

MEAGANS OF
COPPER
CREEK
BOOK ONE

Some
Cowboys
are
Off-Limits

NATALIE DEAN

SOME COWBOYS ARE OFF-LIMITS

KEAGANS OF COPPER CREEK BOOK 1

NATALIE DEAN



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Cover Design by Deborah Bradseth (who has been amazing to work with! Thank you Deborah!)

DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this book to YOU! All of my wonderful readers that have been following my stories over the years.

We're embarking on another new journey through Copper Creek. I hope you enjoy these stories as much as you've loved the Baker brothers!

Thank you to my biggest fans.... There's a lot of you! Jess, Bernie, Wren, Judy, Sherry, Vicci, Phyllis, Debbie, Indra, Jennifer, Carol, Jeanette, Margaret, Paul, and I know there's more I didn't list. But thank you all!

And I can't leave out my wonderful mother, son, sister, and Auntie. I love you all, and thank you for helping me make this happen.

Most of all, I thank God for blessing me on this endeavor.



AND... I've got a special team of advance readers who are always so helpful in pointing out any last minute corrections that need to be made. I'm so thankful to those of you who are so helpful!

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Elijah

Elijah ran a hand through his mussed hair and heaved a sigh as he let his gaze sweep over the field of hay. Half of his work was done, and tomorrow he'd have to do the rest. He wiped his brow, then peered up at the sun. They only had a few weeks left before it would be too late to cut the hay for storage. It'd be near impossible for it to dry if they waited until the end of September.

Thankfully, they had a few good hot days left. Then they'd have to focus on the potatoes and onions in the other fields. It had been a rough start, but now that they finally had the upper hand on their farm, he could see a profit coming their way in the new year.

He smiled to himself as he watched every brother, right down to the twins who were going to start their senior year this fall, working hard. There wasn't a single soul who didn't put the good ol' Keagan effort into play.

And they all had Wade and Annabel to thank for it, too. His oldest siblings were the glue that held this family together. Not a single soul had been lost. That was saying a lot, considering their parents had abandoned them about fourteen years ago. There were times he thought for sure that someone would call Child Protective Services on their sorry bunch, but somehow they'd managed to avoid it.

Elijah slapped his hat onto his head and trudged toward the house. It would be better to leave the tractor behind at this point. It was getting late and they'd run out of daylight before he could finish the field.

His stomach growled as if alerting him to the fact that his youngest sister was likely finishing up supper. For a fifteen-year-old, she could cook ten times better than anyone in their family—including Annabel. Even Charlie knew how to pull her weight and contribute to their family as a whole.

If they continued working hard, Elijah could see the Keagan family rising up in the ranks. The Baker family had an orchard and cattle. The Callahans did a little bit of everything. But the Keagans could corner the market on agriculture. None of them had any education in the matter, but they'd learned on their feet and he was proud of how far they had come.

They just had to keep moving forward.

Lights flashed on the horizon a little way from the house. Headlights from the looks of it. The sedan was sleek and shiny. When he squinted, he could have sworn that it was a black convertible. But that was ridiculous. No one around here would buy such a ridiculous foreign car.

Even as he passed that judgment, he couldn't help the yearning he had for something so nice. What he wouldn't give for a brand-new truck that could haul more and go faster. Instead, he had a poor, beat-up, rusted Ford.

He used to be proud of his vehicle. He'd got it with his own money when he was twenty. But as a near decade had passed, he wasn't too keen on it anymore. Sure, it could still run, but just barely.

The car sped closer, spitting gravel until it careened to a stop in front of the house. Some of his brothers stopped what they were doing to stare out at the sight just like he had.

Lucas came up beside him, exiting the barn as he'd passed it.

A woman exited the car, only distinguishable by her long, black hair that she tossed over her shoulder. She looked

familiar enough, but it was hard to say from where.

“Who do you think that is?” Lucas nudged him with his elbow.

“How the heck would I know?”

His brother wagged his brows up and down. “Because if you knew, you could call dibs.” He chuckled and strode toward their visitor.

Elijah darted after him, grabbing his shoulder as he pulled him backward. “You’re not going to hit on a stranger at our house.”

“Why not? I’ve done it before.”

His eyes darted back toward the waiting car. Even narrowing his vision didn’t help him make out who this visitor could be. His hand tightened on Lucas to prevent him from accosting the woman who’d arrived.

Lucas shrugged out from under his grasp. “Ow, geez, Elijah, what’s wrong with you?” He rubbed his shoulder, tossing his brother a dirty look.

“I mean it, Lucas. You’re not going over there. Let Wade or Annabel handle it.”

Lucas rolled his eyes, letting out a huff. “You’re not serious.”

“I’m dead serious. You’ve broken enough hearts as it is.”

Glee spread across his younger brother’s face, but he quickly hid it with a frown. “I haven’t broken any hearts.”

“Yeah? How many voicemails do we have to listen to on the house phone before you admit you’re leaving a trail of disappointed women in your wake.” Elijah pulled Lucas behind him and headed toward the house. When he heard his brother coming behind him, he stopped and faced him. “I mean it, Lucas. Stay put.”

“But it’s supper time. You can’t keep me from eating whatever Charlie made.”

“Then go in the back.”

Lucas shot a look toward the house and then sighed. “Fine. But you have to give me all the details the second you sit down for dinner.”

“Whatever,” Elijah muttered. He headed back toward the house but stopped just when Annabel came darting out the front door. She practically flew down the steps and at their visitor. That was when it all clicked.

He knew exactly who had come to visit.

Scarlett.

Elijah hesitated. At this point if he continued on the path he'd taken, he'd have to pass by Scarlett and say hello. Otherwise, he'd have to backtrack slightly to get to the path that worked its way around the house to the back.

Shoot. He'd never really gotten along with Annabel's friend. She'd always seemed to manipulate Annabel into doing things. While his sister always claimed to want to do what Scarlett said, Elijah couldn't be so sure.

When Scarlett wanted to sneak out and drink, Annabel went too. When she decided to straighten up and become one of those women who deigned marriage beneath her, Annabel followed along.

None of this would be a problem, but Scarlett had access to college and Annabel did not. So Scarlett got the job overseas and Annabel was stuck in this dump. What kind of friend did something like that? She practically abandoned Annabel from the time she went to college to... well, until this very moment.

Elijah worked his jaw, the irritation growing with each passing second as he saw the two women together. If Scarlett was here, that meant only one thing. Annabel would fall for whatever Scarlett wanted her to do.

He muttered a curse.

Annabel had been doing so well lately. What if she had a relapse with her AA program?

A sigh burst from his lips and he hurried toward the house with a quicker step.

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t even realize she was having problems,” Annabel hugged Scarlett close. Her eyes darted toward Elijah when his boot connected with a stone, sending it skittering across the ground. “Elijah, it’s Scar.” She pulled back, allowing her friend to face Elijah. “She’s back in town because her mom passed.”

A myriad of emotions filtered through his body. His own parents weren’t worth the grief he’d spent on them, but Scarlett’s parents had been the good kind. “I’m so sorry, Scarlett.”

She offered him a small smile. “It’s been really hard. My dad is taking it the worst though.”

“I can imagine,” he muttered gruffly. “It’s good that you could visit. Will your company be allowing you to stay long?”

Scarlett’s dark brown eyes darted to Annabel and back to Elijah. “Actually, I’m not going back.”

Annabel gasped. “What?”

Elijah stared at Scarlett blankly. This was unheard of. A decade of working for a company and she was willing to walk away from that?

“What do you mean you’re not going back? Aren’t you like making a ton of money over there?” Annabel’s voice seemed to go up in pitch.

Scarlett clasped her hands together in front of her and looked away. “I know it doesn’t make sense. And maybe we can talk about it later, but right now I wanted to come visit my best friend.” Her voice sounded sadder than he’d remembered it.

For a moment he felt sorry for her. Losing a parent couldn’t have been easy. And if she’d been out of the country when it happened, there was a chance she hadn’t said her goodbyes.

That sadness was fleeting. His gaze trailed her up and down from the way she'd applied her makeup to the name-brand clothing she wore. This wasn't the vision of a woman who had struggled much in her life. Scarlett Perez had more than enough going for her. Everyone had to struggle a couple times in their life. This was her time.

Elijah folded his arms. It would be wise to keep his mouth shut. Annabel was clearly thrilled to see her best friend, and he could see the excitement in her gaze over the prospect of having a friend back in town who she connected with.

Scarlett glanced at him briefly, then looked away. She probably remembered that he didn't appreciate her much. Out of all the Keagans, he was the only one who was willing to voice his disdain for her—sometimes in person. And he wasn't about to stop now.

Annabel pulled her friend into a tight hug again. "Well, I'm sorry for the reasons you're back. And I can't wait to hear all about your plans now that you're staying. Do you want to join us for dinner? I'm sure we have plenty. Charlie makes more than enough because there's so many hungry men."

Scarlett's brows shot upward. "Wait. Charlie? As in little Charlotte? You're having her do the cooking?"

"She's fifteen now. She's more than capable," Annabel said and laughed, looking to Elijah for backup.

Elijah nodded stiffly. "Around here, we all pull our weight. I'm sure you can appreciate that. Back when you took off to parts unknown, that's what you were raving about, right?"

Scarlett shot him a flat look.

"You know, because you ran off to college and then got that fancy job in Germany or whatever." Disdain dripped from his voice. At least they had one thing in common. They could both appreciate the need to move up in the world. Back when she'd left, he might not have felt the same. But he sure did now. "Anyway, Charlie is one heck of a cook. Even better than most of the guys who work down at Sal's."

"Sal's? That diner's still in business?"

“Of course it is.” Annabel gasped with excitement. “You haven’t been back since they’ve upped their game, have you? Oh, you have to go. They’ve got a new gal who makes the most delicious pies. They’re to die for.”

A slow smile spread across Scarlett’s face. She glanced at Elijah, but he didn’t return her grin. Then her gaze shifted behind him and she blinked before her smile split her face wide open. “Lucas? Is that you?”

Elijah stiffened. What in heaven’s name was his brother doing? He’d promised to go inside! Turning around, he found a sheepish-looking Lucas standing a few feet behind him.

“Scar? I thought I recognized you. What are you doing back in town?”

Scarlett’s smile faded somewhat. “My mom passed. I came home for the funeral.”

Lucas frowned. “I’m sorry. How’s your pa doing?”

“As well as can be expected. She was his whole world, so he’s not taking it too good.”

Lucas nodded, stepping around Elijah and taking Scarlett’s hands in his. “You let us know if there’s anything we can do to help. I know your father’s property isn’t too hard to keep up, but the grief can get you by surprise.”

“You’re so sweet, Lucas. I’ll for sure let him know.” Her eyes were locked on Lucas, and the connection between them wasn’t lost on Elijah for a single second.

He swallowed back the curse that hovered behind his lips. What he really wanted to do was grab his brother by the scruff of the neck and drag him inside like the rabid dog he was. Lucky for Lucas, Elijah didn’t feel like making him look like a fool in front of Scarlett.

Elijah shoved his hands in his pockets and jutted his chin toward the house. “I’m sure supper is getting cold if there’s any left by now. We might want to head inside if we’re not going to starve tonight.”

Lucas was the first to head up the steps. Then Annabel and Scarlett followed. Elijah watched them all disappear inside the house. Then he tramped up the steps and shut the door behind him.

Laughter and rowdy voices drifted through the house from the kitchen. He could hear his other brothers welcoming Scarlett for supper. By the time he got to the kitchen door, she was seated at the table beside Annabel.

Elijah couldn't help studying her, listening to every single thing she said so he could get a feel for her plans. If she even breathed a word about something that would send his sister off the deep end, he wouldn't hesitate to ask her to leave.

Once or twice she glanced up at him, her expression blank. Once upon a time he could read her—but that was probably when he'd still had a crush on her. Now, he knew better. Now, he understood that she was only out for herself.

Still, he leaned against the doorjamb, watching her as Liam pushed a plate into his hands. "Here. Charlie thinks you're going to starve if you don't eat this."

Fumbling with the plate, Elijah's focus shifted to his younger brother. Liam leaned against the wall, his gaze darting from Elijah to those at the table. "I know you don't really like her, but you realize you're going to have to be nice, right?"

"I'm nice," Elijah scoffed. "Since when have I ever not been nice?"

"I dunno. There was the time when Scarlett brought Anna home late one night, and you sorta tore into her."

Right. That was when Annabel learned she couldn't control herself around alcohol. "Well, that was like ten years ago. I'm different. She's different." Or at least he hoped she was. "Besides, this is Scarlett we're talking about. She's not going to stick around long."

"But she said—"

"I know what she said. I don't believe a word of it. She's always running off to do something new. She'll stay long

enough to help her dad and then she'll be back to leaving everyone who cares about her. You'll see."

Liam took a bite of his pulled pork sandwich. "Yeah, I guess."

Scarlett

Scarlett would never get used to how big Annabel's family was. Even when she was younger, she couldn't believe just how many children their parents wanted to have.

Then their parents left.

She glanced around the table, marveling at how they'd managed to stay together. When she was younger, she had felt bad for this family. The poverty. The lack of supervision. But as she took in everyone, she couldn't help but wonder what it might have been like if she'd had even one sibling.

Would they be close? Would dealing with her mother's death be easier?

She couldn't imagine so. The ache that sliced through her right now was deep enough that it didn't feel like anything would make it better.

Except it would eventually subside. She had logic on her side. The grief would abate when she dove into her new purpose—taking care of her father.

Scarlett could feel Elijah's judgmental stare on her again. No one held a grudge quite like Elijah. There was no reason for him to be so cranky, especially after so much time had passed. It wasn't like she was the same Scarlett he'd known

before—not that she'd been all that bad. Elijah was just... stubborn. He wanted everything to be just so.

This time, she forced herself to focus on the conversation at hand.

“Then Brielle told Wade there was no way he was going to buy that new bull, and if he did, he was gonna be sleeping in the barn with it.” Lucas laughed, and his gaze darted toward Scarlett briefly. “Can you imagine? Not even a year ago, Wade would have been the one to put her in her place. But I guess that’s what marriage does to you.” His gaze locked on Scarlett. “Don’t you agree, Scar? Marriage is for the weak.”

Several pairs of eyes turned toward her and she choked on the water she'd just sipped from her glass. “What?”

“I seem to recall you had zero interest in getting married. I believe your exact words were that a woman could make it in this world without the help of a man just fine.” He winked at her, and suddenly the flutters from her childhood crush disappeared. She must have changed a great deal for something so simple to turn her off.

“I don’t think I ever said *that*.”

“Oh, come on, Scarlett. You swore off men back when we turned twenty,” Annabel said as she laughed. “We made a pact, remember? We were going to stay single until we got everything we wanted in our lives and then some.”

Scarlett found herself flushing. Yes, things had changed drastically since that time. It seemed like a lifetime ago. She took another sip of her water, but even as the cold liquid spilled down her throat, she couldn’t shake the embarrassment she currently experienced over just how vocal she’d been back then. She cleared her throat and offered a small laugh in response. “Actually, I think I’ve gotten to a point where I would rather find someone to spend my life with.”

The room went quiet. This family wasn’t like any other she’d met. It was like her statement was blasphemy, but only because it appeared Annabel and Lucas had both opted to stay

single just like she had. Perhaps Elijah had felt the same way; she couldn't be certain because she refused to meet his gaze.

The lump in her throat continued to swell and the blush she was certain she wore deepened. "That's one of the reasons I'm back." She met her friend's gaze, surprised to find Annabel looking so disappointed. "I was going to tell you when we talked later. But I guess this is as good a time as any. I'm moving back—indefinitely. It's time for me to settle down and start a family."

"What are you talking about?" Annabel whispered. "I thought... you said you loved your life. Everything was perfect." The hurt in her voice didn't quite make sense. It was as if Annabel had been frozen in time all these years apart.

Scarlett's gaze darted away. "Maybe we could go hang out on the porch or something."

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea." Annabel got up, leaving her plate at the table. "I'd love to find out how you got brainwashed."

Scarlett blinked. This wasn't the reaction she'd expected. She'd hoped her friend would be thrilled that she was back, but right now it didn't feel like she was in acceptance of the person Scarlett had grown into. She got to her feet and followed Annabel toward the door.

Elijah's hard stare was hard to miss when she passed him, and the hairs on the back of her neck refused to settle even long after she'd made it outside.

Annabel settled onto the porch swing—the one on which they'd spent summer nights chatting. It creaked and groaned but thankfully didn't snap under the weight. Scarlett gave Annabel a dubious look when she patted the area beside her.

"I don't really feel like sitting down right now," she murmured.

At least Annabel smiled at that. She tilted her head and let out a sigh. "Okay. Tell me what happened."

"What do you mean? My mom died."

“No, what happened to make you change who you are?”

“I’m still the same me,” Scarlett insisted. She scooted back and leaned against the railing. “I guess I’ve just realized that life is short. My mom was only fifty-four. She still had her whole life ahead of her. I can’t spend the rest of mine wasting it on a career.”

“But you love your job.”

“Yeah, I did. But it’s not the end all. What happens when my dad passes? I’ll be alone.”

“You won’t be alone,” Annabel argued. “You’ll have us. You know that, right?”

Scarlett shrugged. “Of course I do. But eventually you will fall in love and start a family. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life being the fun aunt. I want a family of my own.”

“But...” Annabel’s brows furrowed, but at least she didn’t appear disappointed anymore. “You always said that you didn’t want to be defined by a guy or a kid. Not that it’s bad... but you were right. Some people just don’t want to be tied down. That’s what we decided, remember?”

“People change, Anna. I’ve changed. It took losing my mom to make me realize that I’ve been doing it all wrong.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Her frown faded and she offered a half-smile. “But I love you too much to hold it against you. I just think it’s a dumb decision, and part of me hopes that you’ll come to your senses.”

Scarlett laughed. “Sorry to break it to you, but I’ve finally started thinking clearly.”

“Okay, so what’s your plan? You used to be a translator for some big company. What now? I don’t think that Ingrid down at the hardware store will need someone who can speak five languages.”

“Actually, it’s nine now.”

Annabel choked, coughing after she sucked in sharply. “Seriously? Dude, you really shouldn’t even be here. This town isn’t going to give you anything after the life you led.”

“It’s going to give me more time with my dad,” Scarlett said simply. “And my friends.” She cocked her head slightly and her smile widened. “Ten years later and you’re still the only one I would want to bare my soul to.”

Her friend laughed. “Does that mean I’ll be the first one you tell when you find the guy you’re after?”

Scarlett joined in on Annabel’s laughter. “Of course. I can think of no one I would rather spill all my secrets to. Now, tell me if there’s any fresh blood I should make myself aware of. Or anyone I should avoid.” She lifted her brows a few times. “I drove past that new country club coming in. That place is huge.”

Annabel pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. “Yeah. The guy who owns it isn’t half bad. He’s actually more of a saint. First, he built the club. Then he expanded it into an equine therapy center for kids and adults. It’s crazy.”

“Whoa. Is he single?”

Annabel rolled her eyes. “I guess when you said you were ready to get married, you weren’t lying. No, Shane is engaged to one of the Callahan girls.”

Scarlett gaped at her friend. “Wait, so how many of them are married? Brielle married Wade, right? I still can’t believe that. So Adeline must be married. Who was next in line?”

Shaking her head, Annabel let out a heavy sigh. “There is way too much for you to catch up on tonight. You might as well schedule some sessions with me so I can fill you in on everything that’s changed.”

“Well, it’s not my fault,” Scarlett groaned. “You were supposed to keep me informed about everything that was happening out here. I feel like you’ve been holding out on me.”

“I guess we’ve both been sorta busy.” Annabel pressed her lips together. “Do you have a plan for what you’re going to do? I mean for work?”

Scarlett shook her head, a chagrined expression filling her face. “I don’t have a clue. I figured I’d get back, settle in, and then decide what’s the best route to take. I don’t have many expenses.” She glanced over her shoulder toward her car. “And if worse comes to worst, I can just sell my car, ya know?”

Annabel’s gaze followed the motion. “That would be a shame. It’s an awesome car.”

“Material things aren’t everything,” Scarlett said quietly. “If my mom’s death has taught me anything, it’s that I need to prioritize my relationships with others a lot more.”

“Man, you really have changed,” Annabel mused. “Then again, you might change your mind like you have in the past.” She said it with a light tone, but it still hurt a little bit. Scarlett must have made a deep impression on the people in her life if they all insisted that she was this flakey.

“I guess only time will tell.”

