now my heart was beginning to race. On fire from pure and simple intimacy. A bond slowly formed as his fingers searched my naked skin, memorizing how it felt. He moved lower with his lips, pushing the collar of my shirt toward my shoulder and brushing his lips against my collarbone.

Gently, I moved my right hand from his waistline and slid it into his jeans. Hesitating for just one more second, I finally ran my hand down his hard length. I erupted in flames as he shuddered against my touch. It wasn't even directly against his skin, and yet, to him, it was enough. He moaned as I touched him again over his boxers.

His fingers dug in a little harder as I finally grabbed his arousal.

"Brex baby," he moaned and my back arched, attempting to move my hips closer to him.

One hand beneath my shirt drifted upwards again, and then a rap of knuckles on a window skidded this blissfully freeing moment to a rushed halt.

Tate's head shot up, his eyes meeting whoever was at the window, and he immediately crashed his body against mine to cover me. I tilted back to try and see who was at the window, and my mouth fell open, so I quickly buried my face into Tate's exposed chest.

Knuckles rapped against the glass again, and Tate slowly inched forward just enough to turn over the engine for the truck. I swallowed hard, the lump in my throat sticking as I pulled my hand out from Tate's pants.

Reaching above me, Tate pressed the button and the window rolled down. Little girls' voices met my ears the moment the window seal had broken.

“Is Uncle Tate in there?”

“Mama, why won’t Uncle Tate come out?”

“I want to see, Mama, quit covering my eyes!”

The window stopped rolling down, and Tate carefully, but awkwardly crawled over me as I inched myself away from the window, back toward the passenger seat. I winced a few times from the pain in my leg, but managed to squirm into a barely visible position, hidden by Tate’s massive frame.

“Well. That was not what I expected to walk up on,” Tiffany’s voice pierced through the open window.

“What are you doing here?” Tate replied. “Mom and dad aren’t back yet, so I wasn’t expecting anyone.” His fingers were quickly doing up his jeans.

“Clearly, seeing as Brexlynn had her hands in your pants,” she responded, but her voice sounded light and teasing, as if she found it humorous.

“Tiff,” Tate warned, now beginning to work at his shirt. I could still hear the three little girls desperately wanting to see their Uncle Tate. He finally got his shirt buttoned all the way up as I kept my arms wrapped around myself, unable to find a way to put my bra back on discreetly.

“Hi Brexlynn!” Tiffany said, waving through the window. I gave her a tight lipped smile but kept myself as hidden as I could. She glanced down and told her kids to be patient and then leaned against the window. Her curly hair was pulled into a high, messy bun, and she was wearing a plain blush colored blouse today.

“Seriously, what are you doing here?” Tate asked again, fully dressed again, and his right hand found my leg. He brushed reassuring strokes across it.

“You haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Good thing you and Brexlynn are still together, since the family’s coming to visit,” Tiffany said, and my face fell. She had no idea what had happened between us, or the fact that we weren’t really together, or maybe we were? Probably not, seeing as Matt had openly threatened us before coming on this little outing.

“What visit? Spit it out, Tiff. I don’t have all day,” Tate snapped.

“Obviously you have some free time on your hands or you wouldn’t be getting hot and heavy with your girl right now.”



“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tate mumbled. “Now spill.”

“Mom and Dad are returning tomorrow from vacation because they so graciously rented out the ranch for Dad’s side of the reunion this year.” Tiffany grinned as Tate looked like he wanted to punch something. My phone vibrated in my pocket, but I remained focused on the conversation at hand. At least I knew why I hadn’t seen Tate’s parents since we’d returned from Vegas until now.

“I’m sorry, they did what? When?” Tate replied, exasperated.

“The reunion starts tomorrow.” Tiffany grinned as Tate groaned. “Oh, come on, it’s not that bad. At least it’s Dad’s side of the family and not Mom’s. Only MeeMaw and PaPaw with Dad’s two siblings and their families.”

“Which includes their kids and grandkids. This is the worst timing possible,” he grumbled.

“Why? Everyone will get to meet Brexlynn, it’s at the ranch, what’s so bad about that?”

“One, nobody needs to meet Brexlynn if I don’t want them to, and second, do you not remember what happened at the last reunion that happened here? I was stuck cleaning that shit up—”

“Language!” Tiffany shrieked out.

“Sorry, I was stuck cleaning that stuff up for weeks after. By myself.” Tate leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. Tiffany rolled her eyes and then she tilted her head, a curious look passing through her brown orbs.

“Wait, why wouldn’t you want to show Brexlynn off? She’s your girlfriend, and obviously someone you really care about. You haven’t—”

“It’s none of your business, Tiff,” Tate abruptly said.

“Are you ashamed of her?”

“No.”

“Embarrassed?”

“No. It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it?” Tiffany threw her hands in the air confused.

“It’s complicated, okay? Now can you just, not?” he finally said, slamming his palms against the steering wheel. Tiffany’s hand suddenly shot through the window and grabbed Tate’s ear. She jerked him hard toward her and leaned in close.

“Get. Out. Of. The. Truck,” she demanded, and even I felt a little

worried for Tate with that attitude. He didn't argue, quickly rolled the window up once she released him, gave me those "I'm sorry" eyes, and then climbed out of the vehicle. The door closed behind him, and I was left in silence. Scrambling, I quickly grabbed my vest and threw it on, zipping it up to add another layer to cover my chest that lacked a bra.

I wasn't sure where that ended up, seeing as it wasn't in the front of the cab. Searching everywhere around me, I was interrupted during my small quest by several more vibrations from my phone. Nobody texted me that much, ever. Not even Katie or my brother.

Sitting back down on the middle seat, I slid it from my pocket and found an unknown number had sent me over ten text messages. Unlocking the phone, I clicked on the messages and felt my heart sink.

*End things with him. Now. If I even catch wind that you're with him, he gets hurt, his siblings get hurt, his parents get hurt. Should I include the grandparents too?*

Matt.

Beneath the written message were picture after picture of Tate's sisters. I recognized them, but what was scary was the fact that they weren't pictures from the wedding, but what seemed like pictures from their daily regular lives. With their kids out doing regular things. Grocery trips, date nights with spouses, even a few at different times of the day.

I stared at my phone, gasping for air as the door creaked, and Tate bounded inside once more. As the metal clanged shut, I jumped. Startled. Afraid. And no longer feeling that sense of bliss we'd previously been sharing.

Matt was serious about his threat, too, as the last picture that had come was him with his gun, pointed at Thalia who was blissfully unaware that she was in danger. She was walking down the street, holding her husband's hand with a massive smile on her face.

"Brex baby. You alright?" Tate asked, his voice coming from a different realm. I slowly shook my head no, unable to look away from my phone. I'd known this was going to happen, which had been the main reason I'd tried to keep Tate out of this. But maybe all along Matt had been gearing up for the moment that Tate revealed he knew it was him. These pictures seemed to have spanned many days and nights, many different outings.

My heart split in two as I slid myself away from Tate.

It was crushed beneath my soul that was withering to black as I knew

the only way to protect him was to end this. Again. Before it had really started, again. I so desperately didn't want to. But this time, he would be aware of everything, so maybe this time, it would feel a little different.

Tears rushed out, sliding along my cheeks and crashing into my lap. Salty stains left in the wake of my dying heart. The pain was so excruciating I would rather be stabbed ten times over than experience this again.

"Brex?" Tate tenderly asked once more, and I stretched out my hand, revealing the message and pictures on my phone. He read it, sifted through the photos, and then his eyes slowly glazed over. Stone cold. The phone plopped back into my lap as I clasped my hands together and refused to look at Tate.

"No. I won't—"

"It's your family, Tate. Not just me. Not just you. But everyone else now," I quickly cut him off. He didn't answer. Sitting rigid in his seat, processing the information I'd just revealed. It killed me, because I could see him coming to the understanding that I was right. This was the only thing we could do to make sure that no one else was hurt.

I knew he'd protect his family like this. He'd done that his entire life. No matter how much he cared for me, they would always come first, because I wasn't his family. There was no malice in my heart toward him for that either. It was okay with me.

Keeping him safe, not hurting him, was my priority, and that included his siblings and those he loved.

"He's insane," Tate muttered.

That was the last either of us spoke as we made the silent and soul crushing drive back to the ranch. At least my final moments with Tate had been expressions of love.

## Chapter 38

I quickly disappeared into the bunkhouse, curling up under the blankets without bothering to change. My heart was crushed and silent tears pooled upon my pillow. Hunger didn't pain me. My injury had long since been overshadowed by the sick numbing death that my soul had paid.

There was no escaping Matt. Not like I once believed. The harder I fought, the tighter he tugged. The wider he expanded his threats. I couldn't be the reason that the man I cared for knew pain in a way he didn't deserve.

Leaving was easy, staying gone would be the hardest part. Seeing him day in and day out knowing that if I tried to contact him, his family would be hurt was an unbearable burden. One that I was willingly carrying.

Something I'd selfishly carry if it meant peace for Tate. I may have died as I left that truck, but at least it meant Tate could live.

My gaze remained fixed on the wall. Even as the bunk began to bustle with the girls turning in for the evening. Even Oakley had decided to sleep in our house tonight. My coworkers practically ignored her as they gossiped about what had happened earlier.

Asking questions about why Matt called me CeCe, why all of the threats, and why Tate had snapped so easily. They didn't even realize that I was there at first either.

"I'm pretty sure Tate and Brexlynn have something going on," Melody said as a sheet rustled.

"That would explain why he beat Matt up like he did," Eva answered, boots plopping onto the floor.

"Jealousy is a big motivator," Gemma added.

"Except when Matt grabbed Brexlynn, that looked quite aggressive." Aubrey's voice was hesitant, cautious, and mistrusting. "I think there's something else going on."

Silence encapsulated the room for a moment before Eva responded. "Did anyone else notice the fear on Brexlynn's face? She looked terrified."

“Which is strange, because she and Matt have barely ever interacted,” Melody replied.

“So we’ve seen,” Oakley sneered.

Another tear crept down my cheek as I remained still and silent, facing the wall. What a mess this was becoming, and all I wanted was to curl up in Tate’s embrace. To hell with Matt and what he was threatening to do. At least that’s what I wished I could accept, but it would cause so much agony for Tate and his family, and that was something I was unwilling to do.

“I don’t understand what Tate sees in her anyway,” Oakley added.

“She rides better than you and she’s a lot nicer,” Eva quickly snapped back, and I felt a pang in my heart. Grateful that at least someone defended me. “Besides, where have you been the last two nights?”

“Why do you care?”

“Oh, we don’t. But Tate does,” Gemma said.

“Tate? When did you speak with him?” Oakley sounded nervous.

“Last night and this morning when he came by to help dress Brexlynn,” Aubrey inserted, the hesitation turning to something of pride.

“He *what*?” Oakley shrieked.

“Should’ve been here,” Gemma replied.

“Still, I want to know when Tate and Brexlynn got so close. A short ride or two wouldn’t have provided that intense of a—” Melody started, and then suddenly everything went still. Every girl stopped moving and their voices hushed. I assumed they had finally noticed my curled-up figure beneath the blankets.

No one resumed speaking as soft feet shuffled across the floor, sheets rustled, even the bathroom was used. Scrunching my eyes closed, I let the last few tears fall, and then eventually drifted to sleep.

My dreams were plagued by Matt. Death.

And Tate.



Morning crept in quickly and silently. My leg wasn’t a whole lot better, but the bruising and swelling had started to subside. Enough so that I

managed to quietly hobble myself over to the dresser and find a clean sweatshirt. Changing quickly from my wrinkled outfit of yesterday, I snapped on a new bra and the hoodie, not bothering to change my jeans, before the other girls were awake.

Then I waited.

The blistering thought of facing Tate and Matt this morning bit at the wounds that were engraved upon my blackened soul.

Pretending to be a fighter while drowning in the fire was the hardest thing I'd had to do yet.

Eventually, the girls began to stir, not a single one said much as they noticed my figure perched on the edge of my bed. None of them seemed brave enough to ask what was going on, and I was secretly grateful.

How to explain to these girls what happened was something I was still wrestling with. Fumbling in this dark pit was hard enough without having to share with people those secrets I'd been carrying for years. Once they were dressed, Eva gave me a small smile and helped get my boots on before supporting me under one arm while I limped outside.

A side-by-side was parked outside our bunkhouse. Part of me couldn't help but feel a small twang of confusion, knowing that Tate must have left it there before the sun had even broken the horizon. A simple gesture of kindness and caring. She placed me into the back and climbed into the passenger seat as Melody jumped into the driver's side.

Turning the engine over, she quickly sped off, leaving Oakley to walk on her own. Once we arrived in front of the lodge, Eva and Aubrey both took to one side of me and helped me limp into the building. The odd patterns of my feet clunking over the floor were swallowed by the chattering going on in the dining room.

It seemed that what had happened yesterday remained something between just those who had been there to witness it. Ducking around the corner, the two girls placed me on the edge of the table, beside Chance and Cole.

They gave me wide grins and then wiggled their brows. "What's that look for?" I asked, and they chuckled.

"Today you get to be carried around by us," Cole began, grinning widely. His bright-green button up seemed to pair nicely with Chance's pale blue one. They were inseparable.

"Since when?"

“Since Eva asked Chance, and he can’t seem to say no to that girl,” Cole replied. A subtle hint of pink clouded Chance’s cheeks and he returned to his plate of food. I couldn’t help but smile to myself, and take note that I needed to tease Eva about this.

My smile fell quickly, however, as I realized what that meant. Glancing around me, I met the steely gaze of Matt. His eyes were drilling holes in the back of my head, and he shook it twice, subtle, but a warning.

The girls joined us before I was able to protest, plopping a plate of bacon and eggs in front of me. I quietly thanked Aubrey, who sat down on my right. Eva sat herself next to Chance while the other two girls sat down on the opposite side of the boys. Anthony joined Gemma and they fell into soft conversation.

I turned to Eva and gave her a teasing glare. “I hear you pawned me off today.”

She clicked her tongue. “It’s not like that.”

“Oh?”

“No. We have trail rides today and, since you still shouldn’t ride for long periods, I asked if Chance and Cole would take you.” She sheepishly smiled, and I felt a little jealous. I still hadn’t been on a single trail ride yet.

“That makes sense.” I tried to return her grin, but struggled to match her happiness. “What do you two get in exchange?” I shifted my question toward Chance and Cole.

“I didn’t get anything,” Cole grumbled, and then raised a brow at Chance.

He blushed again and returned to his food.

“I see.” I grinned, and then wiggled my brows at Eva. She, too, didn’t say anything and just dipped her gaze to her plate.

A buzz in my pocket had me glancing at my phone. Matt.

*Going with them puts you with Tate. You know the consequence.*

I shook my head and glanced around the room, looking for the very cowboy. My eyes rested on a hunched over figure beside Jake. His hat rested off to the side, his curly hair a little less silky today, but there he was. Shoveling food in his mouth.

*I don’t have a choice. The girls are on trail rides. Don’t worry, I’ll just be on the fence. Come observe whenever you’d like.* I quickly responded and gripped my phone tightly, waiting for his reply.

It seemed to take ages before it vibrated in my palm once more.

*One slip up. That's all. I'm watching.*

Slamming the lock button on my phone, I rammed it back into my pocket and then closed my eyes. Taking deep breaths, I began the slow count. One second, two seconds, three seconds—.

A hush fell over the entire room before I made it any further, and I peeked out to find Tate standing. He looked tired, gray circles forming under his usually bright hazel eyes. They seemed dull, pained. His shoulders were slumped forward, and his typically crisp button up had creases in odd spots across the gray fabric.

Everything about him seemed a little hollow today.

When he spoke, he had a slight lisp to his words. “This week’s guests are my family. They’ll try to swindle extra special favors from y’all. Don’t let it happen. Just treat them like any other guest. Tomorrow, they do want a cookout by the fire for dinner, though.” He paused, placed a hand against his mouth like he was stifling a burp, then he continued. “So, just be prepared to join them, and chores need to be done beforehand. I’m off to the two-year-olds.”

He reached down and grabbed something from the table before nearly tripping over the bench he’d been sitting on. Jake caught him, helped steady him, and then let go. Tate dragged a glass whiskey bottle across the wooden top, raised it to his lips, and then walked toward the door.

Drunk.

Tate was drunk.

“Don’t bother me,” he threatened before ungracefully exiting the dining room. I glanced toward Jake to find his eyes downcast, staring at the plate in front of him.

“What’s up with the boss today?” Cole whispered two seats down from me. The girls all swiveled their faces in my direction but didn’t say anything. I sent another glance toward Jake who lifted his gaze and met mine. Pulling a cigarette from his pocket, he placed it between his lips and raised his eyebrows.

Swinging his legs around, he hoisted himself from the table and headed in my direction. Pausing behind Eva who sat across from me, he lit his cigarette and then met my eyes once more.

“How long has he been drunk?” I asked Jake, Eva oblivious to the conversation as she and Chance were unaware of anything but each other.

Jake shrugged his shoulders. “He was already like that when he met



me this morning to go over duties for today.” Turning his face toward the ceiling, he blew out some smoke, and then returned his attention to me. “Would you like to fill me in on what’s been going on?”

My shoulders fell, my mind reliving one of the most tender shared experiences that had led up to intense heartbreak. The gentle brush of his fingers across my face, those dimples. I knew this was to protect him, but I think he was tired of that, and I was too. He’d given me a chance to make my own choices, and now I may have taken that option away from him.

It was for a good reason, but all the same.

Finally, I shook my head no, and Jake sighed before stalking off.

A hand clamped down on my right shoulder and I jumped. “Woah, didn’t mean to frighten ya,” Cole said as I swung my head toward him. “Just wanted to see if you’re ready to go?”

I nodded. He grabbed my now empty plate, quickly threw it away with his, and then hooked an arm around my waist. Together, Chance and Cole guided me out of the dining room and then jumped in the side-by-side the girls and I had ridden over to the lodge in.