Her friend’s smile brightened. “I bet it will be great. And it’s like Lucas said. If you need any help with your dad’s farm, you can let us know. We’ve found a good rhythm here. We could give you some pointers if you need it.”

“I’d like that. There’s some stuff he’s let go of since my mom passed. It’s only been a couple weeks, but it definitely shows.” The ache in her chest increased. She still couldn’t believe she’d missed saying goodbye to her own mother. They’d thought she was going to pull through after the accident.

Never in her wildest imagination had she thought she’d be motherless.

“You want to talk about it?” Annabel’s voice broke through her reverie, and Scarlett glanced at her friend.

“Nah. I’m fine.”

Annabel’s eyes narrowed. “Scar...” she drawled. “You lost your mom. I can tell you’re upset even though you’re putting on a brave face. You don’t have to hide it from me, you know that, right?”

“I know.” She rubbed her arms up and down, but it didn’t rid herself of the goosebumps that had formed. “Everything is still a little too fresh.” Her voice broke this time. “Maybe in a few weeks after I have some time to process it?”

“Can you at least talk to your dad about it?”

Scarlett shook her head. “There’s no way. He’s a ghost of himself. I’ve never seen him so despondent. If I told him how I was feeling, I think it could make things worse.”

“I’d think you two could connect on it, though.”

The truth of the matter was that she’d let her relationship slide with her family. She couldn’t remember the last time she came home for a holiday. Had she called on said holidays? Of course. But for all intents and purposes, her parents had become strangers. Watching Annabel with her family made her realize just how far her relationship with her father had fallen. And she needed to fix it.

She wouldn’t be able to do that if she chose to return to Germany. There were no other options besides staying.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Scarlett flashed her friend a smile. “Of course. This is just part of life, right?”

Annabel didn’t look convinced, but before she could say so, her phone rang. She grabbed it from her back pocket and held up a finger as she answered. “Hello?” She glanced toward Scarlett, covering the speaker of the phone. “I’m going to take this inside, okay?”

Scarlett nodded and turned away from the house.

She wasn’t alone for more than five minutes when the screen door opened and shut. “That was fast,” she murmured.

“What are you doing here, Scarlett?” Elijah moved to lean against the railing beside her.

Tossing him a confused look, she muttered, “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You know what I’m talking about.” He sighed.

Scarlett faced him, her brows furrowed. “Actually, you’re going to have to lay it out for me.”

His expression was hard, not unlike all the other times he’d stared at her this evening. “Annabel hasn’t seen you in ages, and now suddenly you’re here and want to catch up with your *best friend*.” He spit the words out like they were venom.

“What is your problem?” she snapped back.

For a moment he looked confused. But then his eyes hardened. “What?”

“You’ve never liked me. I get that. There’s something I’ve done that really made you mad. But you said so yourself. I haven’t been around for ten years. So what is your problem?”

“*My problem? My problem* is that you only show up when you want something or you need a little minion to make you feel better about yourself. I’m not going to let you mess with Anna again. She’s finally in a decent place.”

Scarlett was at a loss for words. Out of everything Elijah could have said, this wasn’t expected. What was she supposed to say? Even if she recalled every memory she had of herself with Annabel, she wouldn’t be able to pinpoint any instance when she’d treated her poorly. Elijah was remembering wrong. He had to be.

She opened her mouth, fury surging inside her, but the door to the house opened and banged shut.

“Sorry about that. It was work. I guess I’m going to have to cover someone else’s shift.” Annabel’s eyes darted from Scarlett to Elijah and back again. Her brows furrowed. “Is everything... okay?”

Elijah stepped back, a fake smile spreading across his face. “Yeah. Why wouldn’t it be?”

Annabel’s eyes drilled into Scarlett, but she wasn’t about to tell her a single thing. This was between herself and Elijah. The conversation wasn’t over. They’d settle things the second she could get him alone. Her own strained smile tugged at her lips. “Yep. *All good.*”

Elijah

Elijah didn't buy one word that Scarlett had said since the moment she arrived. She was just trying to win the sympathy vote until she inevitably left again. He couldn't remember one time in the past when she had someone else's best interest at heart—especially not Annabel's.

Not only that, but Scarlett had always had a one-track mind. Ever since she was a teenager, she'd always planned on being a fiercely independent woman. This was one of the many reasons his small crush had fizzled out.

Was she objectively attractive? Yes. She was one of those women who would continue to turn heads for years to come.

There was also something about how driven she was. Scarlett had made something of herself. Walking away from all of that simply didn't make sense. There had to be something deeper going on.

He spent the rest of the evening out on the porch while Annabel and Scarlett caught up. Their quiet voices were difficult to follow even though he was only a few yards from them. None of it mattered, though. When he got a chance to be alone with her, he'd tell her exactly what she was going to do.

She'd tell Annabel she'd changed her mind and wasn't going to be sticking around after all. Then Annabel wouldn't have a relapse, and everything would go back to normal.

A small niggling thought weaseled itself into his head. Was he being too hard on her? Nah. If Wade were here, he'd agree with Elijah's sentiment. In fact, Elijah would make sure to tell his older brother what was happening and maybe they could have an intervention with Annabel about being manipulated by her best friend.

"What's your deal, Elijah? Don't you have something else you could be doing right now?" Annabel's voice rose enough to pull his attention to her. "You need to stop staring like a crazy person. You're weirding Scarlett out."

He glanced to Scarlett but was unable to read her expression. "I'm allowed to be out on this porch as much as anyone else. It doesn't belong to just you."

"No, but if I want to catch up with my friend, you should have the decency to give us some privacy."

Elijah took a few steps toward her. He leaned against the post at the stairway and crossed his arms. "Maybe I'm not willing to believe Scarlett is here with good intentions."

Annabel scoffed. "What is that even supposed to mean?"

"It means that Scarlett has never been the best influence on you."

Annabel rolled her eyes. "You barely know Scar. So how about you mind your own business."

His gaze drilled into Scarlett. "You said you planned on staying? Where are you going to work while you're here? Because Copper Creek is nothing like working for a big company abroad. It's still just a small town."

Scarlett shifted in her seat, but her gaze never wavered. "I don't know where I'll be getting a job. It's not like there's a lot of people looking for someone who can speak different languages here, so my college degree isn't going to do me much good, is it?"

"Exactly. The Scarlett I knew wouldn't just come here without a plan. She would have figured out what she was going to do for work, where she was going to live, and when

she was going to go crawling back into the hole she came out of.”

“Elijah!” Annabel gasped. “What is wrong with you!”

“You want to know what’s wrong? I’ll tell you what’s wrong. Scarlett has been nothing but trouble since the time you were kids. I might be younger than you, but even I could tell that she manipulated you into doing things you shouldn’t have. She was using you.”

Pain and surprise flickered across Scarlett’s expression, but only briefly. She looked away but didn’t argue.

Annabel, on the other hand, was quick to strike. She shot to her feet, her face flushing with indignation. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You have no clue.”

“Yeah? Well, how about you enlighten me? Huh? Tell me why I should welcome the likes of her on our property after what she did to you.”

“What she did?” Annabel shook her head. “I don’t owe you anything. Not a single explanation. How about you slink away like the rotten brother you are and leave my friend and me alone, all right?”

Elijah glowered at the two of them. This wasn’t going to end well. He could feel it deep in his bones. If he was going to ensure that his sister remained safe, then he needed to make sure that Scarlett didn’t do anything stupid. But how was he supposed to do that when Annabel wanted him banished from her presence?

“Well? Leave. Go, before I call some of the guys out here to drag you inside.” Annabel’s voice seethed with venom, but what did he expect? She had always come to Scarlett’s defense from the moment anything ever threatened her.

He let out a huff and stormed inside. He’d come up with a plan eventually. And maybe he wouldn’t have to use it. If he was right about Scarlett, then she’d be out of here before the end of the month.



ELIJAH THREW ALL his energy into harvesting the hay the following day. He needed to stay busy or else his thoughts would immediately revert to Scarlett and how infuriating it was that she'd returned.

What was worse was the fact that Wade didn't care. He seemed to believe that Annabel was perfectly fine choosing the friends she wanted to spend her time with. And if Scarlett was one of them, she was grown up enough to make that decision.

Clearly, Wade had forgotten the last time Annabel went off the deep end with her drinking. Hopefully, she was still going to meetings. She'd need the support.

Elijah finished up with the tractor and drove it along the dirt path that led to the barn. He'd park it out back, and then he'd have one of his other brothers take the baler out to the field in a day or two after the hay had dried up enough.

When he climbed down from the tractor, Lucas was coming straight for him. Elijah fell into step beside him as they both headed for the barn. His brother glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "I have a favor to ask you."

A grunt escaped Elijah's throat.

"I know you're busy with the harvesting, but I just got a call from Mr. Perez."

Elijah stiffened. Why had Scarlett's dad called him? He faced his brother, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

Lucas offered a crooked grin. "Mr. Perez cut his hand pretty bad when he was working in his fields. He's not going to be able to finish the season out, and Scarlett doesn't have a clue how to run a ranch."

Already, Elijah could see what was coming. Lucas had made the mistake of offering his help on their ranch when he'd shamelessly flirted with Scarlett the other day. Of course Mr. Perez would request help from their family. On top of that

offer, Scarlett's friendship with Annabel would almost ensure that the Keagans would put in some free labor. "Geez, Lucas. It's the middle of harvesting season. We don't have time to go out there and help them. What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that Annabel would rip our heads off if we said no."

"Well, why can't you do it? You were the one who said you'd be willing to help."

"I'm behind. You're not. In fact, I'm pretty sure you have everything mapped out so we'll get done a few weeks ahead of schedule."

"Yeah," he moaned, "because you always fall short and I need to make up the slack. How do you expect me to do that if I'm at a different farm helping them get their place put together?"

Lucas smiled sheepishly. "I don't know. I figured you'd do what you always do and make it work."

Elijah dragged a hand down his face. They were finally getting to where they needed to be. He had gotten this ranch to a stable point with the help of his older brother. "What does Wade have to say about it?"

Lucas shrugged.

"You didn't ask him, did you?"

His younger brother chuckled. "I thought that if you ended up agreeing to help, you'd be able to convince him why it's a good idea."

"That's just it, Lucas. This isn't a good idea. It's a foolish one. The only reason any of us would be there right now is that Scarlett is there..." Wait. Scarlett is there. She's struggling to help her father with the family farm. If she needed help, and he was the one to offer it, he might actually convince her that her absence was better for everyone.

And if she didn't see things his way, then he could still keep an eye on her and make sure she wasn't going to do anything stupid.

Elijah let out a part groan, part sigh. “Fine. I’ll help.”

Lucas’s smile widened knowingly. “You have a thing for her, don’t you?”

“What? No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do,” he sang. “I can see it in the way your demeanor changed when you mentioned Scarlett. You have a crush on her, and this is your way to get close to her without her pushing you away.”

“I don’t have a crush on her,” Elijah muttered. “If anything, I want her to go back to Germany and leave us alone.”

Lucas shook his head. “You know, I don’t blame you. I think she’s smoking hot, too. I’d totally ask her out if Annabel hadn’t barged into my room last night and threatened me within an inch of my life.”

Elijah stared dumbfounded at Lucas. Annabel was making sure none of them were able to mess with Scarlett. She protected her from Elijah’s prejudice and Lucas’s flirtation. She really wanted Scarlett to stay.

His stomach soured. Already, Annabel was attached to her friend again. And could he blame her? There weren’t many people in town who seemed to want a friendship with the Keagan family. They’d been the outcasts for so long that he’d even considered it a miracle for them to enter the Callahan’s good graces.

It was only a matter of time before the rest of the town saw things the right way, but until then, Annabel desperately needed a friend.

Getting Scarlett to leave was a bad idea. He could single-handedly be the reason for Annabel’s regression if he was successful in getting her only friend to leave town.

Lucas nudged him. “See? There it is. That look in your eye that tells me you don’t really mind donating some of your time to the Perez family. So that’s settled. You’re going to help out with their farm, and I’ll keep doing what I can here.”

Elijah's hand shot out and he grabbed Lucas by the collar of his shirt. "No."

"No?" Lucas wheezed with a laugh. "No, *what?*"

"You're not just going to keep doing what you're doing."

"You... *don't* want me to work?"

"Oh, I want you to work. But you're going to do twice the amount of work you usually do so we can stay on track."

Lucas whined. "But that's a lot."

"It's about a hundred and ten percent of what you *should* be doing. It's not like I'm asking you to do my chores and yours. I know you can't do that."

Lucas made a face and then pulled away from Elijah with a jerking motion. "What? So I have to do a little more? And then you're going to help out Scarlett's dad?"

"You have to do every blasted chore I put on a list."

"Like a *honey-do* list? Come on, man. I don't—"

"Exactly like a honey-do list. You're going to make sure you do every single thing on that list by the end of the day, or I'm out. Then *you're* the one who will have to help out the Perez family, and their work is gonna be even worse because they don't have nine other brothers to share the burden."

Lucas frowned. "Fine. I'll check off your dumb list and you can help Scarlett. Then, when Annabel eases up, I get to ask her out." He watched Elijah closely as if expecting to get a reaction from him—an indication that Elijah was interested in Scarlett even a little.

Well, he was going to be disappointed. Elijah shrugged. "Good luck with that."

"What do you mean, good luck? I don't need luck. I've got skill." Lucas beamed. "By the end of the second date, I'll have her wrapped around my finger."

Elijah chuckled, laying a heavy hand on his younger brother's shoulder. "Oh, I know you will. But here's the thing.

Scarlett is pretty much a female version of you. She doesn't want to get married, despite what she told Annabel."

"Good," Lucas cut in.

"But she's also going to be cunning and manipulative. By the end of the second date, you'll be eating out of the palm of her hand and begging her to give you more. And you know what? She's gonna kick you to the curb."

Lucas snorted. "That's not going to happen."

"What? You don't think she can wrap someone like you around her little finger?"

"Oh, I'm sure she has a certain level of skill. But the problem with your theory is that she's going to make me want to settle down." Lucas gestured to his body from head to toe. "This? This doesn't have a drop of interest in settling down. I don't want to get married. I don't want kids. I don't want to have the responsibility of providing for someone at all. So even if she pulls all her tricks on me, it won't work."

Elijah lifted a shoulder again. "You forget that she was in my grade when we were in high school. I saw what she did to the guys back then. She chewed them up and spit them out. If you go down that path, you're not coming back whole."

The corners of Lucas's mouth quirked upward. "Sounds like a fun challenge. Perhaps I'm going to have to find a way to ask her out sooner rather than later."

Elijah rolled his eyes. If Scarlett didn't destroy him, then Annabel would. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that Lucas was heading for trouble one way or the other. Luckily, it appeared that Wade and Annabel were the only ones who truly struggled with alcohol addiction in their family. If Lucas got hurt, then he only had himself to blame.

And maybe karma.

Yeah, after all the women he strung along over the years, it would be good for him to be knocked down a peg or two.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Elijah called after him as Lucas hurried away.

His brother waved a hand through the air dismissively, and Elijah turned toward the barn. He had a few more things to get done before he could call Mr. Perez and discuss what he needed help with.

Then he could head over there in the morning.

Scarlett

Scarlett didn't sleep well at all. Elijah's cutting remarks had hit her harder than she'd expected. She went over in her head her entire relationship with Annabel and couldn't come up with a single thing that would appear as though she was the villain he had made her out to be.

It wasn't making any sense.

When light came into her room through the sheer drapes that grazed the floor of her bedroom, she sat up in her bed, wrapping her arms around her legs. It had been so long since she'd been a teenager in Copper Creek. There was a possibility that some of what Elijah had said was true.

When she'd asked Annabel about it, her friend had laughed it off.

Had she really been that bad of a friend?

A shiver rippled down her spine and her stomach twisted. In the process of trying to figure out why Elijah was so irritated with her, there was a thought that was starting to haunt her. She recalled how back in high school she'd talked Annabel into going out to parties. And how she'd somehow manage to get her hands on some form of alcohol and encouraged Annabel to get drunk with her on the weekends. She remembered how Annabel started drinking on the weekdays after school too.

She prayed she wasn't *that* bad of an influence. And she truly felt like she'd made a change since coming home. Scarlett had turned over a new leaf. She had a fresh plan and one she was actually proud of.

Scarlett pushed aside the covers and the self-doubt. Just because she wasn't sure what she wanted to do with her life now that she was back, didn't mean she wasn't going to figure it out. That was what she was here for. She had time.

The savings she'd been able to accrue allowed her some flexibility. And for now, she just wanted to mend the relationship she had with her father.

Her room was exactly as she'd left it when she'd left for her new job. There were still some signs of her growing up here, like the porcelain dolls on the shelves and some childhood collectibles. Her twin daybed seemed so much smaller than the queen bed at her apartment in Germany. That would be one thing she'd miss, but it wasn't a deal breaker.

An almost timid knock on her door stirred her from her thoughts and she hurried toward it. Her hand rested on the knob, then she thought better of opening the door. "Yeah?"

"I've got breakfast for you," her father's gruff voice came through the maple door. "Will you be joining me this morning?"

She nodded, then had to remind herself that he wasn't able to see her reaction. "Yeah. Give me a few minutes."

"It'll be cold by then."

Scarlett bit back a smile. Her father was always so literal. But then again, he had this sense of humor she had never managed to master. "Okay. Give me a second."

There was no response. She'd waited too long; he'd likely gone downstairs already. Scarlett heaved a sigh and then grabbed her clothes. Today started a new day. When she'd come home last night, she'd told him she wanted to help with the farm. But then he showed her his hand. He'd sliced it on some tool he'd been using. It was wrapped in a torn-up piece

of his shirt, and she'd insisted on taking him straight to the ER for stitches.

Ten stitches later, and they were back home again.

But now he wasn't sure how they were going to get the harvest done. Lucas was the only option that came to mind. He'd appeared more than willing to help out. And just thinking about him made her stomach do a little flip.

It was silly to have a crush on him. He was a year or two younger than her and she'd heard all about his escapades with the local women. But attraction couldn't be helped most of the time.

She pulled on a t-shirt and hurried into the kitchen, finding her father with a half-empty plate. He glanced up at her and offered a small smile. "Good morning."

"Morning," she returned, taking a seat across from him. "How's your hand doing?"

He lifted it, turning it back and forth before shrugging. "It's fine. Maybe I was wrong. I can probably get to work this afternoon if I'm careful—"

"Dad," she said with a sigh, "no. That cut went deep. If you use your hand doing anything strenuous, the doctor said you could rip open the stitches and then you'd have to go back. Did you at least call Lucas?"

Her father frowned, not meeting her gaze.

"Dad," she groaned. "He said he was willing to help. Just give him a call. They have so many people working over there, I'm sure they can spare someone. And I know that I'm not as well-versed as mom was, but I can help, too."

His bushy brows furrowed and his dark, worried eyes mirrored her own. "I don't want you to fret about the farm. We paid for your education so you didn't have to work hard on the ranch."

"It's fine. I should have never stayed away for so long." Her confession weighed heavy on her—more so than she had ever expected it to. Neither one of them said it, but she could

tell he agreed with her sentiments. They were practically strangers now.

“When will you be going back?”

She shook her head. “We’ve been through this, Dad. I’m not going back.”

He didn’t meet her gaze, choosing instead to focus on his plate. “I know you think that, but—”

“I’m not just thinking it, Dad. I mean it. I grew up here. I know this place. It’s my... home.” Her voice broke on the last word. Both of her parents had grown up ranching and farming. They knew the land like she knew her languages. Once upon a time they’d told her that she needed to leave this place and make something of herself.

Well, she’d done that.

And it wasn’t as great as she’d thought it would be.

“I’m staying, Dad. End of discussion. If you don’t want me working the farm, then I’ll... I don’t know... get a job waitressing. I heard that Sal’s is still open. And that country club has a new restaurant. Maybe I can work there—”

Her father let out a heavy sigh but didn’t argue with her.

“So, will you at least call Lucas? If he can help me get started, then maybe I can get a good head start on some things before the season comes to a close.”

He lifted his gaze to meet hers, the tight lines telling her more than his words ever could. He didn’t want her here. Her stomach flipped, but not in a good way. She could feel the bile creeping up the back of her throat, threatening to make an appearance. As if in self-preservation, she shot to her feet, grabbing a piece of toast from the plate on the table. “I’m going to gather the eggs from the chicken coop. You need to call Lucas.”

He turned around in his seat and called after her, “Why can’t you call him?”

She stopped. That was a good point. Then again, she was certain that if she did, Lucas would take it as an invitation to

hit on her and she knew better than to allow that to happen. When they were younger, Annabel had commented on just how forbidden it would be for any of her friends to date one of her brothers. To start a relationship with Lucas would be a nail in the coffin of their friendship. Scarlett turned toward her father and forced a smile. “Because if you ask him, he’ll know we’re serious. If I call him, then he’s going to think I just want to date him.”

That was probably the most honest she’d been with her father since she’d arrived home. There was no way she could tell him the biggest reasons of all—not yet at least. She didn’t want to guilt trip him, but she also didn’t want him to blame her. She needed to figure out what she was going to do next so he’d start believing her when she said she wanted to stay. That seemed to be the trend right now. First her father, then Annabel, but most of all, Elijah—not that she needed him to believe her. She was all about repairing the relationships with those that mattered most... and he wasn’t one of them.

“I’m going to get those eggs. Then I’ll go milk Cheddar.”

His brows lifted. “Are you certain you can do that?”

“What? Milk a cow? I might not have touched one in nearly a decade, but it’s probably like riding a bike. It was one of the first chores you gave me, if you’ll remember.”

He nodded, then turned back to the table.

Scarlett took a big bite out of her toast. She’d thought it would be so much easier to pick up where she’d left off. But she’d been wrong. This wasn’t anything like what she had hoped for. And it was already turning out to be ten times harder, too.

Scarlett grabbed the rubber boots by the front door and then the gloves she normally used so the broody hens wouldn’t peck at her. Rather than use the basket she used as a child, she pulled on the apron her mother used to wear.

For a moment she felt dizzy. It still smelled like her perfume—lavender with a hint of citrus. She hugged herself, closing her eyes for a moment and letting the feeling of

comfort wash over her. If her mother were here now, they'd be heading to the coop together, laughing about whatever was the latest gossip in town. If she was here, she'd be telling Scarlett how proud she was of her for making the hard decisions in her life. She'd probably tell her that leaving Germany was a hard choice, but if it felt right, then while it might still be hard, it would be worth it.

But most of all, her mother would urge her to enjoy this new adventure.



THERE WASN'T much Scarlett couldn't do when it came to keeping up with the farm. The goats, chickens, ducks, and cows all needed to be fed and their stalls cleaned out. She hadn't recalled her parents getting pigs, so seeing them was new, but nothing a quick search on her phone couldn't fix. After feeding the animals and mucking out the stalls, she set to work organizing the shelves that stored most of the hand-held tools in the barn.

By lunchtime, she was starting to run out of things she could do to stay busy. Thankfully, her father was a welcome distraction. He appeared in the barn door as casually as he used to when she was a child working side by side with her mother.

There was a funny kind of look on his face that made her take pause. "Is there something you need?"

He shook his head at first, then clarity filled his face. "Actually, yes. I've prepared us some lunch. It's nothing much. I haven't been able to get any groceries since..." He swallowed and his gaze darkened. "I made us some PB and J sandwiches. Then that Keagan boy will be stopping by so I can show him what needs to be done for the next few days."

She gave him a pointed look. "Dad. If he's willing to help for the season, just let him. He was the one who offered."

"We'll see. I've done this my whole life. I don't need any extra help. It's not like we're one of the bigger lots anyway."

“No, but we produce enough to make a living and you’re not getting any younger.”

For a brief moment, she thought she saw a ghost of a smile touching his lips. “Your mother used to say that.”

“Well, she wasn’t wrong.”

“No, I suppose not.” He jerked his chin over his shoulder. “How about that lunch?”

“Sounds great. I’m starving.” That piece of toast had done nothing for her. She should have known better than to believe that her diet of coffee and toast wouldn’t cut it while she was burning off calories by the bucket full. She’d need to remember her protein if she wanted to be able to stay on her feet for most of the day.

Scarlett followed her dad to the house. They ate their lunch in silence, and for once, she was happy to do so. After her encounter with the Keagans the night before, she needed to regroup and figure out how best to approach rekindling her relationship with the man seated at the table with her.

This couldn’t be as hard as she was making it out to be. Shouldn’t she just be able to tell him she loved him and that she was sorry she wasn’t here when her mother passed? It wasn’t like her mother was able to hang on very long after her accident. The time it would have taken to fly home to say goodbye had run out quicker than either of them had expected. And a video chat just wasn’t the same.

She glanced at him several times during their meal but couldn’t come up with a single word to express how she felt.

By the time they were both done eating, the only thing she could say was, “I’ll head to the grocery store after Lucas comes. I can even pick up anything you need from the hardware store.”

He grunted. That was usually how it went, so she didn’t know why she expected anything more.

“Just get me a list. And I’ll have Lucas add to it.”

Her father looked at his watch, then muttered, “He’s going to be here any minute. We should probably clean this up.”

They cleared their places and then headed out the door. She motioned toward the barn, fidgeting and unable to stand still. “Wanna see what I did? It’s a lot more organized than it was before.”

He didn’t get a chance to say anything due to the presence of a beat-up truck making its way on the long dirt driveway.

She held her flat hand to shield the sun from her eyes, squinting as it got closer. But it wasn’t until he stepped from the vehicle that she realized the mistake her father had made. “You didn’t call Lucas. That’s Elijah,” she hissed.

Her father shot her a strange look. “No, I distinctly remember speaking to Lucas. I asked for him directly.”

“Well, that isn’t him. That’s his older brother.”

He glanced over toward the approaching cowboy. “Is there a problem with that?”

“Yeah, it’s a problem,” she muttered. “He hates me.”

Another surprised look from her father, but this time he didn’t have a chance to ask her to expound on what she’d said. Elijah stopped stiffly in front of her father, then held out his hand. “Mr. Perez. My brother said you might need some help with your farm.”

Her father nodded. “Yes. We really appreciate anything you can do.”

Elijah didn’t even give her the courtesy of meeting her gaze. “Show me what you’ve got and we can get started.”

Elijah

“*I*’m embarrassed to say I’ve let things slide around here lately. It... hasn’t been easy.”

“Dad! We’re doing fine. And even if we weren’t, no one would blame you for any of it.”

Elijah glanced from Carlos Perez to his daughter, making sure not to let his gaze linger so long she caught him staring.

“I’ve not been entirely honest with you, Scarlett.” Carlos stopped and faced his daughter. “We’re having a hard time making ends meet. It’s nothing that can’t be fixed, but we do need some extra help.” His eyes darted toward Elijah, then back to Scarlett. “But I don’t know how much we can afford to pay someone to do it.”

Scarlett glanced at Elijah, then turned her father slightly as if their conversation couldn’t be heard with that movement. “That’s why I’m here. I can help.”

“Sweetheart, I know you mean well, but there are just certain things—”

She shook her head vehemently. “Don’t give me that. I know you raised me to want more in my life than that of a rancher’s wife, but I’m not going anywhere.”

Carlos took her hand in his and patted it.

Something strange was happening in Elijah's gut.

Oh goodness.

It almost felt like he was feeling *guilty* over what he'd said to Scarlett the other day. This was not good.

Or maybe he felt bad for her and her father. He probably shouldn't be standing here and inserting himself into their family problems.

The instinct to take a step back and let them work out this little disagreement was so strong it made his stomach churn, but he kept his feet planted. Perhaps it was the curiosity of how Scarlett would try to get herself out of this predicament that made him stay. Or it was his concern for Carlos. Either way, he wanted to know how this would end.

"I love you, Scarlett, but even I have to admit that your being here isn't what should have ever happened."

Pain filtered across Scarlett's face, but she didn't meet Elijah's eyes.

"You're wrong," she murmured. "I should have come home a long time ago. Then maybe you wouldn't feel that way."

They stared at each other, both with hardened gazes. Elijah should have definitely walked away when he'd had a chance. He shouldn't be here to witness family problems. He had enough of those of his own. And from the sound of it, Carlos needed a lot more help than he'd let on when he'd spoken to Lucas on the phone. He needed to hire someone.

But if they didn't have the funds to do even that, there was no chance for them. Scarlett wasn't able to run the ranch on her own.

"You're not going to convince me to leave, Dad. I'm here to stay. I'll work from dawn until dusk if I have to. I'll watch YouTube videos and read books—whatever it takes to get the work done. Heck, I'll dip into my savings—"

"Over my dead body."

Elijah and Scarlett both jumped at Carlos's stern words.

“That money is for you to start a life for yourself. You’ll find someone you love, and you’ll buy a house and start a family. I’ll not have you spending your life savings trying to rescue me from some ill-thought-out decisions.”

“But Dad—”

Elijah’s eyes bounced from father to daughter. He didn’t know what prompted him to cut in, but suddenly he stepped forward. “I can help.”

Carlos glanced over toward him. “Yes, we’re very appreciative of anything you can do to help us get started, but as I said, I can’t pay you—”

He shook his head. “I don’t need to be paid.”

This caught Scarlett’s attention. Her wide, clear eyes landed on him. He couldn’t tell if it was shock, distrust, or something else that filled them, but there was one thing he was certain of. She wasn’t happy.

Elijah cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders. “I will help out as long as you need until you get on your feet.”

Carlos’s tired face creased with confusion. “I can’t ask you to—”

“You didn’t. I offered.”

“Why?” Scarlett demanded.

“Scarlett,” her father warned. He held up his hand to prevent her from charging at Elijah. Or at least that was how it appeared.

She pushed aside his hand and stepped around it. “No. We deserve to know his intentions. People don’t just offer to work for free. Especially people who don’t already have it made.” Her cheeks flushed, but her serious gaze remained steady. “Why would you offer to help us when you clearly don’t like me very much?”

“Scarlett, that’s *enough*,” Carlos snapped.

She jumped and glanced in his direction.

“Get inside.”

Her mouth fell open and her blush deepened. “What?”

“You heard me. Get inside. We’ll discuss this later.”

Scarlett shot one more livid look in Elijah’s direction, then stomped toward the house. The door swung open and then slammed shut, sending some nearby birds fleeing from the branches of a large oak tree.

Carlos sighed and faced Elijah. “My apologies for my daughter.”

“It’s no problem.”

He studied Elijah for a moment, his eyes narrowing. “She does make a good point. Why would someone like you be willing to help us? You have enough on your plate as it is.”

Elijah shifted his weight from one boot to the other. “I suppose you make a good point.”

“I know I do.” The corners of Carlos’s lips lifted slightly. “My daughter seems to think you are holding something against her, and for the life of me, I can’t think of one reason why someone would.” He stepped forward, closing the gap between them and his voice lowered. “Is there something I should be aware of?”

There was nothing like the fear of being sized up by a protective father. Wade had mentioned just how hard it was to get into Zeke Callahan’s good graces—on several occasions. Unfortunately, Lucas and Elijah had found his anxiety hilarious. They’d pushed every button Wade had when it came to wanting to impress Brielle’s father.

Interestingly enough, Elijah had zero interest in impressing Carlos. But he definitely didn’t need a gruff old man—who could probably take him in a fight—to be upset with him.

Confessing his prejudices to Scarlett’s father would be a very bad idea. Elijah swallowed hard, fighting the urge to take a swift step backward. “No, sir.” He grimaced, his voice tight and almost sounding like a squeak. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Scarlett is my sister’s best friend. I don’t have any opinions one way or the other about her except that she

might hang around too much.” Hopefully, that excuse was enough to make Carlos believe him.

The old man’s gaze narrowed even further, then his face broke into a smile and he clapped a heavy hand on Elijah’s shoulder. “Alright then. Let’s get down to brass tacks. If you’re going to volunteer your services, it has to be worth it to you.”

“Sir—”

Carlos held up a hand. “I’m not about to let you throw away your time on my farm. You have more than enough on your plate, so this has to be worth it to the both of us. I can’t afford to pay you right now, but perhaps I can leverage the farm—in part—to pay you back when we get back on our feet.”

Elijah stared at the man, dumbfounded. What exactly was he suggesting? It couldn’t be what it sounded like.

He continued. “What we make from the next few months will first go toward the bills we need to pay. Anything extra can go toward what I owe you. The way I see it, you’ll be a temporary part owner of this property, and when I have the funds to buy you out, that will be the end of our contractual agreement.”

“Mr. Perez, that’s a very generous offer, but I couldn’t take what you’ve worked your whole life for. And what about Scarlett?”

Carlos set Elijah with a knowing stare. “I love my daughter.”

“There’s no question—”

“But Scarlett has always had big dreams. She’s always wanted to get out of this small town and make something of herself. I know her well enough to understand that she’s only home out of grief. I don’t blame her for that. It is what it is. But one day she’ll wake up and realize this is not the life she wants. And when that day comes, she will say her goodbyes and she’ll be gone.”

Shock was the only thing that registered in his mind. Scarlett's own father believed she wasn't going to stick around.

He glanced toward the house and his heart stumbled for a moment. He couldn't fathom what she might be going through at this time. He wasn't naïve enough to believe that she didn't sense it. She probably knew that her father didn't trust her either.

Elijah turned back toward Carlos. "Be that as it may, I would prefer that Scarlett be involved in this conversation. I don't want there to be any confusion over the details of our agreement."

"That's not necessary. This farm is mine and mine alone. Scarlett has her own career, and she's chosen her path." Carlos gestured toward the barn. "Let me give you a tour."

If there was anything that signified the conversation was over, it was that very moment. Carlos headed for the barn, and Elijah had no other choice but to follow him. He listened with half an ear as Carlos explained where they were struggling. Some of their equipment was in need of servicing. The crops growing in the field needed to be harvested. They needed to prepare for the winter months. He had two cows and three pigs that had been raised for their meat and needed to be sent to slaughter.

It was a great deal more work than Elijah had counted on, but nothing he couldn't handle. He had some knowledge of the mechanics of the tractors Carlos needed to be worked on. And while they didn't care for many animals out at his family's property, he could handle the next steps for them as well.

They stopped their little tour just outside of the pig pen. Their conversation had died down, and Carlos seemed to be deep in thought as he stared out at the fields surrounding his property. He let out a sigh, drawing Elijah's attention.

Removing his hat, Carlos shot an almost embarrassed look in Elijah's direction, then ran a hand through his thinning hair. "Honestly, until Scarlett returned home, I wasn't even sure I wanted to keep this place running." He let out a wry chuckle.

“I had all but contacted the folks who would come out and sell this place for parts.”

Elijah’s brows shot up. “You wanted to sell?”

“I’m not the young man I once was. I didn’t have any children that I could hand this place down to. Scarlett was never interested in the country life.” He shrugged. “I suppose when my wife passed, my dreams for this place died with her.”

Aside from the fact that Carlos probably shouldn’t be sharing these things with the man who was trying to help him save the place, Elijah didn’t feel comfortable being the one he confided in. He didn’t know Carlos. He barely knew Scarlett. “I’m sorry, sir, but why are you telling me this?” The question slipped out before he had a chance to find a better way to phrase it.

Carlos returned his hat to his head, his brows drawing together. “I suppose I don’t want you walking into this blind. As I said, I don’t believe Scarlett will want to stay long. Any help you give me to keep up appearances would be appreciated. I’m willing to compensate you for any help I can get.”

“Why not... just tell her?”

He chuckled again, the kind of chuckle that was tired and sounded like a man who had given up. “Scarlett wouldn’t understand. This place was her home. I think a part of her doesn’t want to let go of the memories she has of this place. I had thought she’d be married by now—settled down somewhere and making a new home there. But that didn’t happen. I wasn’t expecting her to come home, either. It was all very sudden.” He squinted at Elijah. “If I tell her I’m interested in selling, she’ll convince me not to do it. Best to let her believe we’re saving this place and let her go on her merry way before I make any firm decisions.”

A sudden thought materialized in Elijah’s mind. “You still want to sell.”

“That would be the plan eventually. I might even have to pay you out of the money I get from it.”

“But what if I were the one to buy it from you?” He didn’t have the money for a place like this, and they both knew it. Based on his history, he was certain Carlos would know he had less than a thousand dollars to his name. All his money went back into the ranch. He rolled back his shoulders and lifted his chin. “I’d be happy to buy this place from you in a long-term arrangement.”

Carlos seemed to be considering Elijah’s words. It didn’t appear he was thrilled about that sort of plan, though. Then, finally, he took in a deep breath and expelled it through flared nostrils. “We’ll keep that in mind moving forward. I’m not certain it would be in either of our best interests to hand over the reins, so to speak.”

That was better than an absolute no.

Elijah nodded firmly.

“And I’ll not have you breathing a word of this to anyone. Not your family and not Scarlett. If I hear you’ve let anything slip, then the option is off the table.”

“Of course, sir.”

Carlos appraised him with gray eyes that seemed so weary and yet so full of wisdom. “I’d understand if you don’t want to get started today without the paperwork in hand—”

“I came over to help today, sir. I’m more than happy to roll up my sleeves and get to work.”

Carlos nodded. “I’ll give my lawyer a call and discuss everything we’ve talked about. We’ll get the original contract drawn up, and then I’ll let you know if your offer would be manageable.”

A thrill shot through Elijah at Carlos’s words. He’d been putting his blood, sweat and tears into his own family’s ranch for so long, and he wasn’t under any assumption that the place would be his. Wade had always said the ranch would belong to whoever wanted to stay. But only so many families could live on that acreage. Wade already had Brielle, and they’d be starting their family soon. He had several siblings who would be sticking around until they got on their feet.

This might be the opportunity that Elijah needed to spread his wings and fly from the nest.

His gaze swept over the property and a feeling of excitement and peace filled his chest. This would be the perfect place to start.

Scarlett

Scarlett paced like a caged animal in the parlor of her childhood home. From this vantage point she could see her father and Elijah talking—colluding with each other. That might have been too strong of a word.

Her father needed help. She'd seen that the second she'd come home. It looked like her father had only done the bare minimum. She couldn't blame him, but to have Elijah come and offer to help free of charge seemed sketchy at best.

Why was he even here? If her father had contacted Lucas, then Lucas should have been the one to show up. At least he didn't seem to despise her.

She let out a growl of frustration as she stopped and watched the two continue to talk. Then Elijah stared at the house. It was almost like he could see her through the window. She nearly dropped down to her knees, then thought better of it.

If Elijah could see her watching them, then all the better. He needed to know she wasn't going to let him just swoop in here and take over.

What if they were out there making some kind of crazy deal?

This farm still belonged to her father, and by proxy, it belonged to her. There was no way she'd allow anyone to come in and take it from them.

Elijah turned back to her father and they disappeared into the barn. Her world spun with the possibilities of what might be happening. It could be fine, and she was overreacting to her father pushing her out of the conversation. But there was also a very real possibility that Elijah was sweet-talking her father into something. He could be as bad as Rumpelstiltskin.

Scarlett drummed her fingers on the console table in front of the window, waiting for them to make a reappearance. There were only a few things she didn't think she could do. And if Elijah could fill in the blanks, then she'd be fine.

They'd all be fine.

Finally, her father came trudging across the property, leaving Elijah near the barn alone. Then Elijah disappeared around the side of the structure. Her focus shifted to her father, noting just how tired he looked. He hadn't seemed that worn out when he'd come to get her for lunch. How had she missed it?

She had to be mistaken. He was just worn out from having to give Elijah a tour. He'd get some water or a cup of coffee and then he'd perk up.

He climbed the steps to the house and pushed through the doorway.

She lost no time in pouncing.

"What did he say? Is he really going to help for free? Why would he even offer that? You're the one who taught me that nothing good in this life is free." The words tumbled from her lips as she followed her father through the house and toward the kitchen. "I hope you didn't agree to anything that could hurt us."

Her father turned at that statement and set his weary eyes on her. "What do you mean by that? Why would you think that fine young man would hurt us?"

She blinked. Actually, she knew Elijah well enough that she could honestly say she trusted him. She knew good and well that he wasn't a slimeball or anything. But he disliked her, and that seemed to rub her the wrong way more than she'd ever admit. "Okay, maybe he wouldn't *hurt* us, but he might do something that isn't what you want."

"And what is it that you think I want, Scarlett? You haven't exactly sat down and had a big, long conversation with me since your arrival. All you've said to me is that you plan on staying and you want to help me with the farm. Then what? What are your plans after we do that?"

She froze. "That's it. I'm staying. I'm not going anywhere. More time with you—this farm—this is what I want."

He smiled at her. It wasn't the kind of smile that she'd grown up with—the one that said he was proud of her. This smile had only made an appearance a few times in her life. It was the kind that said he didn't think she'd be able to follow through with what she said, though her intentions were admirable.