The drive down toward where Tate worked the two-year-olds was long and filled with anticipation. Beyond the indoor arena that stretched high into the sunny sky was an outdoor arena and round pen. Railing surrounded both, with beautiful sandy footing routinely maintained to provide proper support for the horses that were worked there on the daily.

Today, it seemed that, although drunk, Tate still gracefully loped a little gray colt around the arena. Blissfully unaware of the fact that we were slowly nearing. Two sorrel quarter horses and a bay were tied up off to the side, saddles slung over the hitching posts along with three sets of bosals, similar to what was on the horse Tate was riding.

It shouldn’t have surprised me that he was still as quiet and in control of that little gray horse as he was regardless of how drunk he’d become.

Chance put the vehicle into park, killed the engine and then both boys helped me hobble toward the railing that surrounded the arena. They hoisted me up, and I collapsed upon the top rung, relaxing just as Tate pulled his horse to a stop and turned his exhausted eyes in my direction.

I couldn’t stop a tear from crashing down my cheek when our gazes met, and quickly looked away. Brushing the stain from my skin, I heard him push his horse forward once more. This was going to be extremely difficult and long.

Eventually, Chance and Cole had the sorrel horses tacked up and were leading them into the arena. They paused as Tate continued to bend and flex his little colt without acknowledging them.

“Hey boss,” Chance finally said, and Tate barely spared them a glance as he moved to the farthest side of the arena. As far from where I was perched as he could.

They both shrugged their shoulders and then mounted. For the next couple hours, I watched the three of them work these little two-year-olds—even giving advice and direction that shocked both Chance and Cole while desperately wishing to get on the bay that was tied, patiently waiting. Both of them murmured, surprised that when they did what I was saying, it worked.

But I didn’t just want to give advice, I wanted to ride.

Perched up on the rail near where the bay was tied was Tate’s mostly empty whiskey bottle. A couple swigs of liquid courage would drown out the dull pain in my leg. I’d been able to apply some pressure on it already today, so getting on and riding shouldn’t be too hard, right?

Gently sliding down from the rail, I used it for balance as I slowly hobbled toward the lone two-year-old. The bay nickered as I approached, a little filly. She had black stockings that rose just past her knees, a soft gray muzzle with a small white diamond just hidden by her forelock.

Her eyes told a story of feistiness but mixed with curiosity and level headedness, something that I loved to see in new horses. She would be willing but not too dangerous. It took some very creative ideas to get her saddled, several swigs of the whiskey, since throwing on heavy tack minus a leg wasn’t the easiest feat. But while doing so, I heard Tate scold Chance and Cole several times.

As I slipped the hackamore over the little filly’s ears, I began to lead her toward the arena. It was slow, but we eventually made it through the gate. Mounting her would be interesting knowing she only had a few rides on her and wouldn’t stand still for me to drag myself on the way Becky did.

So, I climbed the railing and slowly asked her to bring her hip toward me, trusting that Tate had already spent a lot of time on groundwork and moving away from pressure. He yelled a couple more times at Chance and Cole just as I was able to swing my right leg over while balancing on the rail with my left hand.

Sliding into the saddle, the filly took several steps forward, wanting to walk off with me. Working with her on that a couple times, I eventually let

her go once she stood for me quietly until I was completely seated. Balancing was difficult, as I couldn't use much pressure with my left leg, but this horse wasn't to the point that anything fancy could occur anyway.

No more than three minutes of me in the saddle had passed before a booming voice ricocheted around the arena. "What do you think you're doing?" Tate snarled.

I asked the little filly to stop and glanced at him. He was glaring at me, swaying a little in his saddle. "She was by herself."

"Don't care. Get the fuck off," he said.

"What's wrong with you today, man?" Cole asked before I could say anything. I glanced to my right to find both him and Chance staring at Tate in bewilderment.

"Why are you drunk this early?" Chance added. "Better yet, why are you drunk at all? You never get wasted."

"It's none of your concern," Tate snapped.

"I think it is when you've done nothing but yell at any of us today," Cole replied.

"I have this nasty habit of thinking I can fix things, anything really," Tate started, rage coursing through his voice and both of the guys shared confused glances. "So naturally, I guess that plays into my decision of women. But guess what?" he spat out, swaying some more, and continued to glare directly at me.

"I learned my lesson. Not everyone can be fixed. Especially a stubborn ass woman with ex-husband issues. But my idiot self thought that she was worth it. That despite her little flaws, she wasn't as horrible as he said she was. Not as stuck up or selfish," he paused and asked his horse to step forward and raised his voice. "But *nooo*. It's not like she can let anyone else make a decision for themselves. Apparently, my stupid ass fell for a big. Fat. Slut."

My heart dropped into my stomach.

"What?" Chance whispered to Cole. Tate continued to stare at me from across the arena, his eyes in a glazed drunken stupor.

The anger left his slurred voice. "Yep, I thought I could fix a slut," he emphasized again, and I felt the sting of tears pierce my eyes. They threatened to tip over the edge as he continued to glare at me with dead eyes. My body was numb as I sat frozen upon this little filly. The massive ache in my leg was drowned out by the agony coursing through me from his words.

“Say it again,” I choked out.

His eyes darkened. “Slut.”

There it was.

Removing my left foot from the stirrup, I swung my leg over the little filly’s rear end to dismount on the right side. This freaked her out, and she took off as I plummeted to the ground. I didn’t even care that the horse was bolting around the arena, or about the massive bruise that would form on my behind from where I’d landed.

I just wanted out.

This was going to be hard, I had known that. But what I hadn’t thought was that he’d use those words against me. That he would take what I’d shared with him in confidence and weaponize it simply because he was feeling hurt. The filly continued to bolt around the arena as I pushed up from the dirt and stood on one leg. Brushing my pants off, I waited until the filly passed once more and then hobbled toward the closest railing.

Leaning against it, I heaved. Trying to catch my breath. This wasn’t happening.

I could take the torture from Matt, but not Tate.

Not Tate.

The tears crashed over the edge, and I blindly followed the railing toward the gate. Numbly stumbling against the brown rails, bumping into the wooden frames toward my escape from this. Never again would I let my walls fall for another person. Brick by brick, I replaced the guards around my heart that I’d built for years. Inch by inch I crept closer to the gate.

Hands suddenly gripped me beneath my arms. Cole’s face appeared through my blurry, tear-clouded vision. He gave me a soft smile and helped me back out of the arena. Chance zoomed down, already in the Razor as Cole lifted me into the back seat. I rammed my eyes closed as we sped away from the arena, my heart shattering like glass.

## Chapter 39

Eva helped me hobble across the darkened yard, past the lodge, and toward where Jake's home was. The fire would be in his backyard, offered by Jake himself. I'd spent the rest of yesterday in the bunkhouse, sleeping. Chance and Cole must have had a million questions, but not once had they asked yesterday.

When the girls arrived last night, they'd been more careful and hadn't been gossiping when they'd entered the little home. Not that it would have mattered. My exhaustion from the event earlier had sucked me back to sleep just mere seconds after their entry roused me awake.

I'd even slept most of the morning away today, waking only once when the girls had popped by to bring me some lunch. Finally, I'd torn myself from the bunkhouse when everyone had come in to get changed for the fire.

This was going to be interesting. Tate and I hadn't discussed what we would do if his family saw me, saw us together. Except Matt had threatened the people he loved, so we also couldn't be seen together.

And after what he said yesterday...

Resolving to hide in the shadows at the fire and let him deal with his family on his own, I managed to pull on a pair of fresh jeans by myself and another clean hoodie. While all the girls got dressed up, I wanted to blend in, remain hidden. I'd even ditched the cowboy hat for a ball cap so I could more easily hide my face with the hood from my sweatshirt.

The weeds were a little overgrown on this pathway, but the laughter and voices that pierced through the night sky made it feel anything but empty. We turned around the side of Jake's little house and passed onto a well-manicured lawn. A small garden rose off to the right side, some patio furniture that looked hand carved had been dragged down from the porch behind us and now circled a massive bonfire roaring out in the dry dirt lot beyond the grass.

There were so many people, some I recognized from the wedding, some I didn't. Tate looked sober today, at least from this distance, and was sitting between two little boys. Jake was trying to keep one of Tate's nieces from stealing food off of his plate. Many of the ranch hands were mingling with Tate's family, and Matt was, of course, sweet-talking Tate's mother, which made me a little nervous.

It seemed no one even shared a glance in mine or Eva's direction, however, as she helped me sit in a chair far from the bonfire. Back in the dark, something I'd requested. She shook her head, confused, but didn't ask since she knew I wouldn't answer.

Five minutes later, she returned with food and dragged a chair next to mine. I'd barely gotten a bite in when she sighed heavily.

"Alright time to spit it out. Everything. No one else is close enough to us to overhear, and I'm so confused. What is going on?" She stared at me as I took a few more bites. Maybe confiding in one more person wouldn't be terrible. She might even be able to give me advice. But if I shared this with her, who else would she tell it to?

I slowly shook my head.

"No. I'm not taking no for an answer again," she abruptly said. "I promise I won't tell anyone, but you don't need to be going through whatever is making you look miserable alone. We are friends."

"Last time I let someone in, they destroyed me. So, no," I responded, looking down at the delicious steak and fries on my plate. Some grilled veggies were slathered beside it and my mouth watered as I took another bite.

"Brexlynn. Or CeCe. Or whoever you are, I can tell you what I already know, and you can fill in the details, or you don't have to. Just let me assume whatever it is, which is most likely wrong—"

"Are you asking out of curiosity or because you actually care?" I snapped at her, not wanting anyone to dig into my life who just wanted more to gossip about.

"Because I care!" she replied with a huff. "I've always cared. The moment you were hired, I knew there were so many secrets to you, mostly because that was how my life was when I was first hired as well. I was homeless, addicted to pills, and had been fired from my last three jobs because of it. Finally, I'd gotten myself clean and applied to so many jobs. No one except for our company took a chance on me."

She paused, letting things sink in as I pushed the fries around on my

plate. “Everyone has baggage, Brexlynn. I’m the last person to judge whatever is going on. I just want to be here for you as you figure this out. Maybe even help.”

I’d known about her past, she’d shared it with me just a month or so after we’d both been hired. She was probably right, letting someone know what was going on who wasn’t involved might help me not feel so alone, so trapped.

Placing my fork onto my plate, I closed my eyes and began. Quietly, I shared with her how Matt had been my ex-husband and abusive—although, I left out the gory details. I spilled the beans about kissing Tate at the bar even though I hadn’t known it was him yet, about the fake relationship over the weekend, about the real feelings, about everything that had led up to where now Matt was threatening Tate and his family because I hadn’t played along with his game as well as I thought I had.

She listened intently and quietly, acknowledging me with nods, and then it grew still and silent between us.

Until she spoke. “I’ll do everything I can to make sure Matt doesn’t come near you again. I’m so sorry I thought he liked you.”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s an easy misunderstanding.”

“But Tate. He likes you!” she squealed, and I blinked, shocked for a moment. She decided to focus on that, not the abuse, not the horrible threats that were going on right now, but the fact that Tate was interested in me.

And it felt a little relieving.

Until I remembered what he’d said earlier. She wouldn’t quite understand why that had hurt as badly as it had though, since I’d left out the detail about the scar. Rubbing my thumb across the raised skin on my ring finger I tried to smile. She saw right through it.

“He still likes you; he has to. Or he wouldn’t have gotten drunk yesterday or been so upset about it.”

“I can’t blame him for it either, I took that choice away from him. But he also didn’t really protest.”

“You never explicitly said that you wanted to be with him though, did you?”

I shook my head. “Not really. I just thought it was implied when I told him I had feelings for him too.”

She clicked her tongue. “So, you *assumed* he knew. You want to know what my dad used to tell me about assuming things?”

“What?” I rolled my eyes and she giggled.

“It makes an ass out of you and me. Get it?” She grinned, and I shook my head. Using the letters of the word itself was funny, but she wasn’t wrong either. I’d just assumed things and now here we were.

I didn’t say anything in response, and she let me chew on our conversation. Time passed as I finished my food and slowly, Tate’s family eventually all disappeared, leaving just us ranch hands. Some of the guys added more fuel to the fire and the flames roared to the sky once more.

Leaning my head back, I stared at the speckled sky. A black canvas, splotted with silver streaks of light. Stars turning the black into shades of dark blue and deep hues of purple. Mysterious and beautiful.

Even the sky seemed to be mourning along with me.

The chattering around me was sporadically interrupted by slow guitar strings being picked. Peppering through the conversations and many buzzed words came a low hum. I leaned forward in my seat to find a large circle had formed around me.

Chairs wrapped the blazing flames, cigarettes hanging from several mouths, beers clutched in the grips of the cowboys around me. Even the girls seemed to fit right in, so much more than the first day we had arrived.

For a moment, this felt like home.

“Are you going to actually play something, or just pick at it?” One of the guys finally said to Jake who was mindlessly strumming the guitar. He chuckled, shifting the cigarette between his teeth. Tate, who sat to his right, had pulled his hat down low and was puffing on his own.

“I don’t actually know how. I play the mouth organ, but this big fella beside me used to play.” Jake grinned and glanced toward Tate, who had a beer in one hand and the other draped lazily over the armrest. The collar of his black sweatshirt was pulled up, tucking beneath his ears. The stubble across his jawline had been trimmed a little this morning, but that mustache now curled upwards at the edges quite nicely.

He shook his head. “Used to,” he grumbled.

Many of the hands began begging him to play something, bargaining and whining. Desperately wanting to hear him play.

I wanted it too.

I gazed at him, feeling my heart break once more.

He must have felt my eyes on him for he lifted his head and his eyes locked onto me. “You promised,” I mouthed, and something flickered behind



those dull hazel orbs for a moment. Embers from the fire dancing across them.

Sighing, he placed the beer beside his chair and gently pulled the guitar from Jake's lap. He brushed his fingers across the strings as cheers slowly faded, leaving nothing but the crackle of the fire. Tate didn't look up, didn't start playing either. He fiddled with the guitar and passed the cigarette back and forth between his teeth.

Then his fingers began to pick at the strings. Something that seemed lighter than I'd expected. His raspy voice began singing, and the stillness that befell the crowd had me just as entranced. He sounded better than singing along with the radio. Jake began thumping against the ground beside him, adding in some drums.

His eyes remained fixed upon the guitar and ground as he sang "Ol' Sweet Day" by AHI.

After two rounds of the chorus and the bridge, he finally lifted his eyes and looked directly at me. Hazel eyes full of sorrow and longing. Part of me hoped that he was actually singing to me, asking me to be with him when all of this was done, but I wasn't sure and definitely wasn't going to assume things again.

But he sounded so perfect, and those words were ones of hope and desire; that despite what he'd said to me yesterday, I couldn't help but feel something spark in me. A revival.

Whistles and cheers broke the silent moment when he finished singing, causing him to pry his gaze away from me and tuck his head back down. He rolled the cigarette back to the front of his mouth and raised the guitar for Jake to take back.

"Nah, bro. Encore!" he said, and everyone cheered, whistling, encouraging him to play more.

Cole quickly sprinted away from the fire and then suddenly returned holding another guitar. "Saw this in the back of one of the trucks, Tate, and stole it. Sorry." He grimaced.

"You play?" Tate asked, and Cole shrugged his shoulders.

"A little, though Chance plays the fiddle pretty good."

"Well, shit. Do you got your fiddle?" Jake said, turning toward Chance, who grinned and reached behind him, pulling a case out from the shadows.

"Always got it with me when someone says bonfire," Chance replied.

“How did we not know this and we’ve known you for years?”

“None of us knew Tate played either,” Chance said, sliding the bow across some strings. Tate raised a brow beneath his hat.

My heart was thumping in my stomach. I could share something with the group that not even Matt knew. A secret that I’d hidden from everyone, even Katie. A secret that only my brother knew of because he’d been the one to teach me to play the guitar. I could also play the banjo and steel guitar. Learning to play those instruments had been an escape from Matt and the reality that I’d been living.

So, I buried it deep within my heart.

Leaning toward Eva, I gestured to her. “Do you think you could go borrow that guitar from Cole if he’s not going to use it much?” I whispered, and she furrowed her brows for a moment before she realized what I was saying. “Don’t tell him it’s for me, though.”

She nodded and crept from her seat. Tate and Chance were jamming a little bit and everyone was clapping along as I watched Eva bargain with Cole. No one seemed to be paying attention as Chance stood up and did some silly little jig.

Eva made it back over to us and handed me the beautiful, mahogany guitar without a single person noticing. Plucking a string every so often so no one could hear me over the music, I tuned the guitar as Chance and Tate finished their jam session.

“Hey, you know any Reckless Kelly?” Oakley blurted out, and Tate lifted his head for a moment, the half-smile falling from his face.

“Yeah, I know a song or two,” he curtly replied, and then turned to Chance. “You know ‘Wicked Twisted Road’?”

Chance nodded. “Sounds better with two guitars, though.” He pulled his bow across a few strings.

“We can make it work,” he replied, and they played a couple notes the same and then he began. I waited. I knew this song too. Thanks to my brother, once again.

Tate began singing, beautifully as usual, the eerie lyrics that told a story.

Then I began to pluck along. Eyes shot my direction as I added in the second guitar part, but I didn’t care that everyone else was staring at me. I didn’t care that I was sharing a secret that turned Matt’s relaxed face to one of fuming rage. What I cared about was the shock on Tate’s as he looked up

and realized I was the one playing.

The joy that then flitted through his voice as he sang and the smile that slowly caressed his face.

That's what I cared about.

We didn't need to speak for us to share that in this moment, during this song, our hearts were right in sync. It almost seemed as if Tate was singing lyrics of the very path he'd traveled as we played.

I could listen to him for the rest of my life.

Even though I knew that the rage that coated Matt's face meant I had messed up, I didn't care. I needed this win. It had been a win. I would always count it as a win. I was tired of being a puppet on strings to Matt.

And then the song was over, and the spell was broken.

I handed the guitar back to Eva who quietly carried it to Cole.

"You play?" Gemma squealed. Tate stared longingly at me for one more moment, then returned his gaze to the guitar in his hands.

"I can't believe it!" Aubrey gasped. Many others made similar comments and I offered them small smiles, but Tate had become distant again. Eventually, the shock wore off and they requested something else.

They tried to get me to play again, but that was it. Tate began plucking Colter Wall's version of "Cowpoke" on the guitar, and Jake pulled out his harmonica. As the night continued, music was sung, laughter was shared, but I remained in the shadows, waiting for this ache that had once again begun in my soul to dissipate.

The hurt that was in store for me tomorrow was something I'd deal with—tomorrow. What terrified me more was what he might do to Tate's family now. But Tate knew the threat, and he was a big boy. I prayed he would take the necessary precautions.

It was the last song of the evening, as it was getting late. Everyone was arguing about what it should be until Jake said he wanted a George Strait song. My heart caught in my throat as Tate smiled underneath his hat.

"How's a slow, love song sound?" he muttered, and despite it being a majority of men around us, everyone shouted in agreement. It would help reduce the excitement so we could go to sleep easier. But what got me was the fact that I knew by the first chord he strummed what song he would play and what that song had meant to me.

Silent tears fell as he sang "I Cross My Heart."

Closing my eyes, I let memories float through my head of the

wedding. Tate holding me tight against his chest, singing to me. The two of us hidden away in that dark room, stuffing cupcakes in our faces. Falling asleep in his arms beneath the cloudy sky. The tenderness of the dance to that very song.

Sleep that night would come easy, even if I was torn in half as I opened my eyes when the song finished. Tate was staring at me once more, his hazel orbs swimming in the low firelight.

It was at that moment that I realized I loved him.

I was in love with that man.

He'd said some awful things to me yesterday, and I could be mad at him for that. But I was still in love with him.

I would always love him.

## Chapter 40

Assumed.

That word rolled through my mind for most of the morning. I'd been awake long before the sun, worried about Tate and his family. But I couldn't get that word out of my head. I was so confused as well. Going back and forth between trying to figure out if Tate was mad at me, no longer into me, or longing for me.

Mixed signals galore.

Limping out of the bunkhouse, I pulled my hat low over my head and pushed the braid behind my shoulders. I adjusted my purple button up, made sure it was tucked in nicely and tugged my boots on. My leg still hurt, intensely. But the swelling was gone, and the bruises were now days old. I could put enough pressure on it to limp myself around.

My spurs jingled a little as I walked out into the crisp morning air, regretting that I'd chosen to not wear a vest. But I was on a mission. Tucking the wooden box into my armpit, I continued agonizingly slow down the stairs and onto the gravel.

I made it all the way out toward the main road when I realized my phone was sitting on my mattress back in the bunkhouse. Cursing myself, I paused trying to decide whether or not I should go back for it.

Ultimately, I decided against it. I needed to get Becky tacked up and ride up to Tate's home before Matt woke up and saw me, before Tate rode down to start his chores. I wasn't going to assume anymore. I was going to tell Tate that I wanted to be with him for real, no fake thing, despite our unspoken earlier agreement because of Matt's texts. Yes, I would express to him that I knew this was horrible timing because of that, and that I knew we actually couldn't be together.

But I just wanted him to know that despite all of that, I wanted him. I would tell him how I really felt for the first time ever.

Despite knowing we couldn't be together, I still wanted him. My

excuse would be this box of buckles that I had promised him. He'd kept his promise to play me a song, so I owed him buckles.

My heart raced as I limped along the railing and whistled for Becky. An explicit rule from the moment we'd arrived was that we weren't allowed at the boss's house. At Tate's home.

There had to be some sort of exception for me, though, right?

Becky came racing down the mountain just as the sun peeked over the ridge. The clouds were puffy and thick this morning, casting a bright pink hue across the ranch. It was beautiful, and I wished I could admire it, but I was on the clock.

Slipping the halter over her ears quickly, I led her back to the tack barn as best as I could without falling over. The pain meds weren't doing much right now because I was exerting myself extra hard, but I gritted my teeth and carried on.

Peeking out from the barn, I found the ranch nearly still. Only a few wandering animals broke the quietness around us. I led Becky out from the barn and gave myself one more deep breath of air for confidence.

Swinging up, I kept the box of buckles resting closely in front of me and pushed Becky to the right, ready to round up the side of the fence line.

It was a cloudy morning as we rode, the sky particularly bright with orange and pink glows from the rising sun that skated across the dewy canvas. A world of its own stretched above us as if encouraging us along our way.

I pushed Becky into a trot and then a lope in hopes to get under the cover of trees sooner rather than later. If I got caught now, there was almost no way of getting around what I was doing. Pain pulsed through my leg as I continued forward.

The trodden grass path that Tate rode so frequently guided me up to the point between two knotted pines that he often popped out between.

A worn dirt path, just wide enough for a single horse split the two trunks and I led Becky through the brush, blindly hoping it would take me where I needed.

I was grateful there was the rising sun, because with the dense canopy of leaves around me, I struggled to see where I was going. Trusting Becky to pick the best footing, I attempted to lead her through the forest toward whatever destination lay ahead.

My curiosity seemed to kick into overdrive, battling with the nerves

on what may be when I arrived at Tate's home. Battling over what may be at the end of this dense maze.

We weaved through deep greens and browns, around aspens and pines and flowers that were just beginning to bud. I could hear the trickle of water nearby, a creek flowing just off to my right.

We made a sharp left, another right, and emerged into a clearing that had me struck in awe at the beauty. Stretching behind the simple cabin-styled home was a massive lake, the water delicately lapping against the bank.

A couple side-by-sides were parked off to the left, and a road to the right wound away through the thick brush. The home in front of me was built on a slope, so although in front you only saw the main level, it allowed for a deck and covered porch in the back. The basement would let out onto one of the most serene places I'd seen.

Which was a lot to say, considering I'd seen some absolutely perfect sceneries before. This was something different as the morning light sparkled off of the sweeping lake water below that barely moved.

A small river ducked down below a wooden bridge to my right, snaked around the back which fed the lake where the out flowing water from the body of water took off to the left.

Thick wooden fencing stretched around that river to the left and several horses grazed about inside it. The palomino he often rode was amongst them, content and well taken care of.

He even had his own few chickens, as I spotted a coop just past the porch in the back, and I could imagine how wonderful it was to wake up to them every morning as I listened to the rooster.

A small barn was built off to the left, behind the Razors that were parked along the edge of the asphalt drive. I assumed it stored all different kinds of toys for someone like Tate.

Dismounting from Becky, I ground tied her on some luscious mountain grass and hesitantly approached the door. There wasn't a light on in the house, and the excitement from discovering where the trail had led was gone as the nerves reentered.

I even debated whether I should knock or just leave the box. But I'd come this far, risked this much, so I should knock.

Stepping up the three stairs to approach the front door seemed the hardest climb of my life. Despite the inviting two wooden porch chairs out front, despite knowing that I might get to see Tate alone for five seconds,

ascending three stairs took much more effort than desired.

My knuckles rapped on the wooden frame and then I waited. But nothing. So I knocked again and waited. And waited.

Then I heard the faintest of footsteps sound behind the door and the golden knob turned. Lightly groaning on its hinges, the door swung open, and Tate appeared. Behind him I could see a cabin-like interior, clean and organized still with that homey feel.

Tate stared at me in shock for a moment before his face turned cold. “No one’s supposed to come over here. Jake explicitly set that rule the first day you arrived.” He sounded a little threatening.

“I know,” I squeaked out, trying to remain composed. He let go of the door and shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans. His dark-blue, plaid button up remained untucked as if I’d interrupted him getting ready just barely.

“Then what the hell are you doing here?” he grunted out, and then pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

“You’re going to give yourself cancer if you—”

“You don’t have any right to tell me what to do,” he snarled and stuck one between his teeth.

“Sorry,” I whispered and looked down at my boots.

“What’s in the box?” he asked, still cold but not as angry.

“Oh,” I replied, startled by the abrupt shift in what we were discussing. “It’s for you.” I raised my gaze to meet his eyes and lifted the box toward him. He furrowed his brows but didn’t remove his hands from his pockets. His curly hair looked even less kept today, especially without the hat, as if he wasn’t taking care of it anymore.

“I don’t want whatever it is.”

“I owe you. I promised.” My voice broke.

“They’re buckles?” he asked, the coldness in his voice fading a little. I nodded. “The ones you won. The ones that you’ve hidden from everyone in your life who cares about you. You pretend to be strong Brex, but you can’t even face—”

“What do you think I’m trying to do right now?!” I yelled at him and shoved the box against his chest. Hard. He grunted and, out of instinct, ripped his hands from his pockets to grab the container. “You have no idea how painful it was to listen to you call me a slut. I don’t care that you were drunk, Tate. Drunk words are sober thoughts. But it destroyed me and yet, here I am



trying to tell you that I'm in love with you. That I'm sorry for not letting you actually voice your thoughts and have a say about what happened to us when Matt decided to bring your entire family into all of this. But because I love you, I couldn't bear being the reason that the people you love get hurt. I can handle it; I've been living with that pain and guilt and fear for years. But you don't deserve it," I snapped. I let him have it and then swung around.

"So, you're just going to run again?" he shouted after me.

Spinning to face him, I threw my hands in the air. "Well, you obviously don't care, because I'm just some slut you fell for that you couldn't fix." And then I whistled. Becky trotted over to me as I pretended that my leg didn't hurt, stomping away from him.

"Brex!" he shouted as I hoisted myself onto my horse.

"Say it," I snarled, looking at a bewildered Tate standing on his porch, clutching my buckles.

"No," he sharply replied.

"What? Don't feel so brave now that you don't have liquor in you?" I whipped Becky around and spurred her forward.

"Fine! Run! But don't come back!" he yelled as I dashed away, furious. Yes, I ran away again. Oh, don't worry, I wasn't going to come back. I'd bared my soul to Tate, and he'd yelled at me.

Within the whirlwind of agony from the heartbreak, within the screaming of my heart that had been wrenched clean from my chest by his venomous voice, I hadn't noticed the swirling clouds darkening the sky overhead. We disappeared into the tree line, and I pulled Becky back to a walk as tears crashed down my face. From excruciating pain, both physically and emotionally.

Thunder suddenly clapped around me, followed by a burst of lightning and another bang shooting across the sky. I jumped, barely able to hold myself up in the saddle with this leg of mine. That short walk from the porch back to the horse and then hoisting myself up had done me over. Bursts of searing hot agony radiated up my leg over and over, causing me to struggle to hold on.

We walked, my strength unable to press her forward any faster. I was hardly able to control my body let alone hers as we pushed onward through the quickly darkening forest.

Another flash of lightning and clap of thunder roared through the air as the breeze turned into a heavy wind. My braid swept across my shoulder,

flapping in the torrential gust that was steadily becoming stronger and stronger. So far, there was no rain, but the howling wind was making things even more difficult in the surrounding gloom.

Becky, my usually calm and levelheaded horse, was suddenly beginning to prance. Her head was higher, ears upright, and she was tossing her mane back and forth. No matter how many prompts and cues I gave her to remind her it was okay, she was sensing something wrong that I couldn't feel. A massive gust of wind nearly blew me right out of the saddle, tossing me forward and jamming my sternum against my arm that was clutching at my pained leg.

Then the downpour of rain began.

It wasn't a drizzle either. No, within a minute I was absolutely soaked. Drowning in the water that caused my shirt to cling to my body. The liquid streamed off of my hat and the ends of my hair were sopping wet within a minute, sticking to my shoulder.

My fingers turned numb as the whistling of the wind combined with the ice-cold rain continued to pound against my body. These were my consequences for breaking the rules. Even mother nature was telling me I had been a fool.

Lightning flashed, and the thunder crashed louder, faster, closer than it had been, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Becky stepped forward, and her hoof slid, stumbling to the side to catch her balance and keep us from toppling over. She was doing everything she could to keep me safe despite the mud that was sloshing up around her ankles.

It seemed the rain that was thundering down upon us had swamped the already moistened ground previously slick from melting runoff, and the dirt was unable to soak in much more, so the water now swirled on top. Puddles were forming upon the squelching mud and seeping into every crevice it could find.

Another massive flash of lightning and thunder boomed even closer, too close, and a shiver ran up my spine. Becky stumbled once more, and I asked her to stop. Quickly dismounting, I gave her a couple reassuring pats and began to wade through the mud and water alongside her.

The rain pelted me hard, slamming into my aching and bruised body, causing so much pain that I couldn't focus on what had just happened between Tate and me. The world around me spun, fuzzy stars crashing in and out of my vision. And despite the agony of it all, I was silently grateful that I

was so focused on safely returning to the bunkhouse that I couldn't dwell on him.

Suddenly, an enormous gust of wind knocked me forward and I crashed to my knees. Yelling in agony, Becky swung her hips away from me and snorted as my hands became swallowed up in a pit of mud, still gripping the reins. Straining to pull them out, the mud sucked in harder and harder as I felt a ripple of electricity crash through my figure.

Becky jumped from the tangle, trying to escape the bristling warning, landing her directly in front of me as I ripped my hands out from the mud and rose, tearing off her bridle so she could run home.

Just as I did so, lightning snapped through a trunk to my left, thunder cracked across the sky, and wood crashed against my body from the split tree.

It groaned as branches and all sorts of debris hurdled down toward me, slamming me deeper into the mud. My head began to spin as Becky screamed and bolted away, leaving me alone. I clutched her empty bridle, shoved into the mud, cold, wet, in agony, and exhausted.

The rain didn't let up as my vision began to lose focus. I was so cold, I wasn't even shivering anymore. Just laying still, pinned beneath a heavy tree trunk and pressed into the mud. Rain pelted down upon my bruised and scratched body, the wind howling in my ears. Something new snapped, and I was hit hard against the back of the head.

Then I saw black.

## Chapter 41

I could hear something. My feeling was long gone, my vision still dark but I could hear something as I slowly came to. But I wasn't sure what it was. It was too muffled through the rain that lapped around me, the roaring tumultuous wind, and the thunder that rumbled through the sky.

Straining to listen, to understand what it was, I waited once more. There it was again, still too muffled, but it sounded like a human voice. I tried to pry open my eyes, only to be blinded by a wave of water that swept up my nose. Coughing, spluttering to clear my airways to breathe, I listened again.

“Brex!” The voice shouted.

It was my name.

I opened my mouth to scream out, call out to whomever was shouting for me, but couldn't make a sound as I was hit with another stream of water.

“Brex!” The voice was louder, more desperate, and closer. I spat out the silty water and attempted to shove myself up higher out of the floods but couldn't. Something had me pinned.

“Brexlynn!” I recognized the voice. I recognized him. He was coming to find me even after everything that had happened. Knowing what he was risking coming out here, I had to find a way to call back.

Thunder smashed through the sky, and I waited for it to subside. But so had Tate. “Brex! Baby! Please!” he roared once more, terror forming in his voice.

Turning my head away from the ground, I called out. “Help.” It was barely audible, barely decipherable, and I knew he couldn't have heard it. Clearing my throat once more, I mustered up any strength left and yelled.

Just one more time.

“Tate!” This time it was loud and echoed through the forest despite the rain, despite the wind, despite the thunder that clapped just after, and I heard it. Hooves crashed through the trees and then something plummeted

onto the ground. Spurs clanged across the forest floor louder and louder, moving closer and closer toward me.

I felt him before I saw him. Hands brushed hair from my cheek, wiping the mud from my skin. “Where’s Becky?” I whispered, my body so cold that I couldn’t shiver, though once in a while my muscles involuntarily twitched.

“She’s fine. In with my horses,” he replied, brushing mud from my eyes and mouth. “I’m going to get you out of here, but I need you to hold really still no matter how much it hurts okay?”

I blinked, just wanting to catch a glimpse of him. Slowly, I nodded as he came into focus. A black rain slicker was tucked up under his ears, the water pooled onto his hat and then sloshed off of it as he turned to survey the damage. But his eyes, there were his hazel eyes that held so much concern.

He’d come to save me.

Tate stood from beside me and got to work. I wasn’t sure what he was doing, but I could hear him grunting and feel the pressure slowly leaving my body. Then he must have tied his horse to whatever had me pinned down and whistled her forward.

Something dragged across my back, whatever had hit me hard, and I bit my lip as it tore painfully through my skin. Fighting the desire to scream from the torment it caused. I could feel the wounds open and ooze blood as the drops of rain slammed into the fresh gashes. But the pressure was leaving, heading in some direction that was no longer my body.

I took my first deep breath in a while which allowed the oxygen to rush through my limbs and I began to tremble. Shaking violently as the cold and wet lapped at my body. Spurs crashed in my direction once more and Tate came into view.

He stooped down beside me and unzipped his slicker. “I-I-I-I’m s-s-so co-o-ld,” I stammered.

“I know, Brex baby,” he whispered and scooped me up into his arms. Holding me tightly against his chest, he tossed me up onto his horse’s withers and then mounted. I just laid there, unable to provide any strength to move my body. There was none left. The amount of agony that ripped through me was indescribable.

Tate settled himself into the saddle and then leaned forward, picking me up like a rag doll and cradled me in his lap, shielding me from the rain and wind with his slicker, before pushing his horse back toward where I’d

come from. I apparently hadn't made it very far upon Becky as we rode for only five or so minutes before breaking through the tree line.

His asphalt drive had a thin layer of water rushing down toward the exit where it pooled with the river that now blocked any sort of entrance to his home. He'd been smart and built his house on the highest point around us, but now the river had flooded the bridge and created a massive blockage.