She knew her father well enough to know he would never say such a thing to her out loud, but it still irked her all the same. She crossed her arms to hide the fact she was clenching her hands into small fists. "Mom loved this place. And so do you. I don't want to see anything happen to it."

"And that is why Elijah's help will be necessary."

"You never answered my question. Is he really going to help for free?"

Her father turned away from her and strode toward the sink. He picked up a glass and filled it with water.

"Dad. What's going on?"

"I made a deal with him." He tilted the glass and took a few swallows.

Her blood ran cold. "What kind of deal?" This wasn't good. She hadn't thought Elijah was the type to make any kind of underhanded agreement. Yet, that was exactly what it sounded like. She shut her eyes tight, hating that her father

was taking his sweet time in answering. “Dad,” she repeated, “what kind of deal did you make?”

Carlos placed the glass on the counter and then rested his palms on the flat surface, not facing her. “He’s agreed to do any of the work we need in exchange for becoming a partner of sorts.”

“*What?* You’re selling the farm to him?”

He turned to face her then, his expression hard and unwavering. “I didn’t sell him anything. We made an agreement. He will get paid for his work because I refuse to take advantage of anyone, and especially not the family that you are so close to.”

“I’m close to Anna. Not anyone else.”

His hard gaze intensified. “You know better than to say something like that. The kids in that family are just as much part of our family as you are. He deserves an honest pay, and if that means I put up collateral, then so be it.”

She bit back a groan. Did her father not realize the jeopardy he was putting the farm in by signing away half of it? What if Elijah decided he wanted to sell his half to someone else? “Have you brought up this kind of agreement with the lawyer? It’s not smart to—”

“I’m old, Scarlett. I’m not an idiot. I fully intend on having the lawyer draw up a contract that stipulates the arrangement.” His sharp voice caught her off guard, and she took a sudden step backward. Her pulse roared in her ears and her heart rate accelerated.

Their relationship had been strained since she’d returned home, but she hadn’t thought it was so bad that he’d do something like this without asking her opinion of it first. She shut her eyes briefly and when she opened them, her father was gone. She spun around to find him slipping out of the kitchen.

Still thumping like mad, her heart stumbled and cracked as a slice of pain shot through it. Was her relationship with her father so terrible that he was trying to push her out? Because

that was what it felt like had happened. She'd been nothing but the good little daughter since she'd arrived home.

She'd dug in and gotten her hands dirty. She'd done all the chores she knew how to do. She'd even gone out to try to start the tractor but couldn't get it running.

A tear slipped down her cheek. It appeared she'd not only lost her mother, but she'd lost her father as well.

He's grieving. That was the excuse she'd continued to give herself whenever she'd had a rough conversation with her father. *He lost the love of his life.* She needed to expect that things would be rough going in the beginning. She needed to show him that she wasn't going to go anywhere. That she was serious about this.

Scarlett threw her fists down at her sides and strode toward the kitchen door that would take her out back. There was a conversation she still needed to have with Elijah, and this new information only added to the importance of what needed to be said.

She all but stomped toward the barn, entering it and taking a quick look before she headed around the back. Wherever he was, he had better be ready. Her heritage had always served her well when it came to speaking her mind. A fire burned deep inside her, forged from her own grief but also from the love she had for her parents and her friend.

Elijah was examining the engine of the tractor she'd attempted to start earlier, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and his hat resting on the seat. He tugged at a hose, then leaned closer to examine something else.

A twig snapped beneath her feet, and he glanced up in her direction. Only then did he stop what he was doing and toss the rag he held over his shoulder. "Scarlett. I was wondering how long it would take you to show up."

She skidded to a stop. "Excuse me?"

"I figured you'd come find me to finish the conversation from where we were interrupted yesterday."

Folding her arms, she scowled at him. “Yeah. That’s part of the reason I’m here.”

“Okay, so let me have it. Tell me I’m wrong and that you’re nothing but a sweet friend who has never done a single bad thing in your life.”

She snapped her mouth shut, unsure of how to proceed. She’d figured he’d come at her with the same stuff, and even still, she hadn’t been able to come up with anything to defend herself with.

“That’s what I figured.” He turned back to the tractor. “The problem is, you’re no different than you were in high school. Sure, you *look* all grown up. And you might be saying all the right things, but the truth is, you’re going to do the same thing you always do.”

“And what is that?” she hissed.

He stopped what he was doing but didn’t look at her. “Leave.”

She gasped. “I don’t always leave.”

Elijah huffed. “You might not think you do, but I’ve seen enough evidence of it to last me a lifetime.”

Her scowl deepened. “Yeah? Prove it. Give me one example of where I left.”

This time he glanced at her as he held onto whatever it was he had his hands on in the engine. “You left when you went to college.”

Scarlett laughed derisively. “That’s the best you can come up with? College? Of course I left to go to college. I was accepted into Stanford. I’m going to go to the top school if I get in so I can have the best education money has to offer.”

Nonplussed, he straightened, then crossed his arms. “Do you know what it did to Anna when you told her you would go to a local college with her but then changed your mind the second you got into the school of your dreams?”

Her heart stumbled. She’d forgotten about that promise.

“Annabel was so excited that you’d be going to the community college just out of town that she planned a huge surprise party for you. But when you told her that you got that acceptance letter in the mail, she called it off.”

“You’re... lying,” she whispered, suddenly feeling nauseated.

Elijah shook his head. “She told us not to tell you. Instead, you guys went out to celebrate, just the two of you.”

That, she remembered. They went to a club where there was dancing, and Anna had gotten incredibly drunk. Scarlett’s stomach knotted even tighter.

“So yeah. When you make promises about staying, don’t blame me for being skeptical.”

She swallowed back the bile that rose in her throat. “Well, that’s just one example.”

He released a dry, humorous chuckle. “You need more? How about when you took that internship in New York? Or when you told her that the job in Germany would only last a year at most and then you’d come back and find something closer to home?” He shook his head. “I’m not saying that everything between you guys is your fault entirely. Annabel needed to find herself, too. But when you make a promise to someone—or stand on that soapbox you like so much, then you better stick with it.”

The sick feeling inside her continued to grow. He was right about the promises she’d made in the past. She’d even made those promises to her parents. But each time she checked in and told them she wanted an extension at work, they supported her.

Well, her mother had.

She couldn’t say the same about her father. He hadn’t said much when it came to her decisions. He’d only said he loved her. She couldn’t be certain he’d felt the same way as her mother regarding her choices.

Did Annabel feel the same as Elijah? Was she secretly waiting for Scarlett to cut and run again?

It felt like the wind was knocked from her lungs. Her shoulders drooped, but her heart continued to beat erratically. She wanted to tell him she was sorry—that she didn't realize how her actions had hurt them. But she couldn't bring herself to say any of that.

She was just stuck.

Scarlett could feel him watching her, though she refused to meet his gaze. He was probably gloating over this win. He thought he had her all figured out. But he was wrong. He didn't know her—he didn't know that she wanted something different. It had taken losing her mother—losing the opportunity to tell her goodbye that had changed her.

“You're wrong,” she finally mustered. She focused on him, crossing her arms. “And I'm going to prove it to you.”

“I hope you're right.”

“And when I do, you're going to eat your words.”

He didn't respond. She thought she might have seen a hint of a smile touch his lips, but when she looked harder, she realized she was wrong.

“And I don't know what you're up to with taking this farm from us, but it's not going to work.”

This time, he lifted his brows but nothing more. Boy, his stoic attitude was really starting to annoy her. While she struggled to maintain a calm, collective exterior, inside she was fuming. It wouldn't do any good to throw a tantrum. Either he'd tell Anna, or her father would find out. Either way, she was up against a wall with nowhere to go.

Stuck.

That word hit a chord in her head, making her almost dizzy. If she had any chance at all of getting her friend and father on her side again, she'd have to make things work with Elijah first.

That sounded about as likely as one of her pigs sprouting wings.

Scarlett pressed her lips together tightly, took a deep breath, then exhaled. “Okay, now that we have that settled, what can I do to help?”

Elijah

Elijah knew Scarlett was stubborn. She'd always been that way, even as a kid. Any time she set her mind on something, she didn't let go. She was like a rabid dog who had locked its jaw onto a piece of meat.

Why was he so surprised when she refused to leave his side?

She stood before him, her hands on her hips and all her weight on one foot. Her eyes made it clear that she had zero intention of backing down, no matter what he might come up with as an excuse.

All he could do was sigh. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Tough."

He clenched his teeth and straightened away from the engine. "You don't understand."

"I understand perfectly. You've found a way to get even with me for how I treated your sister, and that's why you're here. Did you lie on the phone? Tell my dad you were Lucas just so you could come by and take control of this place?"

"What? Are you crazy?"

"Are you?" she spit back.

He gaped at her.

Scarlett flushed and snapped her mouth shut. Her voice softened as she dropped her gaze to the ground. “I get that you don’t like me very much. It makes sense, okay? But I meant what I said when I told everyone I’m staying. You don’t have to believe me. No one does. Because frankly, I’m not doing it for anyone but myself.”

“That tracks,” he muttered, earning himself a scowl before she looked away again. He grimaced. What had gotten into him that he’d become so volatile? He used to be capable of keeping his mouth shut, and suddenly, with Scarlett, he couldn’t even muster that.

“Yeah, I know how you feel about me. Can you do me a favor and just tone it down a little? I’m not hurting anyone by being here.”

He held up a finger, then stopped himself. She wouldn’t see it the way he did. Even if he told her that the longer she stayed, the more likely folks would get attached, she wouldn’t care. She wouldn’t see that a deeper attachment meant a deeper wound when she left.

All he could do was let her make her mistakes.

Elijah wasn’t about to apologize for any of what he’d said, even though something inside him wanted to. The way her face had crumbled when he’d brought up Anna still didn’t sit right with him.

But the truth needed to be spoken. At least now she knew where he stood and why he felt the way he did.

He flung a gesture toward the barn. “You got tools?”

Scarlett snorted. “Yeah.”

“Well, don’t just stand there. Go get them for me. I can’t fix this thing without a few more tools.” He half-expected her to make another snarky comment or tell him to get it himself. But when he glanced up, she was gone.

Maybe she wouldn’t be so hard to work with. A guy could only hope.

Scarlett was back in no time, lugging a large, red canvas tool bag. She dropped it at his feet and the metal tools clanged against one another. “What do you need?”

A smirk spread across his lips and he held out his hand. “How about a five-eighths spark plug socket. You got one of those?” There was zero chance she knew what he was talking about. A girl like Scarlett who went to college in California and worked internationally? She probably didn’t even know the difference between a Phillips and a flat-head screwdriver.

The way Scarlett hesitated confirmed his suspicions. While he knew he’d already been tough enough on her, he couldn’t help piling on. She deserved it.

She leaned down and dug through the bag, then held something out toward him.

“Nope. That’s not...” His voice died in his throat as he took the tool and turned it over in his hands. His gaze cut to her, finding her digging through the bag again. “Actually, this is...” Once again, he was at a loss for words as she held out a small metal disk.

“You needed the gap tool, too, right? Whenever my dad had to fix the sparkplugs on his truck, he needed that.”

Elijah took the offering between his finger and thumb, then shot another surprised look in her direction.

“Anything else while I’m down here? I know it’s a mess, but my dad was never very good at keeping it organized. You’d probably have a hard time finding what you need.” Scarlett was still crouched down by the bag when she thumbed over her shoulder toward the barn. “I don’t know if he has replacement parts, but I seem to remember he’s had to replace them once a year. Want me to go check?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled. “That would be great.”

She hopped up and headed back toward the barn, her steps quick and sure-footed.

Elijah stared at the tools in his hands again and shook his head. He wasn’t even sure Annabel knew what these were. She was more interested in working with the animals. And Charlie

was more interested in the kitchen. Only the men in his family had a good handle on the equipment and how to repair it.

Scarlett only continued to surprise him, which was making it increasingly difficult to maintain the prejudice he had against her—a prejudice he deserved to keep.

She returned with the sparkplugs in hand. “I found some, but I’m not sure they’re the right ones. Can you tell?”

She held out the box, covered in a thin layer of dust and a smudge of grease. He shoved the gap spacer into his pocket to take the box from her. Turning it over, he glanced at her briefly. “I didn’t realize you knew so much about fixing stuff like this.”

“You never asked.”

He bit back a smile. There was no need to ask something like that from someone who could barely be called an acquaintance. He dropped his focus down to the box and found the specs. “Unfortunately, these aren’t going to work. We need something else. I’m going to have to run into town—”

“I’ll go with you.”

This time, he laughed. “Pass.”

“Pass? Did you seriously say that?” Scarlett crossed her arms and tapped her foot. “I have to go to town, too. My dad needs groceries, and there’s a few things that I need to replace out in the barn. I don’t think he’s gone shopping since...” Her voice faded and her expression faltered. “I’m going with you,” she repeated. “And that’s final. I’m not going to let you pay for anything that we will inevitably end up owing you. Heck, I told my dad I’d rather pay you out of my own pocket than let him put together this stupid little contract. But when we’re back on our feet, that will be all over.”

He couldn’t move. There was something about her understanding of how everything would go that made him feel even more guilty than he had before. Carlos hadn’t told her the whole truth about their contract. Elijah couldn’t be sure of what she knew, and he didn’t want to get on her father’s bad side.

Telling Scarlett any details would ensure he didn't have a chance at buying the farm. So he kept his mouth shut. As far as Scarlett was aware, they were only using the farm as collateral.

Elijah placed the tools into the tool bag and then wiped his hands on his pants. "Fine. You can come with me, but I'm leaving now and if you don't have your list—"

She whipped out her phone with a flourish. "Don't you worry about that. It's all on my app." Her fingers tapped madly on the screen, and then she glanced up at him. "When you took the tour, did you notice anything else we might need? Feed for the animals? Supplies? I'm not one hundred percent certain I got everything on my list." Without preamble, she shoved her phone into his hand.

Their fingers brushed against one another. Her skin was as silky soft as they came—definitely not the hands of a rancher. There were zero callouses, zero scars. While her nails were trimmed short, there wasn't a speck of dust that gathered beneath them. These weren't the hands of someone who knew hard labor.

Scarlett wasn't going to last a month out here.

"Well?" she demanded. "Is there anything I've missed?"

He focused on the list, scanning it just to see how much she *had* noticed. Surprisingly, he couldn't think of a single thing he needed on top of what she'd come up with. Scarlett was nothing if not thorough.

Elijah handed it back to her. "I think you're good for now. We'll get this to start with, and if we find we missed anything, it's not a big deal to make a run." He moved to the side of the tractor to retrieve his hat. Once he had it on his head, he brushed past her.

From the time she'd come back into their lives, she had managed to throw him off guard more times than he'd like to admit. He'd found himself feeling bad for her, being impressed by her, and being infuriated with her all at once.

Now, he had one more strange reaction he couldn't understand.

When her fingers had grazed his, he'd felt a strange sort of connection. It was like there was something about her that spoke to him. He had never noticed another woman's hands like that before—not even the girls he'd asked out on dates. He found himself glancing toward them after Scarlett had climbed into the pickup.

She had her hands clasped in her lap as she stared resolutely out the front window. There was a wall between them, but that didn't surprise him at all. They'd built that wall with their arguments and prejudices. Suddenly, he wasn't so sure he wanted it to remain.

Something must be wrong with him. He was getting soft. Scarlett didn't mean anything to him. She was Anna's friend, and as such, the only value she had was in keeping Anna happy.

Annabel was who he needed to worry about. He wasn't sure how easy it would be to derail his sister's progress with her AA program, and he didn't want to find out.

Elijah started the truck and they drove the short distance to the grocery store. When he pulled to a stop, Scarlett reached for the door handle and then paused, her suspicious gaze darting toward him. "Are you going to come inside with me?"

He shook his head. "I'm going to the hardware store."

She pulled the door shut with finality. "Then that's where I'm going."

Stifling a groan, Elijah bumped his head against his seat. "Why?"

"I told you why. We're already in debt to you far more than I'm comfortable with. I'm not going to let you spend a penny on anything we need. I have more than enough money to get us by, but my dad won't let me pay for any of the bills. Surely you can understand me wanting to pay for my family's things."

The look on his face must have demonstrated his disbelief enough that she felt she needed to elaborate.

“He gave me a card to use for supplies for the farm, but I’m not going to use it. He can get mad all he wants. I’m part of this family, and this farm will be mine one day. I’m pretty sure that’s what my mother would have wanted anyway.”

Great, the guilt returned with a vengeance. He’d had no reason to believe that Scarlett wanted to take over her father’s business. Sure, she’d insisted several times that she wanted to stay, but to live in her childhood home and run the farm? It was far more likely that the Queen of England would decide to drop in for a cup of tea than for him to believe that.

This was all talk. He just needed to remind himself of that fact a few more times. Scarlett would tire of this stage of her life just like she had before. All he needed to do was play along.

Elijah grabbed the handle of his door and pushed it open. “Fine. I’ll go inside. But you’re getting me a doughnut.”

“Deal.”

Before he could check to see if she looked like she was joking, she’d slipped out of the front seat and shut the door behind her. Scarlett headed for the front of their little country store. The glass doors slid open and she disappeared inside.

“Lucas is going to owe me big time and it’s gonna take a lot more than a doughnut to cover his debt,” he muttered under his breath as he followed her inside.

Scarlett was already making his life harder than it needed to be just by being present when he had to get work done. Throw in the fact that she was causing strange feelings to stir in his chest like little flickering flames, and he’d have a forest fire on his hands soon if he wasn’t careful. He needed to get his head on straight again. He needed to remind himself that Scarlett wasn’t who she appeared to be. He knew the real Scarlett.

Carlos had even said something similar.

Elijah yanked off his hat upon entering the store and gave a nod to the gal at the front register. He didn't see Scarlett immediately, but that didn't matter. The store was only so big. She was bound to cross his path eventually.

He trudged onward, fighting the thoughts about Scarlett that had surprised him the most. If she was being genuine about her reasons for coming home, he was going to look like the biggest jerk in town.

Shoot.

Elijah stopped in the middle of the aisle and nearly got run over by an elderly woman with a shopping cart. She gasped, her eyes wide. He muttered an apology and jumped to the side. Once she was past, he returned to what he'd been thinking about prior to his near collision.

Everyone deserves a second chance to be a better person.

Even Scarlett.

He'd already committed to not scaring her off, but maybe that wasn't good enough. Maybe he needed to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Elijah raked a hand down his face with a groan. Why did he always get saddled with the hard stuff? Why couldn't he just go about his merry way like Lucas? His brother seemed pretty darn happy with the way he was leading his life.

It was because Elijah was a decent human being with morals and a firm understanding of just how small the gray area in life really was.

Well, shoot. He was going to have to start being nicer to Scarlett, wasn't he?

That was a heck of a lot easier said than done.

"Here. As requested."

Suddenly, a plastic bag was pushed into his chest. He scrambled to get a good grip on it, and then his focus landed on Scarlett.

"I'm all done. You ready?"

His eyes bounced down to her cart, finding several plastic bags already purchased. “How—”

“I know this place like the back of my hand. It might have been ten years, but this place has never changed. Come on. Let’s get to Ingrid’s before it gets too late. It’s almost dinner time.”

Scarlett

Scarlett pushed past Elijah, hiding her smile in her shoulder. The surprise on his face was worth every penny that doughnut cost her. She led the way out the front door and straight for the truck. When she heard Elijah get to the vehicle, she glanced toward him. “We’re going to have to be quick in the hardware store. I don’t want any of this to sit in the car for too long. It’s cool, but there’s not a cloud in the sky, so the sun could still ruin the food.”

The only reaction she got from him was a grunt.

He could be grumpy all he wanted. She wasn’t going anywhere, and he needed to get used to it.

Scarlett followed Elijah into the hardware store, making sure to stay close. She wasn’t about to let him wander off and purchase anything without her knowing. It didn’t matter that he seemed to have good intentions. If she was going to do this right, she needed to make sure she didn’t take any handouts from anyone.

The irony wasn’t lost on her. Yes, her father had been trying to do just that—to make sure they weren’t getting Elijah’s help for free.

Elijah stopped and pulled something off the shelf to examine it. While he was reading the back of the packaging, she took a minute to study him. He had a small bit of scruff

growing along his jawline that seemed to make it more angular. His eyes were the same kind of blue as Annabel's, but his hair was darker—brown rather than blond.

He'd always been more serious than Lucas. But that was about all she knew about him.

Well, that and he was fiercely protective of his family.