No one would be able to pass up or down until its levels lowered. Tate stopped us by the base of his house and jumped down from his horse, dragging me with him. He ran onto the porch, set me down on a dry chair, and then proceeded to untack his mount faster than I'd ever seen it done. The bridle was draped over the back of the chair that I was sitting in, the saddle and pad placed over the rail out of the storm, and then he just let his horse go.

I watched, unable to move as he scooped me back up and carried me through the front door. As soon as it slammed closed behind us, I felt a rush of warmth that caused my skin to prickle like needles. It was just as painful as it had been when I'd first started becoming cold.

Tate tore off his boots, leaving them at the front door, and then pulled off mine to join his. They squelched, emptied of some water and mud, and then he pounded through the house. I was unable to really get a decent look at the interior of it all as he turned right and headed down a set of winding stairs that separated the kitchen and a living area.

It let out into a massive great room, which we sped through, and down a hallway. He entered the second door on the right and turned left. Marching us through a bedroom that I assumed was his as it screamed "outdoors," then we passed through another door on the far wall.

This bathroom was incredible. His whole home had to be incredible if it was anything like this bathroom. To my right was a sink and counter with white marble and gray tile upon the floor, running up the bathroom wall. The faucet looked very much like an old outdoor spigot painted black. He had clean towels neatly folded beside the sink and hanging from the looped hand rowel next to the light switch.

Drawers below the sink matched the color scheme of whites and grays throughout the bathroom. A massive mirror hung against the light-gray wall above the sink. The counter curved around a corner and sat next to the glass wall of the shower. Clear panes allowed me to see straight into the clean shower, which had a bench on the opposite side of the shower head.

Except, the way the ceiling was shaped, I wondered if it had one of

those rain shower heads as well. To my left was the standalone white tub that Tate walked straight toward. He turned on the silver faucet and plugged the bath, testing the water to make sure it was warm. Between the shower and tub at the far end were two doors, one smaller than the other that I assumed led to the toilet and a linen closet.

“Brex,” he said, and knelt down beside the tub, still cradling me in his lap. “You need to take your wet clothes off or you won’t get warm.” He reached forward to help, but I managed to clamp numb fingers around his wrist. Tate opened his palms to me and halted his movement.

“I can do it,” I croaked out, and he nodded, slowly sitting me down gently on the squishy mat beside the bath. He stood up from beside me, opened the smaller door, and brought out a clean towel for me, hooking it next to the tub on a rail.

“I’ll have clean clothes waiting for you in the bedroom, bring me your wet ones when you’re done and I’ll wash them,” he said and paused, his eyes lingering upon me. Tate slowly exhaled and then he exited the bathroom.

I was left alone, cold, shivering, and knew that the hurt I was feeling was no one's fault but my own. I couldn’t imagine what he was going through after everything that had happened, but he was still being this kind to me. My heart longed for him, ached for his presence and smile. His laugh and his goofiness.

First, I peeled my jeans from my body, they had luckily protected my legs from any of the scratches and wounds inflicted from the branches. I was also so cold that I was numb to the pain from the healing stab wound. Though the ache that was bouncing through them told me I had more bruises coming in the morning. Once my pants and socks were off, I slowly began to unbutton my shirt.

Gripping the hem at my wrist, I tugged on the sleeve. Mistake. A scream involuntarily escaped my throat, piercing the silent air, and I collapsed to my knees as pain shot through me. I let go of the fabric and reached behind my back with a trembling hand. My fingers brushed over dried blood that practically glued the shirt to my skin.

Panting, I braced for the searing agony that would come when I ripped the shirt off, and then the door crashed open. My eyes shot up from the tile to meet Tate’s. Tension twisted his features as desperation coated his face. A desire to take away everything that hurt me was plainly written in his eyes, which only made me feel confused. He’d yelled at me to never come

back earlier, so why did he still seem to care?

“Stop,” he said as I tugged again and opened my mouth in pain.

“Brex, stop,” he commanded, running his fingers through his tousled hair. Somehow, he was already dry and adorned in a fresh pair of jeans with a matching gray T-shirt. I whimpered and placed my palms against the cold tile.

Tate grabbed the washcloth from the counter and dipped it into the tub, turning the running faucet off as he did so and then gently began dabbing the damp fabric against my back. It stung a little, but I didn't move.

A serene stillness passed between us as nothing but our breaths and the rainfall were heard. Tate gently worked at my wounds, slowly peeling the fabric from my skin inch by inch until it finally fell away. I sat hunched forward, panting in nothing but an unclipped bra and panties as tears silently slithered down my cheeks.

“How bad is it?” I hesitantly whispered. Fingers brushed against my exposed skin, gently. Tenderly.

“Not that bad, actually. I think the rain made it seem like it bled more than it actually did,” he softly replied. Clutching my hands to my chest, I remained still as he slowly slid around toward my left side. His movements were gentle, measured as he gripped the edges of the wet bandage upon my leg and peeled it from the stab wound.

It had started to heal over nicely, but the events from earlier ripped it apart again and blood was once again bubbling to the surface and crusting around the wound. Tate gently blotted at the iron liquid, cleaning it up a little before I was to submerge myself in the bath.

He was being kind to me. Treating me as if he cared and I felt so torn.

Once again, the movements stilled between us as he remained off to my side, waiting. I knew what was to come next, but I was trying to decide if I should tell him to close his eyes or just let him see me. This could be the last time we ever interacted.

And I was exhausted. Running had done me no good.

Slowly, I wrapped my hands around my back, straightened up a little, and the straps of the black undergarment fell forward along my arms. Tate didn't move as I gently slid them off completely. The bra fluttered softly to the ground, and I was completely bare. He could see if he wanted to; I was too broken, too tired to wish for a different moment.

Placing a hand against the tub beside me, I attempted to rise to my



feet but stumbled, and he caught me. Placing a respectful hand around my waist, he steadied me as I let my panties fall to my feet and then stepped out of them. My heart was racing in my throat, I knew this wasn't anything sexual, but I was still naked in front of another man.

Tate's eyes slid across me briefly as he helped me step into the blistering warm bath water.

Sinking down into the tub, I kept my back to him and pulled my knees to my chest. The shivers were slowly calming down as I sank to my chin into the water, keeping myself shielded from the world.

The pooling liquid around me slowly turned a murky red, blood from my back seeping into the mixture with the dirt that was drifting, washing off of my skin. Tate stayed, kneeling next to the tub, waiting for me to say something, or do something.

But I remained silent. I didn't look at him, trying to convince myself that he hadn't broken me. That I had thick skin. That I was as strong as I once thought I could be. He wouldn't see me fall apart.

I heard him exhale, and then Tate leaned forward, grabbing the bar of soap. His hands were steady as he dipped it into the water and then began gently washing my back. Using a soft cloth and the soap, he worked his way across the wounds, over my shoulders, and then pulled the braid away from my neck.

Hesitantly, I reached backwards and grabbed the hair he was holding and slid the hair tie from the end. His fingers froze against my neck as I worked the braid out of my hair and then went to pull it up onto the top of my head.

But he clamped one of his hands down onto mine and gently tugged the tie from my fingers. He brushed some of the knots out of my hair and then returned to washing my neck. The strands fanned across my shoulders and brushed into the water, draping against my skin like a blanket. Whispering across his arms like a feather dancing in the wind.

Erratic beats of my heart pounded against my chest as Tate slid his hands along my upper arms. I slowly raised them from the bath and allowed him to wash them completely.

My head swam. I could turn around and let him see. I could share with him everything like I'd once considered doing, or I could take the soap bar from him and wash myself facing away.

That was the easier thing to do. Especially since I was so confused

and hurt with what was going on.

Except this was Tate. I'd promised myself I would let him in, even if he'd said some hurtful things to me.

So I slowly swung my head to find his hazel eyes soft. Studying me. His gaze was pained but intense, his curls once again holding that shine to them. Cautiously, I turned the rest of my body, watching him as his eyes never left my face, never left my gaze. I exposed everything to him and he blinked, his dark long lashes boldly contrasting against his hazel orbs.

Reaching forward, I gently slid the soap and towel from his hands and finished washing myself. As I did so, his eyes finally left my face and tracked my fingers as they brushed across my skin. Wordless desire crashed through him.

Tenderness filled his frame as he watched me gingerly step out of the bath.

Water dripped along my naked skin as he remained crouched beside the tub, his gaze locked onto me as I slowly dried off, ignoring the dull ache in my back and leg, and then let the towel fall to the floor.

He tilted his head, his eyes returning to mine before he slowly, ever so slowly rose to stand in front of me.

"What were you thinking riding here?" he finally said, and I furrowed my brows, frustration settling back in, popping the bubble that had cocooned us.

"That's what you want to say? Right now? Right at this moment?" I asked, startled.

"You could've hurt yourself. You *did* hurt yourself."

"It's not like I can predict the weather."

"I know that."

"Then why are you mad?" I placed my hands on my hips and glared at him.

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Because you coming here is only going to result in Matt hurting you again. Or me, or one of my siblings."

"Like you care about what happens to me?" I snarled, and he stepped toward me, placing himself directly against my exposed body.

He looked down at me, his eyes holding so much intense emotion that I couldn't decipher each individual feeling. "I never stopped caring, but I'm allowed to be pissed that you would do something so irrationally stupid."

"Stupid? Now you're calling me stupid?"

“No. I’m saying that what you did was stupid.”

“I’m a big girl and can handle myself.”

“But I couldn’t handle it if you were dead!” he snapped at me, and I opened my mouth to say something back but couldn’t find the words. Ramming my lips together, I stared at him, feeling his chest rise and fall heavily, rapidly against my body. “I didn’t agree to this to protect my siblings; I agreed to this because I couldn’t stand you getting hurt anymore by that fucker.”

“Oh,” I whispered and looked down, suddenly feeling embarrassed.

“And after last night when someone decided to share with the entire world that she could play the guitar, all the horribly gut-wrenching acting I’d done to make Matt think we were over was for naught.” He placed two fingers against my chin and lifted my head. I stared at him, bewildered by everything but also suddenly not caring about any of that at the moment. We could continue to fight or whatever later, right now I wanted him to finally be with me.

“Tate,” I whispered, and he tilted his head.

“Hmmm?”

“Kiss me,” I breathed out, and his lips crashed against mine without hesitation.

Finally.

My heart leapt from my chest as he circled his arms around my waist and pulled me into him. Every part of my naked body was pressed against him. His lips worked their familiar magic, soft and delicate, passionate. The kiss grew, hungrier, more desirable as he shoved his tongue into my mouth. I tipped onto my toes and wrapped my hands around the nape of his neck, twisting those curls between my fingers.

His arms slid down from my waist, his hands brushing across my backside before tucking under my thighs and lifting me from the ground. I wrapped my legs around his waist as he gently carried me from the bathroom.

Our lips remained entangled as he tenderly sat me down upon his bed. I peeked out as he pulled away just briefly and smiled.

I was all his.

## Chapter 42

My leg draped over his naked body, tangled in the white sheets as he ran a finger lazily up and down my back, carefully avoiding the scratches. I rested my head against his chest, feeling more content and at peace than I ever had in my life before. This moment would be impressed upon my soul for as long as I lived. No matter what happened, I had willingly given everything to Tate, and he'd done the same.

That was something that no one could take from us. No matter what happened. He pressed his lips against my head, tenderly kissing me as I ran a finger in circles upon his chest.

“I loved you first, by the way,” he whispered against my hair.

I clicked my tongue. “I doubt that.”

“So, you were in love with me the moment that you helped me deliver that calf?” he asked, and I paused my movements.

“What?”

“Yep. You gave me an attitude and helped me deliver a calf without being squeamish. It was hot.”

I buried my face into his chest, smiling and hiding the blush.

“Told you,” he whispered and I closed my eyes. “Besides, do you really think that I needed help with my reputation at the wedding?”

My eyes shot open. “You lied?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I made up an excuse to get you to come with me.”

I rolled my eyes and then rested tightly against his chest again. “Okay, but we hadn't technically met yet.”

He chuckled. “Brex baby, I'd been watching you for weeks. Plus, I think you forgot we had met before that night. You know, when you kissed me at the bar?”

“Were you stalking me or something?” I exclaimed, running a lazy finger along his chest.

He smiled to himself and leaned back against the pillows but said nothing else. There was comfort in this moment, especially since I knew that no one could find us up here with the storm that was raging on.

Keeping my cheek pressed against his body, I lazily scanned my surroundings that weren't Tate and his sweaty, naked body. I was curious what his room was like. To my right, the wall was complete stone, a fireplace set into it beside the door that led to the bathroom. Facing the fireplace was a brown leather loveseat, a coffee table splitting the wall and sofa with a TV mounted above the fireplace.

The bed we were laying in was against a wooden beamed wall with two end tables on either side of the dark, walnut-stained framed bed. A simple white comforter with several dark-blue accent pillows spread across it. A cedar chest rested at the end of it, the same beige color that matched the two lamps on the end tables. The bases were made of antlers that paired well with the light fixture hanging from the center of the ceiling. Two windows were on either side of the bed, the curtains cracked to reveal the still torrential rainfall that crashed down onto the yard outside.

The flashes of lightning onto the lake that spread out before me was a beautifully terrifying view. He had the perfect home.

Then my mind drifted to what he'd said back in the bathroom. "What did you mean by acting?" I asked, confused as his hazel eyes met mine.

He sighed. "I wasn't actually drunk that day, Brex. I don't ever drink enough to get drunk."

My heart fell, and I pulled my leg from his body. "Then how could you say I was-was-was—"

"A slut?" he quietly finished for me, and I nodded. "Because Matt was watching."

I whipped my head up as he tugged me back against his figure. Tate's eyebrows twitched as his gaze flickered briefly downward and then back up to my face. "Matt was there?"

"It killed me to say all of that, Brex. Literally destroyed me to watch you shut down. But he had pulled his gun from his waistband and was pointing it at your head. So, yes, I said some really awful things that were an absolute lie."

My mind was racing as I processed what he was telling me. "I don't expect you to try and fix me," I finally whispered.

"I know. I never thought about doing that because you don't need to

be fixed. You need to heal, which is something only you can do. Though, I hope to help make it easier,” he replied and I tilted my head up so he could kiss my lips.

“I have another small confession to make,” he said, pushing some hair behind my ear.

“What’s that?” I leaned against his palm that rested upon my cheek.

“I may or may not have been watching and recording every interaction between you and Matt since he came to the ranch,” he muttered, and my eyes flew open.

“You what?!” I screeched, and pushed him away.

“Please don’t tell me you’re defending him,” Tate stated.

“No, I’m not, but that’s an invasion of privacy.”

“Not when he decides to beat you in front of my security cameras that I’ve got covering nearly every inch of the ranch. I let strangers stay on my property, Brex. You really think I haven’t installed measures to make sure people don’t steal from me?”

He watched my face as I stared at him, realizing that all along I hadn’t been able to hide anything from him. Not a single thing that I thought had remained a secret was most likely something he’d known from the moment it happened. Including who Matt was.

Did Tate possibly okay hiring him on purpose? For me? To help me?

“So you’ve seen... Everything?” I reiterated, and he nodded, running his thumb back and forth mindlessly across my cheek. “Anyone else?”

“No. The moment he arrived, I didn’t let anyone else watch the security footage unless I’d already combed through it. So now that you know, I’d like to take it to the police and get him put away, for a long, long time without a chance at early release this time.” He stared at me, and I blinked, barely able to hold back the tears that were crashing through me.

“This entire time?”

“All I’ve wanted to do is protect you, but I also knew that the only way to stop Matt was to catch him in the act. You told me that you’d only been able to take pictures after things had happened while married to him. I wanted concrete proof so good behavior doesn’t mean shit this time.”

I grabbed his face and began peppering him with kisses. “There’s a way out,” I whispered between each breathless kiss.

“You didn’t think I would let you get away did you?” he kissed me back. I shook my head, his mustache tickling my face. “Good. Now, will you

put your earrings back in and let your hair grow out?”

I paused, startled. He stared at me, confused as to why I was so shocked.

“Why do you like them so much?”

He grinned. “Because they’re you. I guess if you like dying your hair and not wearing them you can, I just thought you did that to hide. Please stop hiding.”

I nodded, kissing him again. “The moment the rain stops, I’ll go back and put the earrings in.”

“Good. How’s the leg and back?” he asked.

“Sore. Like other parts of my body,” I replied flirtatiously.

He chuckled. “Let’s get them bandaged up, change these sheets, and see how the weather looks after.” I nodded.

Gently he lifted me from the bed, and I resolved at that moment to pretend like there still wasn't much to do once the storm stopped. Right now, I would play happy house with the man whom I loved and who loved me.

Things looked so much brighter, exciting for the future.



Swinging my feet back and forth, I watched as Tate, dressed in sweats and a T-shirt, seasoned some chicken he was going to cook up for lunch. Sitting beside the stove he was working at on the counter, I let my eyes lazily wander around. A massive island with eight bar stools spanned the center of the kitchen across from me.

Just past that were two tan leather couches with an ornately designed rug splitting them. The window that rose behind the couch showed a still-storming sky outside, which I honestly didn’t mind. That meant I was able to stay longer. That he and I would have another moment of blissful safety. To my right was a hand-crafted dining room table with matching chairs and two doors lining the wall. A sliding glass door leading out to the porch sat next to the fridge, and then next was the very countertop on which I was sitting.

The sink to my right looked out over the lake behind Tate’s home that speckled with each drop of rain. Everything was clean and spotless, he even

had a few potted plants sitting in the corners of his home that interrupted the warm brown tones. Not quite like the bachelor pad I had once imagined he lived in.

Chicken sizzled in the pan as Tate continued cooking and humming to himself. I was happy. Absolutely content at this very moment.

Tugging at the sleeve of Tate's button up I was wearing, I watched as he worked. Carefully making us a delicious lunch while the storm continued to rage outside. Tate had told me not to worry about the animals, Jake would keep an eye on them since he was closer to the main location of the ranch.

And I knew that Despite everything that was still going on, I had to take this moment to just be.