Was it strange that even though he'd targeted her as the threat, she found his need to keep his sister safe almost desirable?

Yes, it was weird. He'd been nothing but rude to her since she'd gotten back to town. Elijah wasn't the one for her, no matter how much she wanted to settle down. He glanced in her direction, but she wasn't fast enough and he caught her staring.

She blinked, flushed, but held his gaze.

"What?" he murmured, placing the item back on the shelf.

"Why are you helping my dad?" It was the only thing she could think of to ask him that would make sense. His helping was out of the norm on a good day. And considering everything else that was going on, it simply didn't make sense.

He stared at her for maybe a second longer, then moved down the aisle without an answer. She hurried after him, then got in front of him. "Hey, I asked you a question." Though her tone was light, even she could hear the accusation in it. She needed to pivot if she didn't want to mess up what her father had set up because even she could admit they needed help, and right now, it wasn't like there were many who were knocking down the doors to do that. "Don't get me wrong. I do appreciate that you're willing to help, but it... doesn't add up."

Elijah stiffened. Or maybe that was all in her imagination. It was possible that she was seeking out defensive behavior because she wanted him to be up to no good. He slipped down another aisle, and she fell into step beside him. "I'm helping because my brother offered and then wasn't able to follow through."

She lifted her brows. "Lucas asked you to do it?"

He frowned, his jaw working back and forth. “Yeah. And a Keagan is nothing without his word. So, if he’s not going to be around to help, then someone needed to be.”

His explanation only added to his attraction. Elijah might be helping her out of duty, but he didn’t have to. It wasn’t his responsibility. Once again, Elijah was demonstrating how important his family was to him.

She couldn’t help but wonder what it might have been like to have someone so protective over her. Scarlett’s whole life had been about sticking up for herself and chasing after the things she wanted because if she didn’t, no one else would do it for her.

“What?” Elijah demanded, pulling her out of her thoughts.

“Nothing,” she stammered. “I just couldn’t figure out why you would go through all the trouble to help my father when you have a lot on your plate, too.”

“What are you talking about?” Now he really was defensive.

“You... your family’s farm... it’s always been a little rough going, hasn’t it?”

The pure and utter indignation that shined from his expression had her second-guessing everything she knew about the Keagan’s property and the business they ran. Annabel hadn’t updated her on how things were going. They usually didn’t talk about anything she didn’t find interesting, and she’d always resented being the one to help raise her brothers and sisters.

Unless she’d only been keeping that stuff from Scarlett because she was embarrassed by it.

“I don’t know what Annabel has said to you, but our farm is doing just fine. There’s a lot of work, but we’re all pitching in. Ever since we were awarded some money, we’ve been able to—” He cut himself off. “We’re doing just fine,” he repeated.

She didn’t know what to say. There was nothing she could say that wouldn’t sound like she was trying to placate him.

The longer they stood there at odds with one another, the worse the sensations in her stomach became. Scarlett looked down at her feet, feeling like all of her previous confidence had drained from her body and now she was standing in it like she might have stood in a puddle after rain.

Elijah sighed. “Look, I’m willing to help as long as your dad needs me to. I’m not walking away with nothing. I’m going to get compensated. So don’t go trying to find problems where there are none.” He turned and strode away without waiting to see if she’d follow him.

She’d always known that Elijah had strong feelings about his family. As the third in line, he’d always seemed to be ready to take on more responsibility than was needed.

But he also had a good head on his shoulders, and he wasn’t about to lose out on an opportunity that could benefit him. She couldn’t fault him for any of it.

Scarlett pushed forward until she was walking beside him again. She kept her eyes trained ahead as she attempted to come up with the words that could smooth all the ruffled feathers they both had. When she glanced up at him, she found him watching her—probably expecting her to start another fight. Well, she couldn’t guarantee that she’d never snap at him again, but for now, she was extending an olive branch. “I’m sorry.”

He stopped so suddenly in the aisle that she almost ran into him.

“I want you to know that I appreciate what you’re doing for us, and I don’t want you to walk away because you think I hate you.”

“But you do, right? Hate me?”

Scarlett released a groan. “Of course I don’t hate you. I might not like you very much, but I can accept when I’ve been given something that I shouldn’t toss aside. You’re giving my father’s farm a second chance at life. And for that, I will be eternally grateful.”

Elijah’s features hardened somewhat.

Or maybe she was just seeing things. “I still don’t want you doing more than you agreed on. I want to make sure I pull my weight just like anyone else. And when the time comes, perhaps we’ll be a little more like friends than enemies.”

He snorted. “Like that would happen.”

“True. I don’t see any miracles happening over the next few months.” A small smile played at her lips. “But wouldn’t that be something... if we did... you know... become friends?” She let out a laugh. “What do you think Annabel would do if she found out we were actually getting along?”

“She’d probably think we were edging her out.”

Scarlett laughed. “I could totally see that. She’s never wanted me to date any of your brothers. I haven’t even told her that I had a crush on Lucas for the longest time.” She continued laughing until she noticed something different in Elijah’s eyes. They were darker, stormier somehow. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” he muttered, nodding down the aisle. “Let’s get those spark plugs, and then we can get a few other things. You’re the one who said you didn’t want to stay in here too long. Something about the groceries...”

She gasped, and her head swiveled around to stare out the window toward the truck. “You’re right. That cheese is going to go bad.”

He cocked a brow at her. “You think the cheese is going to go bad? Isn’t cheese, like, notorious for being left out?”

“Not in the sun.” She swatted him as they picked up the pace and continued down the aisle. “If the cheese you bought at the store was meant to be put at room temperature, then it would be. It’s the really smelly cheeses that you might be thinking of, and I’m not even sure they can stay out at room temperature.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” he said.

She gasped, causing him to stop suddenly, his hands coming out at his sides. “What? Did you see something?” He looked down at his feet and his gaze searched for what he

could only assume was a rodent or some equally offensive pest.

The opportunity was too good for her not to take. She squeaked in alarm and grabbed onto him suddenly. Elijah jumped and sputtered, still looking for the offensive reason she would have done that.

There was no holding it back now. She released a laugh that drew the attention of several people nearby. Their looks of concern quickly shifted to disdain, but she didn't mind. It was the confusion on Elijah's face that filled her with glee.

"What was it?" he demanded.

"Nothing."

"You gasped. Like you saw something."

She shook her head, chuckling still as she made it to the end of the aisle. "I gasped because you were actually agreeing with me. You were the one who took it to another level." When she looked back at him, she wasn't surprised to see the glower on his face.

"You can't be serious," he muttered. "We're in a public place. You shouldn't do that."

"Oh, come on." She nudged him with her elbow. "Life isn't worth living if you can't have at least a little bit of fun."

He stopped again, staring at her like she'd sprouted wings from her shoulders. "Oh really? That coming from you?"

"What?"

"The whole life isn't worth living if you can't have at least a little bit of fun. The Scarlett who used to hang around our house left that thinking behind when she got all serious and went to college. It was one of the reasons Annabel got so—" He cleared his throat and grabbed the spark plugs from the shelf beside him. "Come on, let's go."

Annabel? What about her? Scarlett hurried after him. "You can't just say that about Annabel and expect me to let you change the subject. What about Anna?"

“Doesn’t matter. Things happen. Life changes. It’s hard, and then it’s not.”

“You’re not making any sense.” She grabbed onto his forearm and pulled him to a stop. “What happened with Annabel when I went to college?”

Elijah stared at her with hard and unyielding eyes. “Annabel went on a bender. The funny thing was that she was fine until you told her that you weren’t going to come home. That’s when things took a shift for the worst.”

“What happened?” Scarlett whispered. She could only imagine how Annabel had felt all those years ago. And Annabel wasn’t the kind of person to spill her guts to anyone. The closest she’d ever come to doing that with Scarlett was when she’d confessed how much she loved astronomy. She’d felt super embarrassed about it at the time, but like most Keagans did, she changed the subject.

“You’re going to have to ask *her* that.”

“I’m asking *you*, Elijah. This all goes back to why you seem to think I’m the only one to blame when it comes to Annabel.”

“I didn’t say that, and you know it,” Elijah snapped. “I said you were both to blame.”

“Then tell me so I can make it right.”

He shook his head. “It’s not my secret to tell. If you want more information, you have to go straight to the source.” Elijah moved past her and down a different aisle. He placed a few more things in his handbasket, but it was clear he wasn’t about to continue their conversation. He was as tight-lipped as they came.

If she wanted to know what had happened with Annabel, she’d have to drag it from her friend in person. And somehow Scarlett didn’t see Annabel wanting to discuss anything about a history she wasn’t proud of. If she hadn’t brought it up in all the ten years they’d been apart, then what made Elijah think that she would be willing to discuss it now?

The ride back to her farm was quiet. More than quiet, the silence was deafening. It gave her a headache to sit beside Elijah knowing full well he could give her a clue or a heads-up on what she'd be walking into if she brought up the issue with her friend.

On top of the headache, she'd become dizzy from all the back and forth.

Elijah had started out as obnoxious, then found his way into her good graces, only to fall right back into the path of her fury.

How could a man be so attractive and so infuriating at the same time?

The only explanation was that she had to have lost it. Maybe she was still in shock from her mother's death. She'd lost her ability to look at things logically.

Elijah might be a lot of things, but he wasn't anyone she needed in her life.

Elijah

Elijah knew he was going to regret telling Scarlett about Annabel the moment the words slipped from his throat. As soon as they returned to the farm, he took the supplies he needed to repair the tractor and booked it. He couldn't give Scarlett any opportunities to weasel the information from him.

For now, he needed to focus on how he would react to Annabel's wrath when she inevitably brought it up. At least he hadn't told Scarlett that she was in AA. That was a secret she had to spill on her own, and he'd kept his word about not spreading it.

The chances of Annabel seeing it that way were slim to none. She wouldn't be interested in that part of the story. She'd tell him he practically told Scarlett by inferring that there *was* a secret.

He threw his whole body into his work, but the extra physical energy he expelled wasn't enough to help him figure anything out. There was something about Scarlett that had him saying things he really shouldn't be.

Then there was the whole issue about the farm. Her father hadn't told her the whole story, and he knew it. Scarlett was still planning on taking over the farm when they were back on their feet.

Elijah now had the hard decision of whether to tell her the whole truth or to confront the man who would be the only one to stand in his way of getting his hands on his own property.

Son of a gun!

The second Scarlett walked back into their lives, his had only gotten more complicated. He'd found himself between a rock and a hard place more than once.

Good thing he didn't owe Scarlett anything. It was like her father had said. Scarlett would lose interest in this place and end up heading out like she always did. Elijah just had to remind himself of that fact, and everything would work out the way it should. He had nothing to feel guilty about. He heard her footsteps before her voice, but he wasn't surprised at her reappearance. Scarlett didn't just let anything go.

"My dad said you could stay for supper if you'd like." The tone in her voice indicated just how much she disliked the idea. It was hard to not be a little pleased with himself.

Elijah pulled away from the tractor he was working on and wiped the grease from his hands. He peered at the sky and then down at her. As much as he didn't want to be anywhere near her, he was still in the middle of fixing the dang thing, and if he went home, it'd be harder to get back into the swing of it. "Tell your father thanks for the invitation."

She stared at him like she expected him to do something.

"Did you need anything else?" He fully anticipated she would tell him she wanted the rest of the story from earlier. Already, he braced himself with insisting she drop it.

Scarlett crossed her arms. Her dirty look was priceless. Or it would have been if he didn't feel it penetrate him right to his core. "Well? Are you coming or not?"

He tossed his rag over his shoulder and then gestured toward the house. "After you."

She rolled her eyes, then spun around and strode toward the house. Elijah shook his head. The next several weeks were going to be interesting, to say the least.

Flashes of memories flooded his thoughts. Memories of a younger version of Scarlett—an outgoing and bubbly woman who could captivate anyone she came in contact with. It wasn't any wonder why he'd had a crush on her. How many times had he brushed off the interests of another girl because he'd been hung up on Scarlett?

Well, those days were long gone. Just because he'd felt something for her before didn't mean those feelings would return any time soon. He wasn't interested in her any more than he was interested in getting the business end of a bull charging toward him.

His boots creaked on the steps leading to the front door. Scarlett disappeared inside, leaving him to enter and close the door behind him. He'd only been in this house once in his life, though Scarlett probably didn't remember it.

He'd done his best to forget it had ever happened—because who wanted to remember a time when a girl was drunk enough to think he was his brother?

The memory still stung more than he'd ever admit to himself.

Scarlett simply never had any interest in him, and he'd come to accept that.

Plates and cutlery clanged or thumped against a table in the kitchen toward his right. Neither Carlos nor Scarlett gave him any mind when he entered the house, and he wasn't sure whether or not to remove his boots. Back home they hadn't started doing so until they'd fixed up the place. But in the Perez residence, he couldn't help but assume they had higher standards. At least that was how it had always felt when he was younger.

Scarlett was the little princess who got everything she wanted, and he'd been the pauper who had only wanted her to give him one chance to prove himself.

Elijah shook off those memories, reminding himself once again that he didn't want anything to do with Scarlett. He

needed her to lose interest sooner rather than later. That was what needed to happen so no one got too attached.

Least of all himself.

He pulled off his boots one by one and placed them by the door. Then he headed farther into their home. Carlos took a seat at the kitchen table, then pulled a linen napkin from his plate and unfolded it. His eyes connected with Elijah's briefly before he placed the napkin in his lap.

Elijah paused, momentarily unsure what to do, but then Scarlett motioned toward the sink. "There's some Dawn soap in the cabinet there. It's gonna be the best thing for that grease under your fingernails."

He glanced down at his hands, turning them over to find the dark substance covering not only the creases in his hands, but also stuck under his fingernails just as she'd mentioned. It wasn't unheard of for him to go several days of work with such a thing. A little dirt never hurt anyone.

However, he was a guest in this house, and he wasn't about to get on Carlos's bad side.

Elijah nodded and moved in that direction, though his ears perked up when Scarlett started talking to her father.

"I got all the supplies I noticed you were out of, but I'm sure I missed something. I was hoping you'd write up a list of everything you know we'll need for the harvest so I can make sure we have it. I don't want to have to make several trips to town."

"I'm sure Elijah can handle that. He's done enough harvests to know what's needed and what isn't."

There was a silence so loud that even Elijah felt like his ears were ringing.

"While I appreciate that Elijah is here to help, I'm not going to learn anything by passing everything off to him. I know I wasn't around to help out much, but I'm here now. I want to learn how to run this place with you. Why can't you understand that?"

The desperation in her voice tugged at him—almost making him want to tell Carlos that he needed to think of some other way to get help. Elijah might not like Scarlett that much anymore, but he wasn't willing to steal something from her.

He heard shuffling movement and a chair scratching against the linoleum. Then Carlos's heavy voice. "Sweetheart, I know you think you want to run this place, but it's just not something you're going to stick with."

"How can you say that?" Scarlett muttered with indignation. "Everything I've put my mind to, I've succeeded."

"You went to college. You spent thousands on a degree. You don't want to lower yourself to working this farm. It's... beneath you."

Elijah stiffened. He'd never thought running a farm was degrading, and yet that was how Carlos was selling it to his daughter. Is that what Carlos thought of him? What if he still had a thing for Scarlett? Would he find Elijah not worthy of his daughter?

Probably.

That was always how it had felt when he'd come around with Annabel.

He yanked a hand towel from the counter and dried his hands with a vengeance. Balling the rag up into a wad, he tossed it on the counter, ready to give this man a piece of his mind no matter the consequences, but Scarlett beat him to it.

"How can you even say that? The agricultural part of this country is the foundation of what makes it work. If we didn't have farmers and ranchers, then we wouldn't have food. You can't tell me that this job isn't worth it."

Carlos's gaze never left his daughter's. Her back was to Elijah so he couldn't see her face while she spoke, but her voice was hard and unwavering. He could hear her passion loud and clear.

It was possible that he'd been wrong about her staying. Maybe she really did want to make a change.

Carlos's stoic features never shifted. "I'm not saying it's an unimportant job. All I'm saying is that you chose a different path. You wanted something and you went for it. Don't throw that away just because you're feeling nostalgic."

She shot to her feet, but the motion didn't startle her father like she probably hoped it would. "How dare you," she seethed.

His eyes didn't waver, nor did his grim expression.

Scarlett continued, "I'm not here because I feel nostalgic. I'm here because I finally realized where things went wrong in my life. If mom were here, she'd see it. She wouldn't push me out. When I came home, I did so because I didn't want to waste a single moment I could spend with you." Her voice trembled with emotion. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides. "You might think that I'm not capable or that I'm just going to leave when things get hard, but that's not going to happen. I don't know how else to prove it to you besides sticking around and making you witness your own stubborn judgments of me."

She stepped out from her chair and shoved it back against the table. Taking her plate in her hand, she stormed off.

Elijah's eyes followed her as she headed out the kitchen door to the back side of the house. He didn't move. It was as if he innately believed that standing still might make him invisible to the man who remained at the kitchen table.

Only it didn't.

The second the door shut, Carlos set his eyes on Elijah. He lifted a hand and gestured toward the chair beside where Scarlett had been seated. There was a plate with a folded napkin waiting for him. "Take a seat, Mr. Keagan."

His feet moved as if on their own accord. Elijah pulled out the chair and settled down into the hard seat. He didn't grab the napkin, nor did he serve himself any food. Instead, he stared at the man who had singlehandedly torn down a woman Elijah had thought indestructible.

"Do you have something to say to me?" Carlos challenged.

“No, sir,” Elijah murmured.

“I don’t take kindly to liars, son. If you have something to say to me, you might as well spit it out now. I get the distinct feeling that we’ll be having several of these kinds of meals together.”

Elijah snorted. “You mean the kind where your daughter storms out of the room? Does that happen frequently?”

“More often than I’d like to admit. She got it from her mother’s side, you know—that fiery temper was something that drew me to her in the first place.” A ghost of a smile touched the man’s lips and he leaned forward to serve himself an enchilada. “My wife was the kind of woman who knew how to get what she wanted. It didn’t matter who she came up against. She could persuade anybody to do just about anything.”

“Sounds familiar,” Elijah muttered, earning himself a sharp and yet penetrating look.

Then Carlos did the unexpected. He laughed. “You’re worried that I’ll back out of our deal.”

“I never said that, sir.”

“You didn’t have to. It’s written all over your face. Either you’re worried I’ll back out, or you’re judging me for making it in the first place. So which is it?”

Elijah shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He’d never had someone read him so easily. Was he really showing all of that on his face? “Honestly? I wonder if you’re wrong.”

Carlos lifted one brow. “Wrong? About what, exactly?”

“What if she stays?”

“Scarlett?” He shook his head. “I know my daughter, and she has always hated living on this farm. Her mother hated it too... at first. But then, one day I brought home the most beautiful black mare. And she was hooked. Scarlett?” He shook his head again. “There was never anything about this place that could have kept her here. Not her family. Not an animal.” He gave Elijah a pointed glance. “Not even a man.”

Elijah swallowed hard. Why did it feel like Carlos was trying to tell him something? They barely knew each other. In fact, he could only remember saying half a dozen words to the man before today. There was no way he'd known about the crush he'd had in his more formative years, had he? Clearing his throat, Elijah turned his focus to the food on the table. "With all due respect, grief can do a lot to a person. Your daughter might have changed."

His hard gaze seemed to soften but only slightly. Carlos picked up his fork and knife and turned his attention to his plate. "With all due respect, Mr. Keagan, I'll believe it when I see it. She can scream at me that she wants this place until she's blue in the face, but it doesn't change the fact that I know her even better than she knows herself. This farm isn't what she wants. She likes the idea of staying here, of putting down roots, but she'll tire of it." He settled back in his seat, laying one more firm gaze on Elijah. "On that note, our agreement still stands one way or another. If Scarlett decides to stay, it will be up to you whether or not you want to hire her."

"Sir—"

He held up a hand. "Until that time, while I'm in charge, I'll allow her to work until she either finds something else to distract her or until she admits she was wrong and gives me a tearful goodbye."

Elijah couldn't believe what he was hearing. He shot a look toward the door, half-expecting Scarlett to have overheard everything and start another tantrum. But she didn't.

He found himself wondering what it must be like to live in a household where someone didn't believe in him. It couldn't have been easy.

Great! Now he was feeling sorry for her.

Scarlett

Scarlett fumed and sputtered as she paced the front porch. She'd taken her plate and started toward the barn, only to remember that there weren't any places for her to actually sit down and eat her supper unless she wanted to sit in the mud with the pigs.