So we ate lunch, laughed, and danced in the kitchen as he sang to me. He held me, touched me, listened to my dreams I once had, and lounged on his porch while watching the storm.

And he had me on the kitchen counter at one point. Then later on his porch swing after the storm had slowed down and the sun was setting.

Eventually, he carried me down the stairs as I blinked heavily, exhausted. We made our way through the family room and around a cream sectional with a matching ottoman that faced a mounted TV. Several beautiful western paintings hung from the walls, the silver starlight dancing across the shadows through glass doors and windows.

Plodding down the hallway, he turned into his bedroom and gently laid me onto the fresh sheets. Tucking me in, I smiled lazily up at his face. He paused, watching me for a moment before returning that smile. Dimples pressed deeply into his cheeks.

Slipping his shirt off over his head, he climbed into the bed on the other side wearing nothing but his boxers and pulled me tight against his body—careful to avoid opening any wounds. He was warm, comforting, and the rhythmical movements of his chest lulled me fast to sleep.



## Chapter 43

A faint ringing in my ears pulled me from the most blissful sleep I'd experienced yet. The ringing became louder and louder until I rolled over to face the nightstand next to Tate's slumbering figure. He was snoring softly, unaware that his phone was lighting up the pitch black room. Sending bright signals like Christmas morning.

Shaking him, he snorted and then rolled toward me, still asleep. One arm draped lazily over my body and then he tugged me against him. I shook him again, and he groaned.

"Tate," I gently said.

"HMMMM?" he replied, still mostly asleep.

"Tate," I repeated, a little louder.

"What Brex?" he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

"Your phone."

"Let it go to voicemail," he said, his voice extra gravelly as the phone went silent. I breathed out and cuddled deeper against his chest, loving every moment of this.

Then the shrill tone of his phone blasted through the air again.

"Seriously," Tate muttered, annoyed and rolled over, ripping it from his nightstand. I don't think he even looked at who it was as he rammed the green answer button and placed it against his cheek. "Who the hell is calling me at this hour?" he growled into the phone. I glanced at the nightstand clock to see it was three-thirty in the morning.

"What?" he said. I could hear nothing but mumbling in the background of his phone. Tate finally blinked and opened his hazel orbs a little wider. "Who's Paul?" he snarled at me.

"Paul? Why would Paul be calling you?" I asked him.

He placed his phone against his chest. "He's not. He's been calling your phone for the past hour and woke all of the girls up in the bunk. It's Eva."

“Why would he be calling this early? I mean sometimes he has early morning work and gets up at this hour but why?” I sucked my bottom lip in and chewed, propping myself up a little higher.

“Brex.”

“Hmmm?”

“Who the hell is Paul?” he grumbled again.

“My brother, chill,” I replied, lightly slapping him against his bare chest and he shook his head.

“Wait! How does Eva know you’re here?” he spat at me.

“I think right now is a better time to hang up the phone so she can go back to sleep.” I skirted around his question. Watching me from the corner of his eye, he returned his phone to his ear and listened to Eva say something.

“She wants to know if you can give her your passcode so she can text your brother my number and he can call my phone?” Tate relayed, and I nodded, telling him my birthday since it was my passcode. He spoke the message to Eva and then hung up the phone, plopping it casually onto my chest.

I blinked, startled and confused, as it landed cupped between my breasts. Tate stared at it for a moment and then snorted, practically giggled. “Look,” he said. “Your boobies caught my phone.” He giggled again and then rolled onto his back with a grin.

“How old are you?” I teased, and he grinned even wider.

“Boobs.”

Shaking my head, the phone began to ring, and I picked it up from my chest. “Hello?” I groggily said.

“Brex! Did you get a new phone?” my brother Paul answered.

“No. This isn’t mine. I don’t have mine at the moment,” I replied.

“Why not?”

“Long story. Mind telling me why you’re calling at three-thirty in the morning? I’m tired.”

There was a short pause and then he spoke. “They’re coming. Why didn’t you tell me he was there with you and that he was in contact with them? They called last night after I’d already gone to bed to see if I wanted to come and left me a voicemail when I didn’t answer. If I had known—”

“Slow. Down,” I said, glancing up at Tate. The worry and fear in Paul’s voice was tangible across the phone. Tate pushed himself upright, watching me. “Who’s they? What didn’t I tell you? Who wants you to go

where?”

I quickly pressed the speaker button on the phone as something in my gut told me that Tate should hear this too.

“Our parents, Brexlynn. They’re coming to the ranch.”

My stomach dropped. This was not happening.

“How do they know I’m here?”

“Who do you think called them? I don’t have the full story, but from what I gathered from the voicemail is that Matt called them, told them where you’re working this summer, and that you two are together again,” Paul answered, and Tate leaned his head back against the headboard.

“That little shit-faced fucker,” he muttered under his breath.

“Why would you get back with Matt?” Paul quietly asked.

“I’m not with him.”

“Why wouldn’t you tell me that he was working at the same ranch as you?”

“It was unexpected,” I replied, still trying to process the information.

“When are they coming?”

“Tomorrow, or I guess this morning. They’re leaving at six in the morning,” Paul answered, and Tate tilted his head.

“Did they make a reservation? It’s my family reunion, so we don’t have anything open,” he said and I shrugged my shoulders.

“Wait!” Paul shouted through the phone. “Who’s that?”

“Tate,” I replied and was met with silence.

“Hello?” I asked, wondering if the connection was lost.

“Tate who?” Paul finally said.

“Tate Pierce,” Tate answered for me, and I heard a shriek on the other end of the phone.

“Are you saying that you’re with *the* Tate Pierce at nearly four in the morning?!” Paul shouted through the phone.

“Why are you up this early anyway?” I answered, skirting around another question.

“Work, now answer me!” he yelled again, something crashed in the background.

“Yes, she’s with me,” Tate replied before I had a chance, and another screech crashed through the receiver.

“You little slut,” Paul jokingly replied, and I froze. He didn’t know about the scar.

“Not cool,” Tate quickly answered. “Don’t call her that.”

“I didn’t mean it in a bad way, I meant it—”

“Still, she doesn’t like that word,” Tate cut him off.

“Why not? Why can’t it be used in a good connotation? My little sister who literally went through hell is finally experiencing the greater joys that come with being with a man. She should enjoy it, revel in it, soak it in. Crave it,” Paul said, and Tate glanced at me, watching my reaction.

I wasn’t sure what I was feeling, but it kind of seemed nice to associate the word etched into my skin as a good thing. Slowly, my body began to relax as I let Paul’s words tumble around in my mind.

“My slut *only*,” Tate whispered, staring at me, and I let the edges of my lips twitch upwards. If it was like that, I was okay with it. He smiled.

I smiled.

He smirked.

I blushed.

He winked at me, pressed mute on the phone. “Good little slut,” he growled, and my body roared with fire, responding to his dirty words in anticipation for the immense pleasure I was coming to expect from him. He’d been right all along.

Tate pressed unmute and returned his attention to Paul.

“Look, our mom said she talked with someone at the ranch for a while and they moved some things around to make sure that they could stay for a bit starting today. I don’t know what Matt’s playing, or what’s going on, but the moment I found out, I had to let you know. I’ll be speeding over once I get off work, but that leaves several hours of you alone, Brexlynn,” Paul said.

I shook my head. “I’m not alone. I’ll be okay. Just get here when you can.”

“Tate?” Paul asked.

“Yeah?” he answered.

A sigh pierced through the phone. “If Brexlynn trusts you, then I do too, since she doesn’t trust anyone. Please. Take care of my sister for me. She’s a little messed up, but the best girl you’ll ever meet.”

“No one will touch her ever again without her consent. Or I’ll kill them,” Tate replied, and a stiff chuckle came from the phone.

“What’s crazy is I actually believe you. I’ve heard all the rumors about Tate Pierce.” The awkward chuckle came again. Paul wasn’t kidding, he thought Tate would really kill Matt if he so much as looked at me the

wrong way. And now that our relationship had progressed, I was a little worried he wouldn't even hesitate. "Alright, I've gotta hang up. Be safe!"

"Love you," I quickly said.

"Love you too, sis." And the line went dead.

Tate slid the phone from the bed sheet and glanced at it. We sat in silence for a moment as he stared blankly ahead. My stomach was in my throat as I realized that after two long years I would be coming head to head with my parents. But I wasn't feeling the same fear and nerves that had once plagued me. Yes, it still sounded scary, but for whatever reason, I actually felt calm.

I would be just fine.

"How'd Eva think to call me?" Tate finally asked.

I winced. "I may have told her everything." The frustration I thought might pass through Tate was completely nonexistent. Instead, he grinned widely and crashed his lips against mine.

"I'm going to call the sheriff." Tate spoke, pulling away from the kiss.

"About what?"

"Matt. I'm tired of waiting. We have plenty of evidence, plus the stab wound. It's time he goes away."

I sighed and placed a hand against his forearm. "Come back to bed after? I'm tired and don't want to leave just yet."

Tate leaned over and pressed his lips against my forehead. "The sheriff isn't going to come out until later today, if at all. They need time to process everything, so it's just going to be a quick call, sending the footage, and then I'll be right back."

"Okay," I mumbled and laid back down in the bed. Tate slipped off of the mattress and quietly exited the bedroom. Waking up to him, no matter the time of day, was something I could get used to.

For the first time ever, I actually considered quitting my job and moving to Montana.

It scared me that the thought was now running through my head. Tate might even say no. But it was an option and, if he really did love me, wouldn't he want me to stay? Wouldn't he want me around all of the time?

Eventually, as I lay there alone and time ticked passed, I became a little anxious because Tate had not yet returned.

Just as I kicked off the covers to go look for him, the door quietly swung open and he padded softly into the room. His brows furrowed as he

saw me sitting on the edge of the bed. Placing his phone down on the nightstand, he walked around the cedar chest at the end of the bed toward me and pushed himself in between my legs.

“What are you still doing awake?” he whispered and kissed my forehead.

“I was waiting for you,” I mumbled, feeling my cheeks blush pink. But he just smiled and gently laid me down on the bed, crawling on top of me. Another kiss against the forehead and he slid me back under the covers. The bed dipped and swayed as he shuffled over to his side and then wrapped his thick arms around my little figure.

“I love you,” he muttered against the back of my head, burying his face into my neck. Slow breaths and then eventually soft snores met my ears quickly after.

“I love you too,” I whispered and met him in dreamworld.

## Chapter 44

It was a somber morning as we slowly rose from the bed with light blazing through the windows. The storm had long since passed, the sunrise also happened hours ago. But after the very early morning call and amazing day yesterday, it seemed neither of us were ready for this to end.

Tate walked toward the dresser that sat along the far wall next to his closet and pulled open a drawer. Out of it he grabbed something I couldn't see and stuffed it in his pocket. Sliding my freshly washed clothes from the top of it he came back my way.

“Your shirt was torn in the back so I just tossed it. Wear mine but go straight to the bunkhouse and change so people don't get suspicious.” He placed the pile at the edge of the bed as I sat up and kicked my legs over the edge.

It was silent for the rest of the time as I got dressed, mostly by myself. I could've done it completely alone, but Tate insisted on helping. Although he only had to ask once, so I'm not sure if it counted as insisting.

He pulled on a fresh pair of jeans and a crisp dark red button up. I watched his fingers begin to thread the buttons through the holes. Stepping directly in front of him, he paused his hazel eyes, meeting mine. Placing my hands over his, I gently pulled them away and then finished buttoning his shirt for him.

A silent expression that I wanted to be given a chance to take care of him too.

The moment the last button was done he placed his palms against my cheeks and crashed his lips against mine. It was as passionate and fiery as ever, desperation filling this kiss. He slipped his tongue into my mouth as I fisted the sides of his shirt and tugged him against my body.

It felt painful to break apart, but it was necessary. He tucked in his shirt before silently turning and leaving the room, with me following behind.

What happened between that kiss and now was an absolute blur.

Some food, begging for this moment to never end, endless amounts of kissing and somehow I found myself sitting in my saddle on Becky.

Tate had his hat on, one hand pressed against my right leg, not ready to let me go. I tugged my own hat a little lower, also not ready to move forward. Then Tate raised a hand and pointed down his driveway.

“You’ll have to go that way since I haven’t cleared the debris on the forest path yet,” he mumbled, his gravelly voice filled with sadness.

“It’ll be okay,” I whispered.

“I know. It just feels a little more like goodbye than I thought it would.”

He wasn’t wrong. It felt more like a long, almost permanent, farewell, and I wasn’t sure why. Tate had called the sheriff who was now aware of what had been happening. Although my parents were coming, I felt confident and in charge. Safe. Tate had my back, I would be okay.

So why did this feel so final?

Eventually, he stepped away from me and gave me a tight-lipped smile.

“I love you, Brex,” he said.

“I love you too, Tate,” I replied, smiling a little wider. He blew me a kiss and then I rode away. Glancing over my shoulder as Becky carried me across the little bridge toward the first turn, I studied Tate’s fading figure. He stood there with his hands in his pockets watching me go.

I hated how final this felt. But in the world we were living at this moment, who knew when we’d have a chance alone again.

Becky rounded the corner and he disappeared completely. Fighting the urge to run back, I pushed her into a lope and we barreled down the drive. It felt free but lonely as the trees whirled past, the fresh scent of warm rain on the breeze. Thick pines rose around me as the driveway rounded down the mountain and then spat me out in front of Jake’s house.

The path continued along in front of the lodge and then connected with the main drive. So that’s where this gravel path led too. I’d wondered that from the start. Just as Becky and I passed the edge of Jake’s home, three figures came my way.

Pulling my horse to a stop, Chance, Cole, and Eva came riding into view. Grins were etched across all three faces as they slowed their horses in front of me. Eva had on a ball cap, placed over two braids. The hoodie she was wearing was two sizes too big, and I raised a brow, giving her the look.



She blushed and gave me a quick nod of confirmation. My heart leapt with joy. Chance and Cole were both wearing black button ups today, sitting on top of their trusty steeds.

“Good morning.” Eva grinned at me.

Cole and Chance looked between the two of them and then Cole blurted out. “We saw you ride down from Tate’s!”

I rolled my eyes. “And I know what happened between Chance and Eva. We are all grown adults.” My voice was light, teasing.

They all chuckled as Eva blushed.

“So when Tate was drunk, he was talking about you. Who knew that some city slicker would steal the heart of Tate Pierce, himself,” Chance said.

“I’m not as city as you think,” I replied, and Eva nodded aggressively.

“I guess you did win one barrel race,” Cole teased, and I shook my head.

“That wasn’t my first rodeo, dude,” I answered, and everyone chuckled.

“Soooooo.” Eva grinned. “How’d you end up at his house anyway?”

“I decided I couldn’t assume anymore,” I replied, and she grinned, clapping her hands in glee.

“I thought it was a rule we couldn’t sleep over at someone else’s bunk,” Chance bantered, frowning.

“Technically, Tate has an actual house not a bunk, so it doesn’t count.” I grinned.

“Stupid loophole.” He shook his head.

“So, bossman shouldn’t be yelling at us today, right?” Cole asked, and I smiled.

“Hopefully not. I mean I left—”

“Cara!” A shrill voice cut through the air, and I immediately stopped talking. Standing outside the lodge were two people I didn’t want to see.

“Cara!” my mother shouted again, waving her hand at me, and the two figures started walking in our direction.

“Who is she shouting at?” Cole muttered, spinning in his saddle along with Chance and Eva.

“Cara!” my father yelled this time. As they neared, I saw that not much had changed. My dad looked like an older version of Paul with blonde hair instead of the strawberry color of my mother’s. He was tall, thin, with a similar facial structure to both my brother and me. Not an ounce of facial hair

dabbed his skin, freshly shaven, and he was wearing a pair of blue overalls over a red button up.

Brushing her hair behind her plump shoulder, my mother waved once more. She had my green eyes and short stature. However, while I was more muscular and fit, she was plump from years of cooking and housework. Her blue jeans hung loosely around her legs, matching a flowing flower patterned blouse.

“Cara Carsen. Don’t ignore me when I’m talking to you!” my mother shouted once more.

“That lady is crazy. There’s no Cara around here. There’s only the four of us,” Chance muttered.

Sighing, I took a deep breath knowing there was no more hiding. “I’m Cara. That’s my legal first name.” My voice broke as I kicked Becky forward.

“What?” Chance and Cole said at the same time.

“I thought it was CeCe?” Eva said as I passed her.

“CeCe is my nickname. Or was my nickname. One that Matt called me and then everyone else began calling me, because my first and last name started with a C once I got married,” I responded. Hooves shifting on the gravel sounded behind me as I rode toward my parents.

“What?!” Cole and Chance exclaimed louder.

“But isn’t your last name Phillips?” Eva added.

“Yep,” was all I said as I came to a standstill in front of the two people who hadn’t bothered to contact me for two years.

“You’re looking well, Cara dear. Now—” my mother started, but I cut her off.

“My name’s not Cara.”

“Yes, it is. That’s what we named you when you were born.”

“No, Cara died a long time ago,” I hissed.

“Cara, that is no way to speak to your mother,” my father butted in.

“I will speak however I want to this lady in front of me who has become a stranger. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have chores to do,” I snapped and watched him flinch. My mother on the other hand rolled her eyes.

“I just don’t understand why you’re so angry when we received the best news! Why wouldn’t you think to contact us either?”

“What good news? Why do you think I want to have anything to do with you? I’ve been just fine on my own for two years after you chose him

over your own daughter.” Becky stomped, feeling the frustration rising in me.

“Now, Cara—” My mother began.

“It’s Brexlynn!”

She waved her hand in dismissal. “Whatever. I’m just happy that we can begin to move past these last two years now that you and Matt have gotten back together.”

My mouth fell open and you could hear a pin drop. “I am not back with that jackass,” I snarled.

“Now, that’s no way to talk about your husband.” My mother shoved her hands on her hips.

“Husband?” I shouted. “Do you not remember the divorce papers? He signed those. From prison. Where he—”

“CeCe. Watch your tone with your own mom.” A shiver ran down my spine as the snake himself slithered out from the shadows against the lodge.

I shook my head and then I laughed. An actual laugh escaped my throat and I startled myself. Instead of the expectant fear, I was finding this entire situation to be a little funny. The weight his actions used to hold over me was no longer. He thought this would work, would intimidate me. But honestly, I was just amused by his charades. Matt’s brows twitched in confusion and shock.

“This isn’t funny,” he snarled at me. The horses behind me pranced as I just knew that all three of my friends were totally eavesdropping. Probably shocked and a little confused, but also very interested. Let the gossip get out, the information run rampant around the ranch hands. I wasn’t the least bit afraid anymore.

“But it is absolutely hilarious.” I chuckled. “This is your big finale? Grand ending to your summer game plan? Bring my parents in, who I haven’t spoken to since you went to prison?” My belly rolled with laughter as he continued to stare at me in shock. “I thought you’d try and shoot me at least.”

His hand suddenly flew to his waistband and gripped the hilt of his gun. But before he was able to slide it out from under his shirt, I heard the piercing sound of a gun cock from behind me.

It snapped through the still air, silencing even the birds that had been chirping.

“Don’t even think about it,” a deep voice snarled, grating across the breeze, and Matt froze.

A malicious grin spread across my face as I glanced over my shoulder

to see Tate sitting atop his palomino, just up the road with a double barreled shotgun aimed squarely at Matt.

And you knew by the way he held that gun that he wouldn't miss if he were to squeeze the trigger.

Matt slowly released his hand, and his light blue, long-sleeve, T-shirt fluttered back over the handgun. Raising his palms to the air, he stood still and unable to reach his weapon.

"Brex baby, you're good to continue," Tate said from behind me, a cold grin across his face.

Smiling at my parents and Matt, I continued. "Honestly Matt, I feel like a slight idiot for being afraid of you for so long. Even more so that I believed you would kill me at some point. Looks like you're the one on the wrong side of the barrel now aren't you?"

He sneered at me, frustrated and annoyed.

"Also, you should know that the police have footage of what you did to me. Apparently Tate saw right through your crap from the beginning. He has been saving everything that his security cameras caught. Which, I mean, is everything." I couldn't help but find it so relieving at how the situation was turning out. Such a nice, clean ending that didn't include anyone dying. I wasn't willing to see Tate become a killer, even for me, although there was a slightly carnal side of myself that had me hoping Matt would do something that forced Tate to pull the trigger.

"What have you done, Cara?" my mother cried out.

"Her name is Brexlynn. Fucking. Phillips," Tate growled from behind me, and I covered my mouth, stifling a laugh as the frustration that seared those words bit at everyone around us.

"Although, I'm liking her last name less and less," he lowly added after, and I felt my body freeze up for a moment. I didn't want to read into what he was saying, but at the same time, I actually liked the idea he was hinting at.

"And who are you?" my whiny mother asked.

"Her boyfriend," Tate snapped, and I heard a few whispered cheers from my friends. "And I'm assuming you and the man beside you are the two piss poor people that Brex calls her parents."

"I don't care who you are, but you don't talk to my wife that way." My father stepped closer to my mother and wrapped an arm around her.

"And I don't care what you say or that Brex calls you 'Dad' because

you are no father in my book,” Tate snarled and bumped his horse forward, still not removing the gun from Matt.

“You have no right to—”

“I have *every* right.” He asked his horse to stop. “What kind of father introduces his fifteen-year-old daughter to a twenty year old man? What kind of father agrees to them dating? Maybe what I believe is the job of a father is different from yours. But I was taught that it’s your role as a father to protect your child, not allow her to be groomed by a fucking predator. It’s your job as a father to go running to your daughter’s side the moment she says ‘Daddy, he hit me,’ not to have her marry the shithead.” Tate was livid, his face held tight as he stared death toward the man that had raised me.

“Despite the fact that you gave her over to some crazy psycho who wants to kill her, she still tells me happy stories of you. Memories that she cherishes. Ones of joy, because she still, for whatever reason, loves you. Yet you don’t deserve her. You don’t deserve the title of dad. Not to her.” He paused, his chest rising and falling quickly, the fury coursing through every fiber of his being.

His voice slowly became softer, more compassionate. “Now it’s become my responsibility to show your daughter what respect is like. What it’s like to have someone truly love her, care for her. What an actual partner is supposed to be like. I’m not complaining because I will gladly do it for Brex, but that should’ve never been something I was responsible for.”

Neither of my parents said anything. What hurt a little was the fact that my heart still broke a little for these people who had shown little to no kindness toward me for years. I still cared for them, loved them simply because they were my parents. But other than that, the love ended.

“You can only stay if Brex is okay with it. Otherwise, get off my property before I have you arrested for trespassing,” he finished. His eyes briefly met mine before returning to his sighted target. Even in this situation, he seemed to know that I was confused and hurting. Despite it all, Tate was letting me make the final decision.

Hesitating for only a moment longer, I allowed myself to forgive them and let go of the anguish that I was carrying toward them. But I couldn’t let them back in. “Leave. And don’t try to contact me again,” I said.

My mother’s mouth fell open to protest as my father’s shoulders sagged. “We are so sorry,” he quietly mumbled, cutting her off.

“I forgive you, but that doesn’t change what happened. I’m happy

now. So let me live my life,” I replied. “Go.”

My father nodded, acknowledging my request, and turned to walk away. My mother, on the other hand, stomped her foot and shook her head.

“Get. Off. My. Property,” Tate snarled again.

“Only the owner can kick us out.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest.

“Exactly. So, get the fuck out.”

“I’m sorry, what? You’re—”

“The owner. Now, leave or I won’t wait for the cops to arrest you,” he snarled again and swiveled the gun toward my mom. She shrieked and threw her hands up, quickly turning around and clacked across the gravel toward my father’s fading figure.

Closure. Relief coursed through me. Finally, I felt free of a burden I hadn’t realized I’d been carrying.

Suddenly, running footsteps crashed across the grass to my right. I glanced over at the sound.

Matt was sprinting toward the field between Jake’s house and the lodge. He’d taken the opportunity of my parents’ distraction to try and escape.

“Oh no you don’t!” Tate shouted, holstered his gun and spurred his horse forward. He ripped his rope from the saddle and loosened the loop.

Tearing off after a sprinting Matt who was on foot, running bat shit crazy, Tate quickly covered the ground between them two, swinging the rope overhead. Chance, Cole, and Eva all brought their horses forward to stand beside me as we watched the show.

Matt screamed like a little girl as Tate chased after him and then released the rope. It clamped down around Matt’s torso, shoving his arms tight against his body as Tate dallied the slack around the saddle horn and his horse skidded to a stop.

“You shit!” Matt shouted as Tate jumped down from his mount and Matt slammed, face first, into the ground.

“Damn,” Cole muttered beside me.

“Ouch.” Chance flinched.

I laughed as Tate ran toward the flopping body of Matt. He looked like a fish out of water trying to roll away but unable to. Grabbing at Matt’s ankles, he attempted to shove them together but Matt kicked, nailing Tate in his thigh.

“That’s gonna bruise,” Eva muttered.

“Please tell me someone’s recording this.” I chuckled.

“Of course!” Cole said, and I glanced his way. He was grinning with his phone pointed in the direction of the commotion.

“HOLD! STILL!” Tate shouted, trying to grab Matt’s free ankle.

“NO!” Matt yelled back.

Tate wrestled a few more moments, avoided getting kicked again, grasping over and over for Matt’s flailing ankle and finally managed to wrap a hand around his free leg. His muscle memory kicked in and Matt was hogtied within another second. My ex fought for one more second and then he finally fell still as Tate ripped the handgun from Matt’s waistband.

“Stay put!” Tate pointed at Matt on the ground and stood up, brushing off the dust from his pants. “Little shithead,” he muttered and kicked some dirt at the defeated figure laying slumped in the grass.

Tate made his way back to his horse and then mounted. “Cole. Chance,” he shouted, swiveling his head toward us. We were all sitting like spectators over something that had started out serious and turned absolutely comical.

““Sup boss?” the two said at the same time.

“You’re in charge of watching him until the sheriff gets here. I’ve got a few things to take care of,” Tate shouted and undallied the rope from his horn.

“You’ve got a lot to explain, Miss Brexlynn,” Cole said to me, and then both boys grinned as a shot rang out.

## Chapter 45

The most harrowing shriek pierced the air as all three of us snapped our gazes back to the hogtied figure squirming on the ground.

“Whoops. I guess the safety wasn’t on,” Tate muttered without remorse, and my mouth fell open.

“Did he...?” Cole started, blinking as we all stared at Matt. He screamed again and tried to break loose of the bonds, which only ripped at the bullet wound more.

“He did.” Chance nodded, stunned, as my mouth fell open. Tate took a deep breath and casually trotted our way.

“You shot him,” I stated as Tate rode up beside us.

“Fuck yeah I did.” He winked, and then loped off to take care of more things—hopefully to make sure my parents really leave.

“He shot his dick off,” Cole finally uttered out loud what we were all staring at.

“Probably should make sure he doesn’t bleed out or something,” Chance mumbled, and the two brothers slowly nodded their approval.

“You think he’ll get in trouble with the police?” Eva whispered.

Chance spun his head and grinned at my friend. “The safety wasn’t on, remember?” He winked, and the two brothers whooped and hollered, then took off running toward the still writhing and now bloodied Matt.

I waited another thirty seconds before taking a deep breath and letting it go.

Asking Becky to walk on, Eva rode beside me in silence for a moment to allow herself time to process as well. The sun was quite warm today mixed in with the aftermath of the rain, the usual cool spring breeze mostly absent and replaced by summer that had finally found its way here.

Then, she broke the gentle wind dancing through the air. “So, I need to tell you something,” Eva said, sounding cryptic.

I glanced her way as we sauntered along. “Why does it sound like



you're gearing up to tell me something bad?"

She grimaced. "It was an accident."

"What was?" I cautiously replied. Watching her for a moment, I saw her withdraw a little before reaching into her pocket. Pulling her hand back out, she was clutching my phone with trembling fingers. Extending it toward me, I slipped it from her grasp and stared at her face.

"You know how you gave me your passcode?" she began, and I nodded. "Well, this morning I thought I'd take it with me for whenever you returned from Tate's. It was vibrating. A lot. Getting quite annoying, so as the girls and I were leaving the bunk, I pulled it out of my pocket to stop it."

She paused as we turned down the main drive.

"Okay?" I questioned, urging her to continue.

"Well, you were getting a reminder for a large email. I think your phone glitched or something because it continually alerted me to the email." She stared straight forward, her face pulled tight.

"I'm still failing to see what's wrong with this situation," I said, glancing toward the serene beauty that stretched ahead. I would never tire of seeing the rolling fields of green pastures, littered with cows and horses.

"I just meant to unlock it and clear the alert. But I clicked on it instead by accident and it opened the email, and Oakley saw it over my shoulder, which drew everyone else when she gasped and, oh my gosh, Brexlynn. I'm so sorry!" she cried out, stumbling through the entire rest of her story with barely a breath.

Asking Becky to stop, I swung to face Eva confused. Her horse continued trotting forward a few more steps before she pulled the animal to a standstill as well. But she didn't look at me, her eyes remained focused on what was in front of her, hardly blinking.

"What was in the email? My credit card account information?" I asked, still trying to figure out what was so devastating about what had happened.

"No," she mumbled quietly.

"Whatever you saw, was by accident," I reassured her and she slowly, numbly turned her head toward me.

Once her eyes met mine, I spoke again. "What was in the email, Eva?"

"Very intimate pictures of you and Tate," she blurted out. I furrowed my brows, confused.

"Like naked pics?" I questioned, bewildered. Unless somebody had

watched us at his house yesterday, there was no moment of us ever being in our birthday suits together.

“No, neither of you were naked.” She chewed on her words for a moment while I remained confused. “But like, you two were very comfortable with each other. He had his hands in certain places on your legs in one of them. You were wearing this absolutely stunning dress, and he was in a suit, and it looked extremely elegant and professional. Like one of them, probably my favorite, he had tipped your head back and was kissing your neck and you just looked so swoon-worthy.” She sighed, obviously remembering what the picture looked like, and it finally clicked.

My mouth fell open. It was those pictures. *The* pictures from the wedding. The ones that the photographer had offered to take of us where Tate and I finally kissed for the first time. Or technically the second time, but I didn’t count the first.

Where he’d sat me up on a dresser at one point and slid his hands up my thighs and acted like a horny boy because the photographer had said so. To get me aroused.

I groaned and closed my eyes. “You’re saying that all the girls saw them?”

“Briefly, because I quickly locked your phone once I realized what they were, but yes,” she choked out.

“But you’re describing some of them in detail!” I whipped my head toward her, opening my eyes once more.

“See, that is the part I was hoping you wouldn’t catch.”

“What part?” I grumbled.

“The brief glance I caught was so stunning, I may or may not have gone back in and looked by myself after the girls were gone,” she quietly mumbled.

I couldn’t believe it. No matter how she put it, she had invaded my personal and private property. I’d trusted her with my phone’s password, and she’d abused it, simply because her curiosity got the better of her.

Jerking my phone toward my face, I punched in the codes and opened the email she was talking about.

And my mouth fell open.

Slowly, I began to scroll through the email, taking my time to look at each photo. Stunning didn’t cut it. Never before had I looked or felt so beautiful, and it was all thanks to Tate. I seemed confident behind that

camera lens.

Eva was right, it was mesmerizing, and I could understand why she wanted to look again. I barely made it through even a third of the photos before sliding the screen back up to the very first one. The one that Eva had said was her favorite.

That moment had been my favorite as well. His breath brushing against my skin. Delicate lips pressing upon my neck as he gripped me tightly, expressing everything and asking for nothing in return.

I, too, could stare at this all day.

Shaking myself from the stupor, I scrolled to the next photo, another intimate photo between us. This time it was our first kiss. The angle the camera had been positioned at emphasized the wrinkles into my dress and skin from where Tate gripped my body so desperately.

How had I missed it?

In each photo where his face was visible, you could see it in his eyes. Blatant, obvious. He had been in love with me even then.

“I’m sorry, Brexlynn,” Eva said, her voice drifting in from far away. I blinked, pulling myself from the email, and glanced around. Quickly locking the phone, I shoved it into my pocket and turned to face her as I spurred Becky forward.

“Thanks for telling me. I can see why you wanted to look again, so I’m not mad,” I muttered, feeling like I was in a trance as we meandered down the road and turned left toward the bunkhouse. “So, the girls know?”

“I think so. I mean, I’m not sure what they interpreted from those pictures, but I do know Oakley is pissed,” Eva replied, her voice not weighing as heavy.

“They were from the wedding, in case you were wondering. During that lull between the ceremony and reception that can happen,” I told her as we came to a stop in front of the bunkhouse.

“You hired a professional photographer during a wedding, to take pictures of a fake relationship that Tate clearly did not think was fake?” she stuttered out, and I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Not quite,” I replied and quickly explained what had happened that led to the pictures.

“Oh, you’re so lucky. I would frame every one of those,” she breathed out as we dismounted. My leg was sore, and I rubbed it, limping slightly up the stairs after we hitched our horses near the bunkhouse.

“Some of them are a little too personal to frame.” I chuckled.

“Not if they’re going in Tate’s house.” She grinned and then paused with her hand on the door handle. “I think you should tell the girls. Everything. Except for Oakley. Let her be pissed and assume all she wants about you and Tate, okay?”

I nodded as she turned the knob. But before we were able to step inside, a woman came stomping around the corner followed by two strange burly men.

A woman I had been doing everything I could to avoid since she and her husband had returned for the family reunion.

Tate’s mom.

And she looked absolutely livid.

“Hi, Mrs. Pierce,” I quickly said, stumbling down the two steps to meet her angry form. Her face was stretched tight and bright red with frustration. She was wearing a simple T-shirt and jeans today, her hair pulled up into a messy bun.

“Don’t ‘Mrs. Pierce’ me,” she snarled.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Pierce,” I muttered, a little confused as to why she was so angry.

“There you go again. You have no right to call me that. Does my son even know?” she snapped, and I stared at her, bewildered.

“Know what?”

“Don’t play coy with me girl. I know everything, and I can’t believe you would do something like that. My son is a kind, loyal man and doesn’t deserve to be played like you’re doing. Not for a second time.” She crossed her arms and shook her head at me.

“Mrs. Pierce, I really have no idea what you’re talking about.” I glanced behind her at the two men standing still and threatening.

“Oh, don’t you, Brexlynn? Or should I say Cara, or CeCe?”

I sighed. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell anyone what my first name is, but—”

“Oh, this had little to do with that, girl. Yes, I’m upset that you decided to string everyone along, but this is so much bigger,” she shouted and the door opened behind me. Out fell the rest of my coworkers and a very intrigued Oakley. I closed my eyes, preparing myself for whatever was to come.

“What are you talking about?” I asked again.

“About your husband! How dare you cheat with my son. He’s already

been through that once, and for you to do it to him again? Your parents told me about Matt, how he came here to win you back and you've been rejecting him. And somehow you managed to convince Tate to kick them off of the property? How dare you!" she screeched.

"I'm not cheating. I don't have a husband," I quickly replied, ready to explain, but she didn't give me the chance.

"CeCe Carson. That's the name that Matt gave me. Your parents said your name is Cara and CeCe is his nickname for you: his wife. I googled it because it sounded familiar, and do you want to know what I found? A picture of someone who looks a lot like you. Someone who's been to the NFR and placed fifth in the world in barrel racing. Someone who used to win a lot of money because she rode that very horse. Becky." She jabbed her finger at my buckskin who stood relaxed, blissfully unaware of what was going on. "You used to live in Idaho and were married to a Matthew Carson. The same Matt who was at the wedding. The same wedding that you showed up to and Tate introduced you as his girlfriend to his parents."