She found herself making a beeline for the front of the house, tempted to sneak in the front door and head up to her room. But there was a problem with that.

Both Elijah and her father would definitely get a glimpse of her running off with her tail between her legs. She'd made a great exit after putting her foot down, and she wasn't willing to turn back now. They both needed to know where she stood when it came to this farm, and she didn't care how many times she had to say it. One of these days her father would accept that she wasn't the same girl who had dreamed of international travel.

She wanted to come home.

For good.

Now, as her food sat cold on the top porch step, she found herself... stuck. She couldn't go inside. She didn't have the appetite to eat out here. And she didn't want to show her face to anyone, really—especially because she'd allowed a few tears to streak down her face and was almost certain the evidence was written all over her cheeks.

Scarlett heaved a sigh and collapsed onto the top stair beside her food. She placed her elbows on her knees, racking her brain for what she could do to make these men see that they were wrong.

Never in her life had she felt so alone.

Maybe her mother had done her a disservice by always siding with her.

More tears fell, staining her cheeks and then her jeans. Oh, how she wished her mother were still here with her today. She'd know what to say to her father to make him see he was being unreasonable. What father didn't want his children taking over the family business he'd poured his life into?

Apparently, her father was one of them.

If her mother were still alive, she wouldn't have put up with it. She would have made her father see that Scarlett deserved an opportunity to prove to them that she wanted to stay. Yes, her mother might also show some reservations about such a drastic change, but she wouldn't have immediately dismissed Scarlett like her father was doing. And she definitely wouldn't let her father offer part of the farm to Elijah.

She lost track of how long she sat out there, only to realize that this was the only logical exit for Elijah to take. The door behind her opened and shut. He didn't move from the door, and she almost thought he slipped back inside until she heard his voice.

"You okay?"

She huffed. "I don't see why you'd care."

He sighed.

"Just because I think you're bad for my sister... and you don't seem to care about your family's farm... doesn't mean I don't care about you."

Scarlett found herself rolling her eyes for what felt like the hundredth time before she turned to face him. "That's hard to believe."

His expression shifted from unreadable to concerned in a heartbeat. In two swift steps he was beside her, moving the plate that had managed to gather the interest of several hungry flies. "Have you been crying?" He reached forward with his thumb extended, but she jerked away from him.

"What? No."

“Scarlett,” he said with utter exasperation. “Your face is still wet.”

She brushed at her cheeks with the back of her hand, then looked away. “It doesn’t matter.”

He didn’t move, and the longer he sat beside her, the more antsy she became.

“Don’t you have some work to do?”

“Yeah.”

Still, he didn’t leave. She could practically feel the heat from his skin pulsating in her direction. Scarlett threw her hands into the air and forced herself to meet his gaze. “Then why don’t you go do it? The sooner you get it done, the sooner you can leave.”

His brows furrowed and his eyes delved into hers. He continued to frown at her as if he wanted to say something. There was zero chance of that happening. She didn’t need another guy telling her what she could and couldn’t do.

Scarlett let out a strangled growl. “What? What do you want? Is this some kind of ploy to get even with me over whatever happened with Annabel? I don’t get it. Why do you have this vendetta against me?”

“I don’t have a vendetta, Scarlett,” he said.

“Then what?”

She watched him closely, but even doing that didn’t give her any of the answers she desired. He pressed his lips together and then shook his head as he got to his feet. “You’re right. I shouldn’t be here.” With that, he got to his feet and marched toward the barn.

Without realizing why, she jumped to her feet and chased after him. “What is going on? One minute you’re cold, the next it’s almost like you want to help. Then you’re back to hating me.” She hurried beside him, his long legs taking strides she found hard to keep up with. When he didn’t answer, she grabbed his forearm and turned him to face her. “Answer me.”

He scowled at her. “You know what? I wanted to help you. I felt sorry for you. It can’t be easy to be dismissed by your own father like that.”

His words stung, but only because they were exactly what she was trying to deny while she’d been alone on that porch. Not only that, but she was also trying to figure out if someone like Elijah could actually care for her.

“It shouldn’t matter what choices you made before. Your dad is your family. He shouldn’t be judging you based on any of that. It’s wrong.” Elijah pulled his arm free from her and continued forward.

“But you don’t like me either.” It was the only thing she could think of to say. What he’d stated was probably the nicest thing he’d said to her since she’d arrived back in town. For the first time in a while, she felt seen.

“It doesn’t matter if I don’t like you. We’re not family. I don’t have to like you. But your father should at least show you some degree of love. Why would you even want to stay?”

Scarlett’s steps slowed and her voice came out weak. “Because he’s my dad and I love him.”

Elijah stopped suddenly. He didn’t turn around, didn’t respond to her words—just stood still.

“I lost my mother. I don’t want to lose him too. I feel like he’s a shell of himself, and I don’t know how to connect with him. He’s all I have left.” There, she’d admitted it to someone other than Annabel. While it was too hard to admit her fears to her own father, she could tell Elijah without any repercussions. She wasn’t sure what her father would say to a confession like that, but she knew it wouldn’t go over very well. Carlos Perez was the most stubborn, hardheaded man she knew. He didn’t appreciate weakness of any kind.

Not even from his daughter.

It was one of the reasons they hadn’t discussed the loss of her mother.

Scarlett squeezed her eyes shut. Vulnerable. That was the only sensation she felt. All her walls were crumbling. She had

to be strong in front of everyone, including Annabel, because that was who she was.

She was strong, independent, and always knew what to do next.

But now she was lost.

More hot tears slid down her cheeks, but she fought them back. She was alone in all of this. Annabel was her best friend, but they weren't as close as they had once been. Her friends in Germany were more like acquaintances. Over the last decade, Scarlett had managed to push away every person who might have gotten close to her, and that was why she had wanted so badly to return to her home.

Alone.

The word felt cold, final. It wrapped around her like a noose, making sure to cut off all oxygen she might have had a chance at getting.

She suddenly felt a strong pair of arms wrap around her, holding her tight, pulling her against him.

Scarlett gasped, sucking in sharply. Her eyes fluttered open but only briefly enough to find Elijah was the one giving her a hug.

Her legs gave out and she slipped her arms up beneath his, her hands clutching his shoulders. She buried her face in his chest, not caring that she was clinging to a man who, only hours ago, had told her to stay away from his sister.

The physical connection to someone who was willing to just hold her was more of a boon than anything she'd received since she'd heard the news of her mother's accident.

Sobs racked her body, and with them all the anguish she'd been dragging along inside her fell away. She'd lost her mother—the only person in this world who truly understood Scarlett inside and out.

Her confidante. Her cheerleader. Her best friend.

She'd never see her again, and that realization had resided inside Scarlett, festering like the wound that it was. The tears

continued to fall, and with each passing minute, Scarlett grew weaker until the sobs stopped altogether.

Surprisingly, Elijah didn't pull away. It was only when he shifted his weight to adjust for her own numbed legs that she realized what she'd allowed herself to do.

Scarlett gasped and jumped back a little too fast. The blood rushed to her head, causing a wave of dizzying stars to fill her vision. Elijah held onto one of her wrists until they cleared. When her focus found his face, she blushed. "I'm so sorry," she rasped, her throat dry. "I didn't mean—"

He shook his head. "It's fine."

"No, it's not."

"Scarlett," he said more firmly this time. "You've been through a trauma. My judgment of you wouldn't stop me from offering my condolences either way."

She couldn't hold his gaze then. Her stomach swirled uneasily and she fiddled with her hands. "Well, you didn't have to."

"I know." Elijah said those words so simply, as if they were the easiest thing to say. When she peeked at him, she found him studying her, which only caused that strange numb feeling to spread to her other extremities. "Are you going to be okay?"

Scarlett huffed. "Aren't I always?" But then she glanced at him again and blushed. "I mean... yeah. I'll be okay. Actually, I feel a little better after..." Her blush deepened. "Sometimes you just need a good cry, you know?"

"If you say so." He crossed his arms and his expression changed from warmth to something different. It wasn't cold—not exactly. But it was guarded. He pulled off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. His eyes narrowed, shifting toward the sky like he'd done earlier. "If you want my advice, I'd call your old job and ask them if you could come back."

She blinked. "What?" It was hard to believe he'd say such a thing after he'd heard her speech in the kitchen on top of

pouring out her soul to him just now. “You think I should move back to Germany?”

He placed his hat back on his head and shrugged. “Seems to me the folks around here don’t much care whether you go or you stay.”

She gasped, and the heat in her face got even hotter. “You can’t be serious.”

Finally, he met her gaze. “I’m not saying it’s right. I’m just saying that it seems like you had more success in your life when you were out doing what you love.”

“What makes you think I loved it?” She crossed her arms and took a step back from him. Once again, he’d gone from making her think there was something more to him to realizing he didn’t have a heart after all. “I love my father. I loved my mother. This is my *home*, Elijah. I grew up in Copper Creek, just like you did. I have every right to want to spend the rest of my life here.”

“Of course you do. But do you really want to stay in a place where the people won’t appreciate what you have to offer? I mean, your father loves you. We both know it. But does he respect you? Can he see the value you have to offer here? I don’t think so.”

Her mouth fell open. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing.”

“I’m just telling you how it is. Living out in the country isn’t for everyone. It’s not all sunshine and rainbows. It’s hard. It’s dirty. And at the end of the day, you’re lucky if you get to take a shower before you fall into bed completely exhausted. If I had another chance at a different life, I’d think real hard about whether or not I wanted to stay in this one. That’s all I’m saying.”

Scarlett’s fury reached a boiling point. She threw her clenched fists down at her sides and stormed away from him, back toward the house. She’d show him.

She’d show all of them.

Her thoughts were beginning to sound like a broken record in her head. No one thought she could handle staying. Not

Anna, not her father, and not Elijah. But she was stronger than all of them combined. If she had to get up at the crack of dawn every single day and work until there was not even a streak of daylight in the sky, she'd do it. She'd read every book there was on running the farm, and she'd prove to everyone who doubted her that she was cut out to be a farmer.

Elijah was right. Farming wasn't glamorous, but she didn't want that kind of life anymore.

She wanted a family. She wanted a place where she felt she belonged. She wanted to live in a town where everyone knew her name and she knew theirs.

Scarlett made it to the porch. She scooped up her plate, shooing the flies from her wasted meal. Tomorrow was a new day, and she was going to be ready for it. But first she needed to find someone who could give her all the information she needed to get started.

She'd make a quick call to her neighbors. Adeline and Sean were local experts around here on everything she might need to know. If her father wasn't willing to help her, she'd find her information somewhere else.

Elijah

Elijah got up two hours earlier than he normally did. It was the start of a new week. He had a long list of chores he needed to get done at the Perez farm and something told him Lucas would be dropping the ball, so he needed to make sure everything was in order at home before he left.

When he got on site, he wasn't surprised to find the place quiet—it was five in the morning, after all. He'd feed the animals, and then he'd get right to work with the tractors.

He climbed out of his truck, but the second he shut the door, he froze.

Scarlett was headed from the water spigot with two buckets. The liquid contents sloshed over the edges and doused the ground with each step she took toward the barn. What was she doing up so early? He'd arrived at this time, fully expecting her to not show her face until much later. Seven, at least.

The look of pure determination that radiated from her face was enough to bring a smile to his own face. It felt like every time he turned around, she was doing something contrary to what he believed her capable of. She continued to surprise him at every turn.

Elijah took a step toward her when she stumbled but stopped when she righted herself. Yesterday, when he'd held her in his arms, he'd set free some of those latent feelings he'd harbored for her in their younger years. Not only had it been dangerous then, but even now his heart felt out of its usual beating pattern.

He'd have to be more careful when he was on site—that included when she showed her vulnerability but also when she was trying to prove a point. When had he become such a sucker for that sort of thing?

That was an easy question to answer. He'd always held an appreciation for women who wanted to carve their own path in

this world. His sister had shown him how important it was for a woman to be a partner with the man they loved—not through her romantic relationships but with the ones she had with her family.

He knew he needed to find someone who was just as passionate about providing for her family as he was.

His gaze continued to follow Scarlett until she reached the trough at the side of the pigpen. She put the buckets down and then grabbed the handle of one with both hands. It was still a little too heavy. Or perhaps it was the awkward size that did her in.

Either way, she lost her hold of the thing and ended up pouring water all the way down her front.

Elijah laughed; he couldn't help it.

The problem was, his laughter drew her attention. She stiffened, then turned to face him. He wasn't naïve enough to think she hadn't seen him before. In fact, he knew she'd seen him. It was the way her eyes had shifted when he'd arrived. She might not have looked at him directly, but she was keeping tabs on him—a fact that both delighted and unnerved him.

Now, she glowered at him. “Are you just going to stand there ogling me? Or are you going to help?”

He leaned against the hood of his truck, arms crossed as he laughed again. “Now why would I do something like that when it's far more entertaining to watch you do it all on your own?” He jutted his chin toward the empty bucket that now rested on its side inside the pen. “You might want to refill that one, though. From my experience, pigs need a little more water in their trough and a little less on the people feeding them.”

“Funny,” she called back sarcastically. “But I think I'll be just fine with what I have left over.” She picked up the second bucket as if to prove her point, and then he watched with amusement as the same thing happened again. Scarlett cursed.

“Language! Pigs are very intelligent creatures.”

This time she faced him and let out a string of words in another language. He didn't understand a single one, but based on the venomous tone they were said with, he knew better than to make another snarky comment.

Scarlett grabbed onto the top bar of the pig pen and climbed inside. She stooped to grab one bucket handle, then the other. Elijah couldn't be sure what happened next from his vantage point due to it happening too fast. But one second she was standing upright, and the next she'd landed on her backside in the mud.

He straightened and took a step toward her.

She held up a hand, signaling for him to stay put. "Don't you dare," she called.

"You sure? I could help—"

"The last thing I need is your help. You're the reason all of this is happening." She grunted as she got to her feet.

"Is that so? Can you tell me just why you believe that?"

Scarlett shot him a death glare, then snatched the buckets again. She managed to make it out of the pen without further incident before charging toward the spigot again. Her entire back was covered in the fresh mud her water had created.

He moved toward her, cautiously at first, then with more confidence. "You might want to get sprayed down before you head off to the next chore you have planned."

"You think?" she snapped. "Because I was planning on making this my next official fashion statement." Her eyes shot to meet his. "Hey, that reminds me. Come here, you're wearing your shirt all wrong."

Elijah cocked his head, instinctively taking a step backward. "Thanks, but I like wearing my shirt the way it is, just fine."

"Your sleeves are rolled up to different lengths. They should be fixed."

He made the mistake of looking down. At that very moment, she tossed the contents of the bucket directly at him,

dousing his entire front with ice-cold water.

Elijah hissed, his body going stiff, arms out at his sides. He shot a lethal look in her direction, not surprised in the least to find her doubled over and laughing.

“Not so funny when you’re on the other side of it, huh?”

Water ran down his frame in rivulets, dripping to the dirt at his feet. The fall weather had set in recently, and the light breeze that was normally a welcome relief to the sun beating down only chilled him to his core. “You’re gonna pay for that.”

She cocked her hip, placing one hand there as her eyes swept over him from top to bottom. Scarlett pulled her lower lip between her teeth and then grinned. “No, I don’t think I will.”

Elijah lunged for her, but she was too fast. This time she threw the bucket itself at him. The five-gallon hunk of plastic connected with his shins and he nearly tripped. As soon as he righted himself, he continued on his quest to get her back for the mess she’d caused.

Scarlett was a lot of things, but she wasn’t slow. He couldn’t remember her being a track star in high school, but the way she could leap over fences and dart around obstacles left him wondering why she hadn’t been interested in more athletic activities when they were younger.

Her face whipped around to glance at him as he started gaining on her. A squeal escaped her lips, urging him onward. He didn’t know what he was going to do when he caught her, but it was going to be good.

She led him farther and farther away from the water and the mud. He’d have to get creative if he wanted to exact his revenge in the most appropriate way. Foot by foot, inch by inch, he edged closer and closer to her until she was just in reach. Then, out of nowhere, she darted left then right and jumped upward toward a branch that hung overhead. Within mere seconds she was perched above him on a branch, leaving his head spinning.

Elijah craned his neck, then stepped back a few paces to get a good look at her. He crossed his arms as he watched her swing her legs like she was the smartest person in the world.

“Whatcha gonna do now?” she sang. “Can’t exactly make me pay for anything up here, now can you?”

He continued to watch her, but every so often his focus would dart to the tree in the pasture they’d found themselves in. He might be able to scale it, but by the time he got up to where she was, she would have more than likely jumped down and escaped.

Scarlett tilted her head and her lower lip pouted. “Eventually, you’re going to have to give up and walk away.”

His eyes darted up to meet hers. “What makes you think I’m going to go anywhere?”

That caught her attention. She shifted in her seat and her eyes narrowed. “You won’t stay out here. You have work to do.”

“Yeah, that’s where you’re wrong.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Elijah nodded. “Yes, I have work to do, but I’m one of those guys who knows how to manage my time. How do you think I get so much work done? I’m working two locations right now. I’m pulling the weight of three men at least.” He took a step toward her, and she scooted closer to the trunk of the tree. “I’m ahead of schedule. I could stay all night long and not worry about meeting this week’s deadlines. You messed with the wrong Keagan. And now you’re gonna learn what that means.”

Her nervous laugh was music to his ears. “I don’t believe you. It gets cold out at night, and you’re wet.”

He shrugged. “By then I’ll be dry. How much do you want to wager that out of the two of us, only one will be able to last the night without shelter? If the cold doesn’t get you, the critters will.”

“Critters?”

He nodded again. “Sure. Remind me of something. Back in Germany, when you had that fancy desk job, how many coyotes did you run into?”

“Coyotes?” The smug humor had all but drained from her face.

Elijah made a show of pulling one of his hands out and pretending to examine something between his finger and thumb as he rubbed them together. He turned his back to her, calling over his shoulder so she could still hear him. “I’d reckon we might see at least one or two tonight. It’s getting colder. They’re gonna need to find food somewhere. What better meal than a pretty, young thing like you.”

What he’d expected to happen, did.

He heard her feet hit the ground with a thwump, and before she knew what hit her, he swung around and snaked his arm around her waist. She gasped and then screamed.

Elijah chuckled as he effortlessly tossed her over his shoulder and headed toward a creek they’d passed a while back. The bend came onto her property, but only just. Seeing as the water was coming from the mountains themselves, it had to be colder than anything they got from the spigot.

The second she noticed where they were headed, Scarlett screeched, kicked her legs, and struggled. “Elijah, no. You can’t. I’m sorry. That water is gonna be freezing.”

“Shoulda thought about that when you doused me with that water earlier.”

By the time they reached the water’s edge, she’d given up the fight. But the second the frigid running water came into view, it was like someone had rebooted her. This time, instead of kicking and trying to climb down, she’d turned into a cat who refused to be removed. She clawed at him, climbing higher and higher onto his shoulder.

Elijah effortlessly pried her away from him, one arm around her back and the other beneath her knees. Her hands remained locked around his neck and she shut her eyes tight.

“Any last words?”

Her eyes flew open, finding his. For a moment they just stared at each other. It was both the longest and shortest second of his life, because immediately after that, she leaned forward and crashed her lips over his.

Scarlett held him fast, tight, as if her very life depended on the kiss she gave him. Every single memory of their childhood when he'd pined for her came rushing back to the surface.

Every. Single. One.

Her laugh. Her eyes. The way she pulled her hair back into a messy bun when she wanted to work hard on something. But most of all, the way he'd always wondered what she'd taste like.

Between her sweet, floral perfume and the sugar honey taste of her lip balm, Scarlett tasted like summer rain and freshly made scones.

Stars swam behind his eyes. His body betrayed him, and she slipped from his arms. Her feet landed in the grass. She didn't immediately pull away from him, but she didn't lean into him either. It was more like she lingered.

They lingered with each other.

A squirrel skittered up the bark of a different tree and Scarlett flinched. Her eyes flew open and she tore away from him—not just out of his arms but halfway across the pasture before he'd realized what had just happened.

Scarlett's retreating silhouette leaped over the fence and took off toward the barn. He wasn't certain, but it even looked like she didn't give him a second glance.

Had she seriously just kissed him to get out of being dumped into the creek he stood beside?

Elijah couldn't decide whether he was impressed or irate that he'd allowed her to distract him so easily. She couldn't have known that he'd had a small crush on her. Not even Annabel knew that about him.