Gasps sounded behind me, much of the story getting out. Many details were missing, but the truth was coming to light.

And I needed to clear some air. "Key words there: used to. We are not \_\_\_"

"Shut up." She cut me off, and I sighed, knowing it was not worth it. "See these two men behind me? They are here to help escort you off of the ranch."

"What?" I gasped.

"You are fired, Brexlynn or CeCe. And your boss back in New York is aware of your inappropriate relationship with my son. He has booked you a flight home leaving today, and you are placed under probation at your job. He is also not happy that you lied. I informed him of your real identity as well." She smiled at me in triumph as my body became numb.

"What if I choose to stay? Refuse to leave?" I whispered, fighting back tears.

She shook her head. "I always knew there was something off about you, so I am grateful that as head of HR, I am in charge of the employees at this ranch. So, if you stay, I'll have you arrested and report you for fraud."

"Fraud?" I cried out.

"Identity fraud. You have ten minutes to pack everything and leave." She crossed her arms once more and cocked a hip.

I stared at her, confused and shutting down. This wasn't happening. I wanted to stay. The entire summer was supposed to have been spent here, and I wanted to finish things out.

Excruciating agony ripped through my shattered soul as I realized what all of this meant.

There would be no goodbye to Tate. No explanation allowed to show his mom that I wasn't who she thought I was. This was the death that my body had warned me of. Not the death of someone, but death of the hope I'd finally regained. Death of a love that had transcended almost all obstacles it was forced to face.

I was at the final mountain to climb and there was nothing left to push me over it.

Slowly, I turned around and wandered numbly up the steps of the bunkhouse. The girls parted like a wave in the sea as I began mindlessly gathering my clothes and toiletries from the bunkhouse. Shoving them inside my suitcase, it barely shut even with me sitting upon it.

I worked in a daze, feeling ready to throw up yet like this was all a horrible nightmare as I dragged my luggage from the bunkhouse. One of the burly men grabbed all of my belongings from my hand and began stiffly carrying it away.

Trailing slowly between the two men, I passed through murmurs and questions from not just the girls anymore, but many of the other ranch hands that had stopped to watch the procession. I was trapped between two large men, hired to make sure I left and keep Tate away from me.

His mom followed behind, looking very pleased with herself as we rounded the corner, and a truck was waiting. The man in front of me with a buzz cut and no beard tossed my bags into the bed and then turned around.

Hooves pounding across gravel crashed through my soundless world. Turning to my left, I saw Tate sitting on his horse, racing my way with Jake right behind him. The man behind me gripped my arm and nudged me forward, following the first burly guy around the front of the truck.

"No!" Tate shouted, but there was little he could do. Tears silently slipped over my cheeks as the man behind me shoved me into the cab.

"What are you doing?" he cried out, his voice cracking. Turning his face toward his mom, he raised his eyes suddenly looking like a little boy. Even his mom couldn't keep her face still as his lip trembled.

"Mom," he whimpered, crashing off of his horse.

“This is for you, son,” she replied as the man climbed in behind me and slammed the door shut. Buzz cut guy jogged back around the front and opened the driver’s door while I kept my eyes locked on Tate.

“Please,” he quietly cried out. “Please don’t take her away.” His mom wrapped her arms around him and he stiffened. I watched the man in front of me slowly die, frozen in her embrace.

Confusion cloaked him, ebbing the strength from his body as the vehicle’s engine roared to life. I raised a shaking hand, reaching for him as the tires spun against the gravel.

He snapped. “Don’t take her away, Mama.” He shrugged her off, sprinted forward, and ran after me.

Jake crashed in front of him, circling his frame.

“LET ME GO!” he shouted, and shoved against his best friend.

The truck sped past his restrained figure.

“BREX!” Tate ripped his torso around, throwing off Jake as the driver beside me turned the truck up the road.

And the most harrowing cry bellowed through the air.

A mournful scream of heartbreak that split the very ground around us.

The truck shook and I spun around in my seat as Tate lay on the gravel, crushed beneath Jake. He looked so broken.

A physical image of my soul.

I caught his hazel orbs once more before we rounded a corner and the man I loved disappeared from my life.

## Chapter 46

Stepping out from the rotating glass doors, I met Katie's eyes. She quickly rose from the stone fountain outside of my work's office building and shuffled toward me. My heels clicked across the pavement, pausing so I didn't bump into the bustling people around me.

"What'd he say?" she breathed out, worry etching her flawless features once she reached my side. She pushed her hair behind her ear, the breeze blowing some strands in front of her face.

"Thanks to your corroborating story concerning my past, my boss understands and is no longer mad about me not telling him my name. I am not on probation anymore," I replied, and she launched her arms around me. Squeezing me tightly. It wrinkled my white, short-sleeve blouse, but I didn't mind. It felt nice to be with her again.

"So, when do you return to Montana?" She asked, releasing me from the hug and then hooking her elbow with mine. We slowly began to walk down the street, car horns honking, people talking over each other—the sounds of the city. Midday and the sun was clouded overhead with pollution.

"I don't," I muttered, smoothing out a wrinkle in my billowing black dress pants.

"What?" she screeched, hauling me to a stop.

"Mr. Belvin still believes that my relationship with Tate was inappropriate, so I'm not getting sent back." I shifted my black handbag, fiddling with the zipper.

"But you're not on probation anymore? What does he want you to do?" She gently tugged me forward, and we began walking down the street once more.

"He says he sees potential in me for more than just western wear, so he's going to have me join his traveling team to learn about different lines of fashion." I kept my gaze ahead, trying to ignore the crushing weight blossoming in me.



Things with Tate were really, truly over.

Katie shook her head beside me, her hair flapping against my cheek.

“When do you leave?”

I sighed, walking forward in silence not quite ready to feel the finality of the situation. Wishing that these were not the circumstances I found myself in did nothing to change it, and I needed to let go. My heart was having none of that though. I still desired to show Tate my hair at its completely natural color that Katie had helped me get it back to yesterday.

Seeing him again, having him hold me again, sing to me, and smile at me was something every fiber of my being held onto. Time would help this wound heal, I knew that, and maybe getting out of the country until my coworkers returned would help too. But his face haunted my every waking moment. Those final memories of dancing in the kitchen, gentle kisses pressed against my mouth were a constant reminder to the love that I was forced away from.

“In two hours. I leave in two hours,” I finally choked out, and Katie froze, shock coursing through her.

“Where to?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know. He says there will be a ticket waiting in my name at the airport, and this new team travels all over the world so be prepared for everything.”

“And you’re going to go without a fight?”

“There’s nothing left to fight, Katie.”

“What about Tate?” she cried out, throwing her hands into the air.

“I have to let him go,” I whispered, clutching my phone tighter, ignoring the fact that Tate and I from the wedding was the picture I’d chosen for my lock screen. There was no need to share with her that every time I closed my eyes, I saw him. Cupping my face and smiling at me. Dimples pressed deep into his cheeks. Or that I saw him ride down from the forest to stop and stare at me standing at that gate for a moment.

She didn’t need to know that at every moment, every second that ticked by, I was constantly transported back to him. Reliving every precious memory where he touched me or rolled his eyes at me. Or grinned at me. The way that stupid mustache would twitch when he’d wink at me.

They were cherished moments that no matter how often I scrolled through the pictures the photographer had sent me, they were never quite satisfied. I knew they were only memories now. And deep down, the longing

that I still clung to would eventually become a thought pushed deep to the back of my mind.

But now, even as I mindlessly packed, barely able to hear a word Katie said to me, he was who I thought of. I hated the clothes I was wearing now. Hated the heels that I was strapping onto my feet. Hated the idea that this plane ride would only take me farther from the life I truly craved, the man that I so desperately loved.

Three days had passed trying to sort out my life back in New York City while constantly wondering what he was doing, where he was. Why he hadn't shown up to rescue me and save me. Like he'd always done. Except I couldn't ask that of him, not after everything. His life was there, and I was obviously not wanted by the woman he called 'Mom'.

Someone he cherished and sacrificed things for. Why would he do the same for me? I could go back, but there was a part of me that knew his mother would be waiting, maybe even my parents would be waiting. They would have none of that and would quickly tote me back off to wherever was far from Tate.

I was nothing but a sore in his mom's life. Lies, deceit, betrayal, all something she was trying to protect Tate from and had believed she'd failed doing. Blaming her would do me no good. Hating her was impossible, because I knew why she'd reacted that way, even if she hadn't given me a chance to explain.

Part of me wondered if she was telling Tate whatever she had to, just to make sure he didn't come after me. Which made me feel heartbroken and guilty all in one. That entire situation, this entire soul debilitating situation had been caused because of that one single choice to fake a relationship.

He could've said no, that it was a stupid idea. I wouldn't have argued with him because it kind of was. But his small confession of when he'd fallen in love with me made me realize why he'd so quickly and easily agreed to the absurd idea. My very misguided motivation to escape Matt's clutches had led even him into a whirlwind of turmoil that eventually spat us both out bearing insurmountable pain.

Agony that crushed me. Wrecked the very body that I was struggling to push forward.

This plane ride, this summer of travels would hopefully give me the power and strength to finally let go.

Clutching Katie for one last moment, she made me promise to call

her, and then I was swept away into a long line of security.

The slow progression forward had me once again biting back the agony that tore at me. Smashing against cages that I was losing the battle to. Crying wouldn't solve anything. It wouldn't transport me back to a time when things were simpler, more routine. Even before Tate.

Going from not having experienced love, to having it in its entirety, to watching it get ripped away was a crushing death I wished upon no one.

The plane's engine hummed as I slipped into my window seat, past the two strangers seated in my row. It was a young couple, immersed in a conversation that had them both giggling.

I'd lost that.

But wallowing in self-pity would not change the current circumstances, so I stuck some earbuds in, turned on some music, and drifted to sleep.

My dreams were haunted by a person I'd once called mine.



The plane touched down in Milan, Italy hours later, and the gentleman sitting next to me roused me awake. I smiled politely and quietly followed him out into the airport terminal. While I should've been excited to be to someplace like this, I couldn't quite find the joy within me.

The vibrant colors that littered the buildings as a taxi took me toward the hotel where I'd be meeting the members of the team weren't as bright as I had once imagined them to be. Sharing this experience with no one I cared about made the historic scenes something I couldn't wait to disappear from.

Someday I'd like to come back. When I was no longer plagued by a sorrow that I'd never experienced before.

The hotel entrance was grand, white with golden trim and a red carpet stretched to the front glass doors. Rolling my suitcase along behind me, I walked through the spinning entrance to find the lobby clean, shiny, and much quieter than the lobby back in Vegas. There was no man who smelled of smoke, caramel, and pine trees standing beside me. No casino with bells ringing and money being exchanged was across from me. It was just more

glass doors that shared a beautiful scenery of lush greenery and a swimming pool sparkling in the sunlight.

A half-smile caressed my face as Tate piggy backed me out to the pool, laughing and teasing me. His ghost of a figure slowly disappeared as four people yelped and waved at me from my right. Opposite of the lobby desk in front of white walls with white marble floors and a few black leather couches stretched the clean entrance.

“You must be Brexlynn! Mr. Belvin sent us a picture, although your hair is a little different color. Oh my gosh, you have the most perfect skin with the most gorgeous freckles ever,” a tall, thin blonde with a short bob said. She smiled brightly at me, her short leather skirt was paired with fishnets and boots tied together with a hidden streak of pink in her hair.

“That’s me,” I quietly replied, glancing at her companions. All girls, all unique. One had long raven hair, reaching her backside. She had on a grunge style and was an inch shorter than I was. Her makeup was thick but bright. Another girl with flaming orange hair had spikes all along her ears and was dressed in a seventies style of neon. Her round face was plump, and she grinned brightly.

The last girl had soft brown hair, curled loosely to her shoulders. She wore a cute flower dress, and I could’ve sworn she was barely eighteen. She smiled shyly at me and slipped behind the blonde who cocked a hip.

“I’m Tacy.” She gestured to herself and then pointed to the raven-haired girl. “That’s Lila. The one with bright orange hair is Macy and, lastly, we have Janie.” She pointed to the young girl. “This is her first outing with us, and in general. You’ve been with the company for two years now, correct? In the western department?”

I nodded my head, and Tacy grabbed my suitcase, tugging it along. We entered an elevator, and she pressed the third floor before the doors slid closed, and we began moving. They talked about the plans for today and how my job would be observation mostly and pictures, when necessary, since I was new.

We reached the third floor which of course looked just the same as the lobby. Cream carpet, white walls, and very clean. Another hotel room that had the furniture in the exact location as the room I’d shared with Tate. Except it was white and cream here with a black couch instead of brown and there were clothes everywhere.

I’d be sharing a room with four other girls and was given the pull-out

bed from the couch. Fine with me, we would only be here for a few days before flying off to another location, another hotel.

Every day was the same as before. Tacy and Lila talked a lot, gossiping about everything and anything they heard. Janie was quiet but would insert herself once in a while and Macy didn't seem to care at all about the gossip. Although she fueled the flames, speaking only to give the girls more to chat about.

Each hotel was similar as we flew from Milan, to Paris, to London.

It was beautiful to see, and I was able to take pictures next to some amazing historical structures, but when I'd send them to Katie, she'd ask why I didn't seem happier. Time wasn't making anything easier. I even missed my original coworkers. These girls were nice, but I'd been through so much with my other team. Grown in a way that was indescribable.

Laying on the couch in London after a busy day at a show, I propped myself up under my arm waiting for a turn in the bathroom. Tacy was in there right now while Lila told Janie and Macy about her newest boy toy. She was leaning on her stomach, talking to the other girls on the bed across from her.

The entire time we'd spent together, I'd never joined in any of the conversations, and I think the girls just assumed I was quiet. I would do my job, smile, and answer vague questions like what my favorite colors were and what not, but otherwise, I let them gossip without me.

Staring at Tate's face on my phone right now helped ease the pain. The weeks that had passed hadn't changed how much I hurt. But I'd begun to find solace in the little I did have left of him.

Shutting my eyes for a moment, I let myself relive the first time we'd entered a hotel room. Tossing a pillow back and forth, making himself right at home. Riding in the elevator when Matt had joined us, and him protecting me without knowing who Matt was to me yet. Even then, he'd protected me.

Shaking my head, I heard the door click open and glanced up as Tacy walked out with a towel wrapped around her head and torso. I snorted as the image of Tate standing butt naked in the bathroom that I'd barged in on, desperately needing to pee, flashed through my mind.

"What? Do I have something on my face?" Tacy shrieked, and I blinked.

"Oh. No. Sorry. Just thinking of something else," I quickly replied, and she let out a breath in relief.

“Something funny obviously?” She walked over to her pile of clothes that she tossed everywhere, looking for a pair of pajamas.

“Something embarrassing and a little funny,” I mumbled, smiling to myself as his smug expression crashed through my mind.

“Embarrassing? We all love embarrassing stories!” Lila exclaimed, leaning toward me on the bed.

“Which is exactly why this one won’t be shared. Can I use the bathroom?” I asked, and all four girls groaned.

“You never share anything. But yes, it’s all yours,” Tacy said, and I slipped down from the pull-out couch bed, grabbing my neatly folded pajamas that happened to be Tate’s T-shirt and a pair of shorts. then headed to the bathroom.

“You really haven’t told us anything personal about yourself, Brexlynn, and we’ve spent nearly every hour of every day together,” Janie piped up, which made everyone go still for a second. “What? It’s true.”

All three girls nodded in agreement and turned to look at me. “I don’t have much to share,” I replied, tossed my phone onto the bed and disappeared into the bathroom.

Another lie. Since when had I started to lie again? It was not a good look, and something that I shouldn’t do. All the lying before had landed me here, so maybe sharing with them a little something about myself wouldn’t hurt. Keep them from asking more and more.

After a quick shower, I tied my hair up into a messy bun, cleaned a couple of my earrings that looked quite dirty and pulled on my pajamas. A shirt that even after being worn and washed, still smelled ever so faintly like Tate. Part of me wondered if I was being a creep wearing his shirt still, but I wasn’t ready to let go of that part of him.

It had been hard enough coming to terms with the fact that every morning I woke up, I wouldn’t be seeing him come riding out from the tree line. There would be no more “Brex baby” from him. No more whispered secrets and shared smiles. No more Becky either. I prayed he was taking good care of her and missed her almost as badly as I missed Tate.

Because of everything, I would never own another horse.

Brushing my teeth, I gathered my dirty clothes and a few toiletries before stepping out of the bathroom to hushed giggles. All four girls immediately stopped gossiping and looked at me with their lips pulled into their teeth.

Lila broke first, giggling once more, and then hid her face as I placed my pile neatly into my suitcase, confused.

“What’s going on?” I asked, and they all snickered again. “Did something happen?”

“You dropped something,” Tacy said, pointing to the ground beside my suitcase. “I didn’t know you wore things like that.” Everyone chuckled as I glanced toward where she was pointing and closed my eyes. The lacy thong I’d bought to replace the one Tate had never returned was sitting on the ground.

Frustrated, not embarrassed, I scooped it up and stuffed it into my luggage. “They don’t give you panty lines,” I muttered, plopping myself down on my bed and grabbed my phone.

“Right. That’s why you wear a man’s shirt to bed every night,” Lila said, and the girls all chuckled again. I shook my head, refusing to add fuel to the fire, and looked down at my phone. Oh, how I wished he was here at this moment. They returned to hushed gossip, obviously about me, but I didn’t really care. I was long past becoming embarrassed by much.

“I’m not a nun,” I finally blurted out, and the room went silent. After a moment, the sheets rustled as the four girls turned to look at me. Tacy giggled, Lila grinned, and Macy shook her head while Janie gave me a sheepish smile. “Those aren’t a thong I’ve worn for a guy, but in case you were wondering, I’m not all work, no play.”

“That’s a bummer, I was hoping for a juicy story about some crazy escapade.” Tacy frowned. My phone buzzed, and I glanced down at it to see a message from Katie. I was a little disappointed, if I was being honest with myself. Part of me had slightly hoped it would be Tate, but no, it was Katie.

My coworkers texted me every once in a while, updating me on things at the ranch. Eva and Chance were officially together, which made me happy, and apparently Oakley got fired the day after I left. She’d been sleeping with Matt. Then Tate disappeared practically altogether. He doesn’t even train the two-year-olds with Chance or Cole anymore.

Though, I was informed that they are still getting worked just as much, so everyone was confused how he did it without anyone seeing. But I knew. He was up at his home, in his own pasture, working them.

Everyone contacted me except for him. Part of me ached, knowing that Tate was still at the ranch, but I also felt a little hopeful knowing that he’d secluded himself like that. Maybe he was still thinking of me. Still

longing for me as much as I longed for him.

That hope, however, was also slowly destroying me.

“Your phone seems to get a lot more attention than any of us. Come on, one juicy story. How about the embarrassing one you giggled about earlier?” Tacy pushed, grinning my way.

“Goodnight girls.” I grinned back and rolled over, closed my eyes, listening to them beg for more details, desperate for more, but that was all I was willing to give them. For now.



## Chapter 47

Morning came too quickly, and the girls were all pestering me for more information. Information I still refused to give. Tugging on a pair of high-waisted bell bottoms, I secured it with my belt and the most recent buckle I'd won, added a crop top to match and braided my hair down my back, letting just a few strands flow free.

Adding a little mascara and I was done, waiting for the rest of the girls to finish.

Jaws dropped at my outfit, and the questions began as we made our way down to the hotel lobby for some complimentary breakfast. Once again, I just smiled and brushed them away feeling my heart break a few more places as another day had passed and no Tate.

He was in my dreams once again.

Placing my phone down on the table where the girls were sitting, I stood to refill my coffee and grabbed another couple pancakes. Although they weren't quite the same as the ones back at the ranch, it was still something to fill my belly. Turning around to face the girls, I saw them all hunched over my phone.

Shuffling back as quickly as I could, I shoved my plate between the four girls. They slowly turned, embarrassment from being caught etched across each face.

"What are you doing?" I seethed out quietly, so as to not disturb anyone else around us.

"You received a text that lit up your phone screen," Tacy started.

"And?" I pressed.

"Well, I couldn't help but notice the picture on your lock screen," Lila replied from my left. The two other girls who sat across from me on this white, round table nodded in agreement.

"Which gave you the right to what? Continue looking?" I snarled, snatching my phone from the table still standing between Tacy and Lila.

“We were hoping it would help us get to know you better,” Tacy muttered, looking down at her plate.

“Have you thought that I don’t share things because I don’t know how to talk about them yet?” I snapped, shoving the phone into my back pocket. “I know you guys are all aware that there were things that happened to transfer me to your team in the middle of the summer. I’m not stupid.”

“So, why can’t you tell us what they were? Mr. Belvin said that it was for you to share, not him, when I asked.” Tacy glanced up at me.

“Because I don’t even know where to begin. Plus, there were things that happened that involved my life before I even came to the company. So, I’m still trying to figure out how much and what to share.” I sat down in the chair, feeling a little defeated and wondering if they cared to know or just cared to gossip.

“Oh,” Tacy softly said, looking back down at her plate. “It’s a beautiful picture by the way. You look absolutely stunning.”

I sighed as the girls became quiet. They looked defeated and embarrassed. I hadn’t meant to hurt them by chewing them out. It was more that I was scared, a feeling I was so used to but hated that it often morphed into some anger. Slipping the phone out from my pocket, I glanced at the new picture I’d used of Tate and me.

He wasn’t wearing his hat, so his curls were on full display. It was of my profile, and he was grinning toward the camera as I faced his cheek, holding him by his waist, ready to gently kiss his skin.

It was one of my most favorite pictures that showed Tate’s full face.

“Who is he?” Janie quietly asked.

I continued to stare at my phone. “Someone I once had the privilege to love,” I whispered, a tear slipping from my cheek. My heart broke again.

“What happened?” Macy asked, her voice gentle and I glanced up at the group to find everyone watching me, compassion in their eyes.

“Too much. Too much,” I muttered.

“But you clearly still love him,” Lila said, and I looked her way.

“That’s not always enough.”

“What’s his name?” Tacy asked.

“Tate.”

She smiled. “A strong name for someone who looks very strong.”

I chuckled. “He’s actually the reason I chuckled last night.” I smiled to myself and looked at the phone again. His beautiful face found joy in me.

From me. I was the reason that he was grinning like that.

“Do tell!” Lila squealed, and all the girls grinned at me, eager to hear what I had to say. Shaking my head, I recounted the moment to the girls.

“And when I say he was very blessed, I mean very.” I chuckled. “Of course, he had this stupid, smug look on his face like he couldn’t have planned anything better. I was hung over and needed to pee horribly, which left me extremely embarrassed. Now, it’s funny, but at the time, I’d only ever seen my ex-husband’s junk so it was rather shocking.”

The girls were laughing and then suddenly Tacy shrieked. “Wait, ex-husband? You were married?”

I nodded. “Once before. He was an ass.” Looking around at the girls, disbelief and joy caressing each of their faces, I couldn’t help but smile in return. This felt nice. No judgment was coming my way either and talking about Matt didn’t seem as scary as it used to be. I’d simply said he was a jerk without batting an eye.

Then my heart stopped.

My stomach jumped to my throat as my eye caught an image over Lila’s head, filling the doorway.

Glass paneling surrounded the room, leading toward the lobby. Bright light reflected through the frames from the sunlight outside.

I blinked, not quite believing my eyes as they rested on the figure who stood in the doorframe.

Broad shoulders upon this tall man with a cowboy hat placed on top of dark curly hair. A perfectly shaped mustache with just the right hint of stubble coated a strong jawline. Thick muscles from years of hard labor stretched at the fabric of the pale-blue T-shirt he wore. A shiny buckle peeked out beneath the shirt holding up jeans that fit just right. Pants that were long enough to bunch over the top of worn, wide square-toed boots.

My gaze shifted upwards from the spurs that still wrapped around his heels and stopped at piercing hazel eyes that had only been a part of my dreams.

I blinked again.

Then rammed my eyes shut and I began to count.

One second.

Please let this be Tate.

Two seconds.

But if it was, why had it taken him so long to come get me?

Three seconds.

I should be mad at him, but I was more excited. Giggles silenced beside me.

Four seconds.

A calloused hand pushed the hair on the left side of my face behind my ear.

Five seconds.

Fingers brushed across the piercings that shone brightly, glittering in the light.

Six seconds.

Another hand wrapped around my waist, gently lifting me from my seat.

Seven seconds.

The smell of smoke, pine trees, and caramel crashed into my nostrils as body heat enveloped me.

Eight seconds and I couldn't stand it any longer.

Ripping my eyes open, there he stood right in front of me. He was real. And he was here.

Tate.

I stared in awe for one moment. Was he really standing in front of me? All the way in London? My hand drifted upwards and I poked him in the cheek, testing to see if my mind was playing tricks on me. The corner of his mouth twitched in amusement, and I poked him again.

He gently enveloped my hand and pulled it away from his face, giving me a gentle smile.

The entire room silenced, strangers wanting to get a look at a real cowboy. Staring in awe at him while his eyes looked at nothing but me. So many emotions were running through me. I'd dreamt of this moment so often that I almost couldn't believe it was real, happening.

Whispers from the girls at the table floated upwards to me as if in a dream, a haze, far away.

"He looks like the guy from the picture."

"I've never seen a cowboy in real life before."

"Does this mean that the buckle is actually real?"

Their words meant nothing as I continued to stare, trying to wrap my head around the fact that he was here. Standing in front of me.

One hand still rested against the small of my back, the other still

tenderly held my hand. I couldn't believe it was him. My heart calmly pounded inside my chest, excited and happy. Feeling at home as he held me close. Still smelling just like him.

Those pictures on my phone were nothing compared to the real version of the man. This time, too, there was nobody to interrupt us. No Matt. No parents. No wedding to go to. Nothing could break us away, because I was also not about to leave him to go to work. If he came all this way for me, then I could easily return with him.

“Hey, Brex baby,” he whispered.

I took a shaky breath in as a tear slid down my cheek. He released my hand and gently brushed it away. His voice sounded so perfect, so real. Tate had spoken my name. My heart fluttered hearing my name on his tongue again. He had come for me after all this time. He was—

After all this time.

The joy that crashed through me slipped away in an instant and I slugged him hard against the arm.

## Chapter 48

He barely flinched as I glared at him, both upset and relieved.

“What took you so long?!” I screamed, and a soft smile crossed his face. He wrapped his arms tightly around me, holding me against his body. Squirming, I resisted for just a moment before falling into his embrace.

“What took you so long?” I quietly repeated, whimpering. He smelled so good, his body so warm and comforting. For the first time since I’d been sent away, I felt at home and at peace.

“I’m sorry, Brex baby,” he whispered, pressing his lips into my hair. “It wasn’t supposed to take that long. It shouldn’t have taken that long.” I felt a tear slide down my cheek.

Not one of frustration but relief. Relief that at least he was here. I still wanted to know why it took him so long, and he better have had a good reason, but Tate was here, and that was all I really cared about.

My little sassy self, however, wasn’t quite ready to let him off the hook. “Explain,” I sharply said, but kept my face buried in his chest so he wouldn’t notice the smirk.

His frame vibrated with a chuckle—he saw right through my charades. “Well, I was going to come after you right away. But the sheriff arrived, and I wanted to see if I could take care of Matt without needing you to relive any of that. Which took a lot more time than we had expected. Also, because of the incident with the gun and his man bits.” He grimaced, but I bit back a tiny laugh. “Anyway, eventually, with all of the evidence we gathered and working with some really good lawyers, I received confirmation he’s going to go away for a very long time. Good behavior will mean nothing this time, and you don’t have to testify.”

I shifted slightly back to see him staring over the top of my head with a slight grin on his face.

“Then your parents showed up. More than once, and I had to keep kicking them off the property. It was quite annoying, if I’m being honest.” He

slid a hand away from my waist and scratched his neck before interlocking his fingers once more and held me tightly. “Oh, and my mama tried to convince me that you actually left by your own choice, right? But I didn’t believe her. Then of course, Becky decided to colic and—”

“She what?!” I screeched, interrupting him, and he shifted his gaze down to mine. Raising his eyebrows, he gave me a goofy look.

“Will you let me finish my story?” he bantered, and I rolled my eyes.

“Go on,” I said, and he chuckled before continuing.

“Anyway, yes, Becky took the opportune moment to give me a slight heart attack. It got pretty hairy there for a moment, and sitting out there in the cold barn all alone, only made me want you even more.” He paused, a tender smile caressed his face. “I’ve never wanted something more in my life.” The girls sitting around me gasped in gentle awe. Even the few people sitting at other tables stopped to listen.

His expression turned a little more serious. “She was fading and fast that night, Brex. In desperation, or a moment of truth forced upon me by the grim situation, I scolded her. I told her that I couldn’t go after you, even though I desperately wanted to, because she wouldn’t get up. Brex, I know this sounds impossible, but the moment after I told her that, she snorted and stood up. By morning she was prancing around like nothing had happened.”

He stopped talking for a moment as I stared in disbelief at him. My horse that I thought I would never see again had nearly died. But Tate had refused to leave her side even though it meant waiting even longer to come to me.

As he talked, I knew that I could never be upset at him for any of this. He’d first made sure I didn’t have to experience anything with Matt again. Then, he dealt with my parents, and I couldn’t blame him for the little bit of doubt that may have crept up.

But what stuck with me the most was that he stayed with Becky. He was willing to stay with my horse until the very end.

“She’s okay?” I finally breathed out, and he nodded. Giving one more moment before that goofy grin came back.

“After that, I quickly skipped town. During my flight to New York, I also found out that my mama had arranged for you to leave the ranch. That she did it all and you hadn’t chosen to leave, confirming what I’d believed the entire time. Jake says that everyone thinks I’ve been a recluse since you were forced to leave, but I’ve just been busy, and then left, myself. Anyway,

once I touched down in New York, I went to the office building where you work. Your boss was out of town, and no one could remember where you'd been reassigned to. So, I called Jake and had him take a peek at your employment papers. Which is where I got your apartment's address."

I leaned into his chest again, finding more and more peace as he continued to speak.

"Once there I had the wonderful pleasure of meeting your crazy best friend, Katie. There were many questions, and I'm pretty sure at one point she attempted to threaten me with a knife, but I could be wrong." His brows furrowed for a moment and then he continued. "She told me the last she'd heard was that you were in Paris, so I took the next flight out of there and went straight to the fashion show that Katie gave me the name of. But you were gone by the time I got there, and I didn't know where you went. Nobody cleaning up the show knew either."

I wrapped my arms tighter around his waist and squeezed a little. "So, what'd you do after that?" I loved listening to him speak. Smelling him, the comfort that came from the very person I had been craving.

"I tried that track my phone thing, but you have your locations off and the password isn't your birthday. Then I had the brilliant recollection that I am rich. So, I hired a guy to track you, and he found you here, at this very hotel. Which led me to look for the next flight from Paris to London which wasn't going to leave until the morning, and I knew that would be too late. So, I rented a private jet and here we are." He finished speaking, and I sighed.

Relief, calmness, joy, everything that screamed I was where I'd meant to end up coursed through me.

"Why didn't you just call?" I asked and glanced up at him. He blinked. Stunned.

The bewilderment only lasted for a second before his hands left my back, cupped my cheeks and his lips crashed against mine.

Cheers erupted around the room as I sunk into his kiss. All the waiting made this perfect. The dreams that had helped me hang onto this man had all led to this moment. The sweetest kiss that transcended time and space. He tasted as delicious as I remembered, maybe even a little better.

He kissed me harder as I held onto him tightly. Soaking in this perfection.

Finally, after the breathless moment of shared love, he pulled away and hovered just a centimeter above my mouth. He smiled. "You are the only



girl in the world who would've been okay with a phone call," he muttered and I snorted.

"I like this version better," I whispered.

"Good," he replied and kissed me again.

And again. And again.

Slowly, he moved away and smiled tenderly at me.

"Come home, Brex," he whispered and I bit down on my bottom lip, choking back tears of joy.

I nodded, unable to speak for a moment. He'd just expressed the words I hadn't realized I'd been wishing for. Something I'd desired more than anything else. He was asking for me to be with him.

"Katie needs a job at your ranch. A permanent job, if you want me to come back. And I don't want to sleep in the bunkhouse anymore, I need a place for my stuff. I have a lot of stuff," I replied, giving him a teasing grin and he tilted his head.

"Are you negotiating right now?" he asked. I nodded. "You get to live with me obviously, especially since I've got a garden that needs sunflowers out in front of my house. Katie can be a ranch hand like Chance and Cole, since I'm assuming she knows her way around horses if she's your best friend."

I stared at him, stunned. He remembered. A once fleeting comment was as important to him as everything else I'd shared, and I grinned. "This is you obviously accepting, right?"

"What's in it for me?"

Stepping out of his embrace, I did a slow spin. "All of this."

He smiled and cocked his head, pretending to assess his prize. "For how long?"

Stopping my spin, I faced him with a smile. "How long would you like?"

"Forever won't be long enough," he gently said, and before I had a chance to respond, the girls at the table stood up and practically tackled him. Ogling over how cute he was being. Tate stared over their heads at me as I giggled. He was fighting between surprise and humor, the joy eventually winning over. Slowly, they stopped attacking him and spun in my direction.

"Go get your stuff and get out of here!" Tacy said.

"And the next time we see you better be at your wedding!" Lila added. Macy and Janie grinned and nodded in agreement before shuffling

behind Tate and literally shoving him my way.

He hadn't shot down the idea. He hadn't balked at their comment for a wedding.

No, he smiled. As if he wanted that too.

Tate waved at the girls and slipped a hand into my fingers, before turning me around and leading me from the room out into the lobby. It was silent and perfect as he pressed the button for the elevator, and we waited. Like Déjà vu, we waited for a silver elevator as we'd done the first time, we spent alone time together.

"So, do we get to fly home in a private jet?" I asked, and he chuckled.

"With how much that cost me, I should've just bought the damn thing," he muttered, and then slung his arm around my shoulders.

"Tate?" I asked as we stepped into the elevator.

"Hmmm?"

"Why didn't you shut it down when Lila mentioned a wedding?"

The doors slid closed, and I pushed the three as he glanced at me with a grin.

"Why didn't you?" he asked, and I glared at him. That deep chuckle reverberated around the empty elevator as he leaned down and pressed his lips against my forehead.

"Oh, I have something for you," he said and shoved his free hand into his pocket. Removing it ever so cryptically, he kept his fingers balled in a fist and grinned mischievously at me.

"What's that look for?" I asked, feeling a little cautious and intrigued.

His grin widened. "You once said that I wouldn't ever get to see you in this. I request you wear this on our wedding night." He opened his hand and there was that black, lacy thong he'd kept from our trip in Vegas. I quickly snatched the panty from his hand and hid it in my fist. He chuckled and faced forward once more.

"You have to propose first for that to ever happen," I shot at him, biting back the happy grin spreading across my face. He tugged his hat lower over his eyes, a playful look twinkling in those beautiful hazel orbs.

"I love you, Brexlynn Phillips," he whispered as the elevator dinged and the doors slid open.

"I love you too, Tate Pierce."

"Though I'm really hating that last name of yours."

I followed him out of the elevator as his gaze slid to mine, twinkling

with joy. “Brexlynn Pierce sounds better, now, doesn't it?”  
It really did.

*The End*

## About The Author

**R.L. Atkinson**



Born and raised in Utah, R.L. Atkinson enjoys a busy life as a mom and wife taking care of all kinds of animals. She uses her personal life experience to help bring reality to all her novels. Writing has always been a passion of hers, and publishing is a dream come true.

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