No one did.

He dragged a hand down his face and let out a breath, allowing himself to return to that moment when she'd given herself to him.

Heart frozen.

Breath stolen.

He'd lost everything about himself in those few seconds, and a small part of him wanted to believe that she felt even a small degree of it, too.

His focus shifted in the direction that she'd escaped, though she wasn't visible any longer, and all at once the reality crashed down on him. It wouldn't matter if she felt even a smidge of what he'd just experienced. She was off-limits for several reasons. The least of which was that she was Annabel's best friend.

He didn't even want to think about the fact that her father was selling the farm out from under her.

There was only one thing he knew for certain.

He'd need to keep his distance if he wanted to survive the harvest season.

Scarlett

Scarlett made it to the back of the house and threw her body against it. Her heart pounded like she'd run a marathon.

Okay, perhaps she had.

But what else was she supposed to do after kissing Elijah?

She shut her eyes, the embarrassment washing over her in a downpour. Why had she done that? There was no reason to. She had no interest in him. She'd thought she liked Lucas. At least he seemed to like her more than Elijah did.

Scarlett's head thudded against the side of the house. That kiss had been a terrible mistake. He'd hated her before, and now she'd handed over more reasons for him to continue his resentment. Something told her that Elijah wasn't the kind of guy who would tolerate a person throwing themselves at someone, no matter the reason.

She blew out a frustrated breath, willing her heart to slow down so she could regroup and figure out how to tell him she was sorry. When she'd splashed him with the water, she hadn't expected him to chase her all the way to the pasture. Nor did she expect that he'd been willing to wait for her to get down.

Then there was the matter of that kiss.

Pressing the heels of her hands to her eyes, she groaned. It had all happened too fast.

The worst part was how much she'd enjoyed being in his arms. From the way he'd scooped her up and tossed her over his shoulder all the way until... that kiss.

Heat spread from her midsection out to her extremities despite the chill from the still-wet mud that clung to her clothes. She lifted her fingertips to her lips, and beneath them a smile formed. Their kiss had been... unexpected. It had awoken something within her—similar to what she'd felt when she knew she needed to come back home.

Scarlett tore her hand from her lips and shook her head, but it did nothing to clear it. Their kiss did nothing to change the fact that Elijah still hated her. This would simply be one experience they'd both look back on with regret.

She pulled away from the house and hurried toward the back door. If she was quick, she might be able to pass by her father unnoticed on her way to the stairs so she could shower. There was still a lot of work to get done today. All of the animals needed to be fed, and she wanted to check on a few things in the barn and corrals—a lot of the smaller things could have been completed by now if she hadn't had her run-in with Elijah.

Right now, the best thing for her to do was to stay busy. She could bury herself in her work until she could speak with Annabel—nope.

Annabel would be livid if she found out that Scarlett had kissed her brother. That was the only rule she had. No fraternizing with her brothers. Since Annabel was Scarlett's only friend, there really wasn't anyone she could confide in.

She couldn't think of that now.

Work first.

Relationships later.

But not with Elijah.



SCARLETT SUCCESSFULLY AVOIDED Elijah after their little moment by the creek that ran through her property. Once she got her work done, she took off. She couldn't be at the farm, not when she'd have to face her father or Elijah.

Heaven only knew what would happen if she had to talk to either of them about what she'd done. Just thinking about it made her face burn. She needed to get her mind off that kiss, and the only option she had at her disposal was to hang out with Annabel.

It was probably a good idea to keep Annabel away from Elijah in case he planned on telling her about it. That thought alone spurred Scarlett's decision to kidnap Annabel and make sure they didn't have a chance to speak until she could tell Elijah to keep their secret.

She pulled up at the Keagan residence, not surprised to find most of Annabel's siblings finishing up their own chores. Dinner would be on the table soon. Perfect timing. She'd be able to pull Annabel away from the ranch, and they could go have some fun.

Annabel wasn't in the barn, nor was she in any of the fields nearby. In fact, none of her brothers knew where she was.

Scarlett stood in the middle of the path that led to the barn when Annabel's truck rambled up the dirt driveway. Pure relief flooded Scarlett's body. Now, if they could just leave before Elijah got home.

Her friend climbed out of her truck, her little sister Charlotte doing the same from the passenger side. Annabel smiled toward Scarlett but took a few steps to the bed of the truck. "What are you doing here, Scar? I didn't think I'd see you until the weekend." She retrieved a few plastic bags of what appeared to be groceries.

Charlotte gathered more of the same.

Scarlett hurried forward and kept her voice low. "Can't I want to see my best friend? Maybe take her out to dinner?"

Annabel chuckled. "Is this about my birthday?"

The blood drained from Scarlett's face. Annabel's birthday. Of course. How could she have forgotten? She really was a bad friend. "Yeah. That's exactly it." There was no use telling the truth in this moment. It wouldn't help anyone.

Annabel moved past Scarlett and headed for the house. "You know I do birthday dinners with my family on my actual birthday. I just figured we'd celebrate together this weekend."

"You sure? Because I thought we could get out of here and have some time just the two of us." Scarlett shot a worried

look toward the road. Elijah could appear any minute. And leaving now almost felt... wrong. "But we'd have to leave right now to get there on time."

Annabel laughed again. "What has gotten into you?" She pushed open the door to the house and nodded for Charlotte to head in first. "You're welcome to stay, though. I got all the fixings for a baked potato bar. Bacon. Sour cream. The good stuff."

Scarlett was about to get on her soapbox to tell Annabel that she could let her baked potato bar wait for one day, when Elijah's truck arrived at the house. Scarlett spun around in the doorway and her eyes connected with his through the front window.

She wasn't sure, but she thought she saw a sinister grin cross his face. He was definitely going to spill the beans. He was going to tell Annabel and they'd get in a fight, and then Scarlett wouldn't have anyone.

Scarlett shot a look inside the house where Annabel and Charlotte had disappeared, then swung her gaze back around to Elijah just as he got out of the truck. He shut the door and leaned his shoulder against it.

Her hand sought out the doorknob until it made contact, and she pulled the front door shut behind her. She blocked the door, but that didn't mean he wouldn't be able to get past her. He'd demonstrated just how strong he was and his ability to move her wherever he wanted her to be.

The acrobatics taking place in her stomach seemed to like reliving that particular moment today.

Traitorous emotions.

Scarlett crossed her arms and smoothed her expression so he wouldn't be able to read her. That was her only line of defense. She needed to know what he'd do or say before she could plan her own defense.

Maybe it wasn't going to be so bad. Annabel might even laugh if she heard the whole story. Elijah was going to dump

Scarlett into freezing water. She had to do *something* to save herself. And Elijah probably didn't even like it.

But there was no telling. His own expression was flat and unreadable. They were at an impasse at this moment. And their time was running out.

She moved away from the door and to the edge of the porch. Elijah pushed away from the truck, coming toward her until he stopped at the base of the stairs. He placed a hand on the railing and then peered out in the distance. "You've been avoiding me."

"So?"

That got his attention, though she couldn't tell if he was amused or irritated.

A small tendril of frustration flickered through her chest. What was she doing? This wasn't who she was. She refused to let him control her. Scarlett lifted her chin and pretended to have all the confidence she had somehow left behind in Germany. "I don't owe you anything."

He cocked his head and his eyes narrowed slightly. Lifting his hand, he dragged his thumb along his jaw and then broke eye contact. "No, I don't suppose you do."

"Then what do you want?" she demanded. "Because as far as I'm concerned, there's nothing to talk about."

Elijah's mirthless chuckle tugged at her. Clearly, he wasn't thrilled about the situation they found themselves in. He could just tell her it didn't mean anything and that it was manipulative and wouldn't happen again. Or was she wrong? Did it mean something?

The flutters in her chest went into overdrive.

Did it mean something to her? All the sensations from that moment accosted her, hitting her over the head and pointing out that she'd never felt that way with anyone before.

No. It didn't mean anything.

She was just starved for attention. What she really needed was to find someone else who could give her what she craved

—what she came here to do.

“What’s going on here?” Lucas materialized out of nowhere, causing Scarlett to jump. Her eyes flew wide as he moved past Elijah and headed up the stairs. He paused beside Scarlett, studying her before glancing toward his brother. Then he laughed. “Don’t tell me that you can’t handle being bossed around by a woman, Elijah. I know you like being in charge, but come on!” He slipped an arm around Scarlett’s shoulder and pulled her closer to him in a sideways hug. “If you had to be subservient to a female, it couldn’t get much better than Scarlett, right?”

She didn’t want to look at Elijah. She knew that if she did, she’d be frozen, unable to move. And yet that was what she did. Her eyes landed on him and stayed there, waiting for him to say something charming, witty, or even bordering on disdain. This could go so many ways.

Tension mounted between the three of them and Lucas must have felt it. Or maybe he got bored. Either way, he grabbed both of Scarlett’s shoulders and made her face him. “Well, don’t mind him. He’s just a big grump who doesn’t know how to have fun.”

“I know how to have fun, Lucas,” Elijah said. “I just don’t go throwing myself at everyone I come across.”

Once again, Lucas draped his arm around Scarlett’s shoulder and guided her toward the door. He rolled his eyes. “Seriously, don’t even listen to him. You staying for Annabel’s birthday dinner? If so, I call dibs on sitting by you.”

Scarlett could feel Elijah’s gaze burning a hole right in the back of her head. He probably wanted her to leave, and she couldn’t blame him. He’d practically admitted that he didn’t think their kiss was appropriate. Heck, he probably thought she’d thrown herself at him.

The embarrassment melted like hot iron into the indignation that hovered beneath the surface. If she’d wanted to throw herself at him, she would have done so. Their kiss was nothing but a way to distract him so she could get away.

She briefly glanced at Elijah just before they entered the house. “Sure, of course I’ll sit by you.”

Lucas grinned, then pushed the door open and motioned for her to head inside. She didn’t bother looking back at Elijah. At this point she didn’t care if he was upset. If he wanted to spill the beans about their kiss, then he could. The chances that anyone would take his side were slim anyway. The more she thought about it, the more she had to admit that Annabel would tell him he shouldn’t have been messing with her to begin with.

Scarlett wasn’t sure when it happened, but at some point she’d found herself alone. Lucas and Elijah had disappeared behind her. Maybe they’d gone down a hallway or slipped into the living room to talk about something. It was odd that Lucas wasn’t escorting her all the way to the kitchen. But she brushed it off. The workday was all but done, and Elijah had been gone from the Keagan ranch for most of it.

The more likely reason for them to go missing was to catch up on what needed to be worked on tomorrow.

So rather than go looking for them, she continued to the kitchen. Charlotte was pulling out potatoes from the oven that were wrapped in tinfoil. Annabel and two of her youngest brothers were filling bowls with toppings for the potatoes. They had green onions, bacon bits, chili, cheese, and so many other options she couldn’t keep track of it all.

Annabel glanced up when she entered and her smile widened. “There you are. I thought you might have left. You okay?”

One of the brothers—Caleb, if she was right—shot a look in her direction. It wasn’t anything that made her worry that he was interested in what might be happening, but it was enough of a reality check to remember this family didn’t really keep secrets.

That meant one thing.

Elijah wasn’t going to keep their kiss a secret.

Regret was the first emotion that seemed to slap her in the face. Why did she have to be so impulsive? There had to have been other options. She shouldn't have even thrown water at him.

But he'd laughed at her. He deserved it.

Scarlett nodded stiffly. "I'm good. We... could we actually..."

Annabel glanced at her watch. "Geez. Where is everyone? They know dinner is at six on the dot. We don't have all night." She nudged her brother. "Caleb, go round everyone up. Tell 'em if they're not here in five minutes, their food is gonna get cold." When her brother took off, Annabel returned her focus to Scarlett. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

Shaking her head, Scarlett forced another smile. "Nothing. I'm good."

If it was going to come out, it was going to come out. She just didn't have the guts to be the one to make that happen.

Elijah

Elijah couldn't tell if he was more upset about the fact that Lucas was clearly trying to hit on Scarlett, or that she was letting him do it. Logically, he shouldn't be upset at all. He didn't care who Lucas wanted to date, and Scarlett was a big girl. She could handle herself.

Besides, she wasn't going to stick around very long anyway. So, what did it matter?

He scowled at the closed door, contemplating whether or not he should just skip supper. He'd get an earful from both Annabel and Wade, but that was nothing compared to the torture he'd have to suffer while being seated at the table with Scarlett.

That kiss had burned a mark inside him much like he'd imagined a branding might feel like. It smoldered and festered, refusing to allow him to forget what it felt like.

The worst part was that he wanted more. He wanted to pull her aside and demand that she kiss him once more just so he could experience it one more time. Her kiss was like a drug. There was no denying it.

He was no better than Lucas.

That realization hit him in the chest—hard. It knocked the air out of his lungs and made his arms and legs feel weak. Lucas was all about dating as much as he could. He didn't want to settle down because he was having too much fun. None of the women he dated meant anything more than a good time.

Wasn't that how he was feeling about Scarlett and that kiss? He was almost willing to take more of it just so he could feel something. His stomach churned and he had to swallow the bile that crept up his throat.

Elijah had promised himself that he'd never become that kind of man. Women deserved to be treated with respect. That was why he was going to put his foot down. Scarlett might not

be the kind of woman he wanted to settle down with, but she still deserved to be treated right. Lucas wasn't going to do that. If he wanted to ensure Scarlett wasn't hurt, he'd have to step in.

It was for her own good.

At least that was what he told himself as he marched up those creaking steps and headed inside. Caleb nearly collided with him as they passed in the hallway.

"Annabel wants everyone in the kitchen right now," he said breathlessly. "And you know how she gets on her birthday."

"Yeah," he muttered. "I know." His younger brother darted past him and out the front door.

When Elijah reached the kitchen, he found Annabel and Scarlett hovering near the kitchen sink, speaking quietly.

Lucas was sprawled out in his seat at the table with his phone out. Half of the Keagan men were seated there as well, including Wade. Brielle sat beside him. Everyone was either having a quiet conversation or they were on their phones.

He took a step forward just as the rest of his brothers entered the kitchen from the other side of the room.

"Good, everyone's here." Annabel handed Scarlett a bowl and then took one for herself. "You know the drill. Make your own potato. There's plenty to go around, so no need to worry about running out of toppings."

Annabel nodded toward one side of the table. "Scarlett, you can sit by me if you'd like."

Lucas shook his head, pulling the chair beside him out from the table. "She already agreed to sit by me. And the birthday girl gets to be at the head."

Annabel glanced at Lucas, and Elijah could see the suspicion in her eyes. "Lucas," she drawled. "We've been through this."

"What?" he asked with feigned innocence. "Can't I be friends with your friends?"

She placed the bowl of cheese on the table, then popped her hip as she put her hand there. “The last time you were *friendly* with one of my friends, she got mad at me because you wouldn’t call her back.”

Lucas made a face. “Yeah, well, that just goes to show that Poppy wasn’t very smart on two counts. Scarlett knows that I’m not interested in anything serious. Don’t you, Scarlett? What’s the harm in one date?”

“Lucas.” This time Annabel’s voice had some edge to it—enough to garner the attention of the eldest in the family.

Wade sat up a little straighter in his seat. “Leave Scar alone, Lucas.”

“It’s fine,” Scarlett jumped in. “He’s just playing around. I know enough to keep my distance.” Her light tone might have been enough to fool everyone at the table but not Elijah. And he had a feeling Annabel could hear it too. But his sister wasn’t doing anything about it.

She sighed, rolled her eyes, and then gave her friend a pointed look. “If he does anything stupid, you have my permission to slug him. Heaven knows he deserves every bit of karma the world has to offer.”

Elijah watched this whole conversation play out as if it were on a stage, and by the time he realized that he hadn’t picked his seat at the table, there was only one spot left—right next to the princess herself.

Scarlett settled into the seat beside Lucas. It wouldn’t have been so bad if she’d done what she always did—ignore him or put him in his place.

But this time she played along, much to the irritation of the birthday girl.

Annabel wasn’t the only one frustrated.

For some reason, Elijah couldn’t stomach what was taking place right beside him.

Scarlett laughed at every dumb thing Lucas said. She nudged him with her shoulder or her elbow. And she scooted

closer to Lucas so the distance between himself and her continued to grow.

She'd said herself that she could handle him, but Lucas was laying it on thick. He was using every little trick in the book. From the way he let his arm brush against hers on the table to the way he said her name with more huskiness than was necessary.

Elijah's blood boiled. There was no easy way to describe what he was experiencing in that very moment. And there was no logical explanation for his reaction. He itched to pull her away from him and force her to trade seats so he could become a buffer.

"Elijah, are you okay?"

He jumped and stared across the table. Charlie was staring at him, which only caused the others at the table to take notice. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and grabbed his glass of water. "Yeah, why?"

"Your face is red and you look like you're going to throw up."

All he could do was snort. Or cough. Both sounded the same to him in that moment. "How can I look sick and angry at the same time?"

"She's right. You do kinda look sick and angry." Lucas chuckled. "I've never seen that before."

Elijah shot him a withering stare. Then he turned his attention back to his baby sister. "I'm fine. I had a... strange day at work."

"Aren't you working with Scarlett?"

He wasn't sure which of his brothers asked that question, and at this point, he didn't care. Elijah returned his glass to the table and pushed his chair out. "You know what? I don't feel all that great. I think I'm going to turn in."

"Elijah?" Annabel's voice was the last thing he heard as he headed for the kitchen door. He should have done what he had planned and gone to his room, but something stopped him.

Instead, he adjusted his course and walked straight for the front door.

If he knew Lucas like he thought he did, his brother would try to put the moves on Scarlett as she was leaving. If Scarlett was lucky, then Annabel would be with her. The problem was Annabel couldn't always be on guard like she was right now.

Scarlett can make her own decisions. If she wants to be with Lucas, you have to step aside. That obnoxious voice in his head returned with a vengeance. What was he trying to do? If Scarlett let Lucas take her out and it didn't go well, the chances of her leaving went up dramatically.

That's what he wanted, right?

Elijah reached the front porch and settled down on the top step. He rested his forearms on his knees, contemplating all the possible outcomes, not surprised in the least that he hated each and every one of them.

"I thought you said you were going to turn in."

Elijah stiffened. He hadn't even heard the door open. And now he was alone with the one person who probably shouldn't be spending any time with him. He didn't move, didn't dare breathe. "I realized I probably could use some air," he ground out.

Scarlett's footsteps shuffled until she finally stopped to the side of him. She leaned against the porch railing and let out a sigh. "So, are you going to tell her?"

There it was. The moment he'd been expecting since he'd gotten home.

"Tell who what?"

"Don't play dumb, Elijah. We both know that you could do some damage with the information you have."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Annabel would probably blame me."

"But I was the one who kissed you."

"Don't remind me," he said.

"Well?"

“Well, what?” A smile tugged at his lips. This was actually sorta fun.

She groaned. “Elijah. Just tell me if you’re going to tell Annabel what happened today.”

This time he twisted around so he could get a good look at her. His eyes narrowed as he tried to figure out what she wasn’t saying. “Is there a reason I should tell her?”

Scarlett huffed.

“Let me rephrase that. Did it mean anything?”

Her scowl softened, and then her expression went slack altogether. “No,” she said firmly. “It didn’t mean anything.”

The disappointment that trickled in, along with the frustration over his brother, made him wish he’d actually eaten something. For some reason, he really was feeling sick to his stomach. “Then I guess there’s no reason for me to say anything.” He said it quietly, but it wasn’t so quiet that he wasn’t heard.

“What aren’t you going to say?”

They both jumped at the appearance of Lucas.

Never in Elijah’s life had he wanted to knock the teeth from his brother’s mouth so badly. Up until Scarlett had arrived, he’d actually had a good relationship with his brother. They got along great, and that probably had a lot to do with the fact that Lucas’s poor decisions had never crossed over into Elijah’s life—with the exception of his less-than-stellar work ethic.

Now, he couldn’t fight this feeling that Lucas was doing everything in his power to set Elijah on edge.

His brother wandered toward Scarlett and stood beside her—a little too close for Elijah’s comfort. He glanced toward Elijah, then Scarlett. “You two aren’t keeping secrets from Annabel, are you?”

Scarlett glanced toward Elijah briefly before laughing like she’d done before. Unfortunately, Lucas didn’t miss the exchange. Elijah was going to hear about this one for sure.

Thankfully, Lucas was smart enough to change the subject. It was either that, or he knew an opportunity when he saw one. “I was thinking. You’re back in town and a lot has changed around here. There’s this country club that went in on the outskirts of town where we could go dancing.”

“Lucas,” Elijah warned with a shake of his head.

“Oh, come off it. Annabel isn’t the boss of any of us.”

Scarlett’s brows lifted, but she didn’t say anything.

“If I want to ask Scar on a date, then I’m going to do it. And you’re not going to do a thing about it.” Lucas nudged Scarlett again. “What do you say?”

“I really don’t think that Annabel would approve...”

“Where’s your sense of adventure? If it would make you feel better, we don’t even have to tell her.” Lucas wagged his eyebrows, then reached over and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

That small gesture was almost too much for Elijah to bear. He nearly shot to his feet to shove his brother away from Scarlett, but his own good sense held him back. He glowered at his brother, shaking his head again. “You don’t want to cross Anna, and you know it. Why even risk it?”

“It’s just one date, Elijah. Back off.” Lucas turned his attention once more toward Scarlett. “And if we get to the end of the date and nothing comes of it, then who cares what we tell Anna?”

The hesitancy was the first thing Elijah noticed just before the confidence in her expression returned. She tilted her head slightly and her eyes brightened. “You know what? I think that would be fun, actually. Though it would probably be better to go in a group. If you can convince Anna to go with us, then I’ll do it.”

Elijah just about crowed with delight at the look on Lucas’s face. He hadn’t seen such disappointment in a long time. But Elijah’s happiness was short-lived. Scarlett was still agreeing to go out with Lucas even if Annabel was part of it. She would likely dance with him. And if he knew his brother

like he thought he did, Elijah knew that Lucas would pull her aside to the dark shadows outside and steal his own kiss.

Just thinking about Scarlett kissing Lucas set his whole body on fire. He burned white hot with pure and utter jealousy. He didn't want anyone, least of all his brother, to lay their hands on her.

Somehow, between their kiss and watching Lucas make his moves, Elijah had come to a very real, very bad insight. He liked Scarlett more than he had before. His insignificant crush had exploded the second her lips had touched his. It was as if a bomb had gone off and all that lay before him was destruction.

If it wasn't there already, it *would* be the second Annabel found out about any of this.

He dug his fingernails into his palms, clutching his hands into fists as he stared out at the property before him. How was he supposed to keep Scarlett away from his brother when she said herself that the kiss hadn't meant anything?

It wasn't like he could tell Annabel what was going on. Lucas had likely heard more than he was letting on when he'd snuck up on them. If Luke wanted to get even, he had all the ammunition he needed.

Son of a gun!

Now Elijah had to figure out how to keep Scarlett safe, even if it meant he wasn't going to be able to have her for himself.

Elijah jumped to his feet and strode away. He couldn't be here, listening to Lucas talk in soft murmurs. He couldn't stand seeing Scarlett gaze at Lucas like he was Prince Charming. He couldn't allow himself to try to come up with solutions that would get her to see him as a possible love interest.

He needed to come up with a way to help her see that Lucas would only bring her heartache—without allowing himself to fall for her completely.

This could very well be impossible.

Scarlett

Scarlett watched Elijah storm away, and something strange happened. Her heart seemed to stumble after him—at least that’s what it felt like. Yes, her heart was still very much in her chest at the moment, but her need to follow him and make sure he was okay was almost painful.

She wanted to apologize for kissing him, for being the person who had caused his sister pain. Everything she wanted to do, however, would be in vain because Elijah would never forgive her. That was something she’d figured out very quickly.

Chances of a friendship were practically nil. And based on the way he continued to get angrier with how she was speaking to Lucas, she got the distinct impression he was worried she’d hurt his brother, too.

“How about we plan on Friday night?” Lucas edged closer and his voice dipped huskily.

Scarlett dragged her focus from Elijah to Lucas. Once upon a time she would have been thrilled to have his attention. Despite everything she knew about Lucas and the way he flitted from girl to girl, she’d still wanted to know what it felt like to catch his eye.

Not anymore—at least not in the way she’d wanted it before.

She took a step back, pressing her fingertips to Lucas’s chest. “You haven’t gotten the go-ahead from Anna yet. I’m not agreeing to anything.”

He hung his head, peeking at her from his lowered lashes. “Really? Can’t we just slip out and do our own thing for the night?”

Her fingertips pushed him until he was forced to take a step back. “I’ve been gone for too long. I’m not going to mess up the friendship I’ve surprisingly maintained with Anna.”

“Anna’s *easy*. She’s not going to be mad.”

She pushed him one final time and then headed down the stairs. Without looking back at him, she called, “Tell Anna I’m not feeling so great. I’ll see her Friday if she wants to go to that club. Or tell her it can be just her and me.”

“Come on, Scarlett...”

Wiggling her fingers, she continued to slip away. Hopefully, Annabel wouldn’t be too upset that she slipped out without saying goodbye. Her whole family was there, after all.



“YOU DIDN’T HAVE to get me anything!” Annabel took the small white gift bag from Scarlett’s hands. The grin on her face said something entirely different.

They sat on the tailgate of Annabel’s truck outside of the country club and Scarlett bumped her shoulder with Annabel’s. “Yes, I did. I’ve been really... absent lately. I wanted you to know how much I care about you.”

Annabel gave her a flat look. “I know you care about me.”

“Okay, sure. But I need to do better. Especially since I’m going to be sticking around.”

Anna’s eyes flitted to Scarlett and she paused, the tissue paper in her hand hovering over the bag. “You’re still thinking you’re going to stay?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I?”

She brought the gift down to her lap. “Because you always go.”

It was more difficult than Scarlett thought it would be to deflect the hurt those words created. Not even Annabel thought she was going to stick it out. When she’d arrived almost a week ago, she’d thought Annabel would be the one who would stick up for her.

She swallowed hard and nudged her elbow into Annabel's side. "I'm staying. Promise."

While Annabel smiled, the expression she wore seemed to say that they'd just have to see how it went. Her friend turned to the bag in her lap.

Around them, several people ranging from teens to adults about her age were flocking to the entrance of the country club. Every time the door opened, music filtered through the air. Most of the people in attendance came with dates. She couldn't imagine they were all going dancing, but then a lot had changed since she'd left.

Annabel seemed to notice her interest and she chuckled. "This place is more than it seems. I don't usually come." She made a face. "The people here are too happy."

"Then why did you agree to come?" Scarlett laughed.

"Because Luke made me feel guilty. He said you really wanted to come tonight and that I was being ridiculous when I said he couldn't ask you out."

Scarlett rolled her eyes. "Lucas is messing with me. I don't think he has any real interest in me."

"Do you have any interest in him?"

Her question caught Scarlett off guard. She stared at Annabel with surprise. "What? No."

Annabel lifted a brow and the corners of her lips quirked upward. "I don't know. You were flirting pretty hard with him at dinner. Please tell me you don't have a crush on my brother."

Scarlett fought the blush she knew was coming. "I don't have a crush on Lucas."

"Scar..." Annabel drawled. "You can tell me."

"Okay, maybe I entertained the idea of going on a date with him when we were younger."

"Scar..." she repeated.

“Fine! Maybe I thought about going out with him when I got back, too. But that changed real quick.” It changed because of a certain kiss she’d shared with a certain *other* brother. “It *changed*,” she emphasized.

“Good,” Annabel said with finality. “Because even though Lucas is cute and he can be really charming, he’s definitely not the kind of guy I would want you dating. And not just because he’s my brother, either.”

Scarlett couldn’t help but wonder if Annabel would feel the same way about Elijah. That brother seemed to have a better handle on his life and where he was going. But was he interested in settling down?

It didn’t matter. She had to remind herself of that. Even if Elijah was ready to settle down, he’d have to *first* be interested in her.

“Scarlett! This is beautiful!” Annabel retrieved a simple gold chain with a small horse pendant. It was something Scarlett had purchased just before she’d decided to come home.

“The second I saw it, I thought of you. I know you might not wear it a lot, and it’s kinda cheesy, but—”

“It’s perfect, Scar. I love it.” Annabel wrapped her arms around Scarlett and then pulled back to put the necklace in her hand. “Help me put it on?”

The chain was no sooner clasped than they were interrupted.

“Hey, guys. I didn’t think you would make it.” Lucas leaned against the side of the truck and winked at Scarlett.

Annabel laughed. “Give it a rest, Luke. She’s not interested.” She held out her hand toward Scarlett and hopped off the tailgate. “You might as well waste your efforts on someone else. We’re going to have some fun, just the two of us.”

Luke’s confident smile faltered. “But I thought—”

“Thanks for the fun idea tonight, Luke. But Annabel and I are going to spend some time catching up.” She gave him a little wave, and they hurried inside.

The first few dances, Scarlett could forget about Luke and Elijah. She threw herself back into the friendship she’d loved as a teenager. All the time they spent apart seemed like a blip in the grand scheme of things.

When a slow song came on, they hurried over to the bar to grab some waters. Out of breath but happy, they found a place to watch the couples dance like it was their last night together.

Annabel motioned toward the group of couples. “You can’t tell me you really want *that*.”

“I don’t know. I think there’s something to finding that person who’s just right for you.” Scarlett’s stomach tightened, thoughts of Elijah returning. “Don’t you think it would be nice to wake up and know you have someone who would do anything for you?”

Her friend gave her a pointed look. “That’s what friendships are for—what family is for. Remember? You were so heartbroken over Jeff in high school that you swore a guy could never give you anything you couldn’t get for yourself. And your life turned out pretty great.” Annabel’s eyes shifted back to those dancing. “Relationships are just about heartache. After watching what my brother went through—what those women my brother dates go through—I think you’ve been right this whole time.”

“I think I was wrong,” Scarlett murmured.

Annabel glanced back at her. “What?”

“I think I was wrong,” she said louder. “I can’t explain it, but there’s a reason we’re drawn to relationships. One day your brothers are going to have a family all their own. One day I’m going to want it. And then where would that leave you?”

There was a hardness to Annabel’s gaze after that. She shook her head and put her glass down on a nearby table. “No. I won’t accept that. We aren’t defined by the people in our

lives. If we can't find happiness on our own, then we've failed ourselves."

Everything she said sounded exactly like what Scarlett used to say when she was younger. Elijah was right. She'd done Annabel a disservice. There would be no convincing her to change her mind. Scarlett wouldn't have been able to be convinced if not for her mother's death.

Then Annabel smiled. "Come on and dance with me. Let's show these people that you don't have to be in love to be happy."

Just as she was about to drag Scarlett into the fray, someone Scarlett didn't recognize tapped Annabel on the shoulder. "Dance with me?"

Annabel glanced from the man to Scarlett and back again. "Actually, we were just—"

"She'd love to." Scarlett turned her around and pushed her toward the guy. When Annabel shot a dark look in her direction, Scarlett laughed. "Let loose. Have some fun. It's not like this is a date or anything." She watched a very unhappy Annabel get dragged away and laughed again. Maybe all she needed was a few opportunities to see that finding love wasn't all bad.

The couple was swept up with the others, disappearing all too quickly. As if that thought alone was enough, her eyes connected with Elijah's across the room. She wasn't sure how long he'd been here. As far as she knew, he hadn't planned on coming. Elijah's gaze darted away, and he managed to disappear into a group of people. Her stomach flipped and her breath hitched in her chest. She'd managed to avoid him all week, but speaking to him here might be inevitable. She needed to get some fresh air—maybe find a hiding place until the end of the song.

"Looks like we can finally have that dance." Lucas's warm breath grazed her ear, causing Scarlett to jump. She glanced up at Lucas. At least he wasn't a threat. Her ambivalence toward him might be just the saving grace she needed so she could keep her distance from Elijah.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Elijah again. The heat of the room swirled around her. He was coming closer. She needed to act quick. “You know what? I’d love—”

Elijah’s hand slipped around her upper arm, forcing her to turn away from Lucas, much to his displeasure. “You can sweep her off her feet later, Lucas. I need to speak to her,” he called over his shoulder as he wheeled Scarlett toward the door that led to a balcony.

The cool air hit her like a splash of ice water. Immediately the heat in her face dissipated, though now it radiated from where Elijah was holding her. They didn’t stop walking until they reached the far side where they could be alone.

Scarlett glanced backward, expecting Lucas to follow them, but he didn’t. The second they stopped, she yanked her hand from Elijah’s grasp. “What was that?”

“You shouldn’t go out with him.”

Her head reared back. “Did Annabel say something?”

“No. But that shouldn’t matter. You shouldn’t go out with him because he doesn’t care about you.”

“What if that’s what I want?” The words slipped from her lips before she had a chance to give them a second thought. Based on the look Elijah shot back, she knew she’d been caught.

“You said you wanted something serious.”

She snapped her mouth shut.

“Lucas isn’t going to give that to you.”

Scarlett stared at him blankly. This had to be one of the weirdest events in the last few weeks—aside from actually kissing him. “I don’t know why we’re having this conversation. I’m not even here with Lucas. I came with Annabel.”

“You don’t have to lie to me. I know you made a deal with him.” Elijah was exasperated. His dark eyes searched hers as if

he could read her thoughts. She wanted to look away with every ounce of her being, but all she could do was stare back.

He was right. She'd made that deal, but not for the reasons he'd thought. She'd realized on her own that Lucas wasn't the one she was interested in. Admitting to such a thing would only make things worse.

Elijah's brows furrowed—probably because she didn't argue with him. He inched closer to her, and she held her breath. They were close enough that she could smell his cologne, feel the heat radiating off him. All the sensations and memories of their first stolen kiss came rushing to the surface, and at this moment, the only thing she wanted to do was take his face in her hands so she could do it again.

His eyes dipped lower, and his left hand grazed her arm. Scarlett shivered, releasing the air that had been trapped in her lungs. This was it. If he kissed her, then she'd know it wasn't just her. Perhaps she'd been reading the signs all wrong. What if Elijah was looking at her in the same way she saw him?

Someone laughed loudly a few feet behind Elijah. He blinked, then tore himself away from her. His voice lowered to a growl and he spun away from her. "You don't know what you're doing." His hands tightened on the railing of the balcony, and he heaved a sigh. "You can't just toy with people, Scarlett. You can't make promises and then walk away."

Tears stung behind her eyes. They were back to that again. "How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not going to leave Anna? I'm staying."

"You don't know what's going to happen. None of us do. But your history can give a pretty clear indication of the most likely path you're going to take."

She gritted her teeth, bearing down on her jaw so hard she brought blood to the inside of her cheek. In one swift movement, she moved past him and strode toward the door. Darting inside, Scarlett nearly collided with Annabel.

"Whoa! Scar, what's going on?"

“Nothing,” she said. As much as she wanted to tell Annabel her brother was being a jerk, she couldn’t. “How about we get out of here and get some ice cream or something?”

“You sure? Because I was thinking—”

Scarlett stopped and faced her friend. There was a strange little smile on her lips. “You were thinking you wanted to talk to that guy?”

Annabel waved a hand dismissively. “You’re right. It’s pointless. Let’s get some ice cream.” She looped her arm through Scarlett’s, and they headed through the crowd toward the front door, narrowly escaping a run-in with Lucas.

Scarlett had had more than enough fun with the Keagan men for one night. It was time to focus on more important relationships.

Elijah

“*W*hat in the name of Sam Hill was that about?”

Elijah glanced up from his glass of water, eyeing Lucas when he sidled next to him.

“You’re gonna have to be a little more clear about what you’re talking about.”

“Scarlett. You took her outside, and then she left like her hair was on fire.”

He snorted. “Still don’t know what you are getting at.”

Lucas gave him a shove. “You stole her from me.”

“I did nothing of the sort.” He took a long sip of his water. “I had a discussion with her, and if she decided to leave, that’s on her.” It was probably a good thing she took off anyway. If she’d stayed longer, there was no telling what Elijah might have done. He’d nearly kissed her out there, and only the good Lord saw fit to hold him back.

“You like her, don’t you?” Lucas’s accusation came out of nowhere, causing Elijah to shoot him a sharp look.

“What?”

“Yeah, I see it now. You like her, and you’re jealous that she’s interested in me.”

He straightened, rolling his shoulders back before facing his brother. “She’s not interested in you, Lucas. If she were, she would have stayed.”

His brother shook his head, a sly smile spreading across his face. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. You’ve been making goo-goo eyes at her ever since she arrived.”

“Have not. I didn’t even want her to be here. I think she should just go back to Germany where she came from.”

“Liar,” Lucas laughed. “You’re lying through your teeth, and if you believe even a word of what you’re spouting off,

you have bigger problems to worry about.”

“Yeah?” Elijah spat. “Like what?”

“Like the fact that you have a crush on a woman who might not be interested in dating anyone. Like that she’s Annabel’s best friend and they’re just starting to reconnect. What are you going to tell her?”

“You were going to ask her out. How’s that any different?” Elijah grimaced, hating how defensive his tone had become.

Lucas laughed, a sound that grated against Elijah’s nerves so much he wanted to knock his brother’s teeth out... again, for the second time this week. “The difference is that I was going to ask her on one date—maybe make out with her a little. But you? You’re attracted to her in a different way. You’ve never been the type who was okay with short-term relationships. You’re falling for her.”

“Am not,” Elijah grumbled.

“Believe what you want, but even I can see it. And if I can see it, it will only be a matter of time before Anna sees it too. If I were you, I’d nip this thing in the bud. You either need to convince our sister you are a good fit for her friend, or you need to find ways to hate her.”

He already had reasons to hate her. But they weren’t doing him any good at the moment. Every logical reason he had for keeping Scarlett at arm’s length wasn’t enough anymore. He was beginning to rationalize why he should give her a chance.

The biggest reasons included her obvious attempts to make right by her father and her friends.

Elijah continued to scowl. “Well, you can believe what you want,” he muttered, using his brother’s words against him. “But nothing is happening between us, and nothing ever will. We’re too different, and like you said, Anna would hate it.” He tossed back his water, swallowing it in two large gulps, then put his glass down. “I’ve got a long day ahead of me tomorrow. I’m heading out.”

“But you just got here.”

“Goodnight, Lucas.”



THE MORE TIME he spent on Scarlett’s farm, the more time he wanted to spend with her. He did what he could to keep his distance, but ultimately, he found he was failing at even that. Elijah just wanted to hear her laugh—to chat with her. When a whole day came and went without getting his fix, the only thing that helped him was supper time. Carlos invited him to eat with their family several times, and that was when he’d get to hear her talk about her life in Germany.

Her absolute love for the people of that country and those she worked with shone through brighter than the stars in the night sky. Her eyes lit up with an enthusiasm the heavens would be jealous of.

But it wasn’t just her stories of what she’d been up to for the last decade. He could listen to her complain or rave about the animals she was caring for and not tire of it. Scarlett seemed to have found a fresh zest for life being home again with her father, and it was intoxicating, to say the least.

He’d simply grown attached to her.

Elijah wanted to blame this newfound interest on their kiss—the kiss he knew had changed everything—but he couldn’t. He could tell she wasn’t quite the same person she’d been. Her choices lately had proven that. It didn’t mean she would stick around, but he was beginning to doubt himself on his prejudices.

They’d gotten into a routine around the farm, working side by side but not speaking much. It was easier to step back and give her some space when Lucas had done the same. Thankfully, he’d found someone new he’d set his sights on for the time being. That could change, but until it did, Elijah would keep an eye on her—make sure she was doing okay.

Lucas’s accusation of Elijah’s crush still hovered like a stormy rain cloud, but Elijah refused to let it affect the way he acted around Scarlett and her father. He was still a

professional, and besides that one day when they'd nearly gotten into a juvenile water fight, he'd remained as such.

It had been about four weeks since their little moment on the balcony of the country club. And on more than one occasion, he'd caught her watching him with an interest that wasn't there before.

The more time that passed, the harder it became to sleep. She visited him in his dreams when she wasn't taking over his thoughts.

Lucas was right about one thing. He really needed to come up with more reasons to hate her or he was going to continue to suffer.

The door to the main house banged open. "I won't be back until after supper. I've left you some food in the fridge you can heat up!" Scarlett called into the house. There was a muffled response, and then she hollered back, "Love you too."

The door swung shut and Scarlett hurried down the steps and toward her car. She was still driving around that silly, expensive thing that probably wouldn't get her anywhere if there were serious weather conditions. He'd been meaning to convince her to trade it in for something more practical, but it was the last shred of evidence she hadn't put down roots yet. She could always have it shipped overseas with her, should she choose to leave.

Her eyes met his, then darted away, footsteps going quicker. He stood by the barn, watching her leave, thankful that he didn't have to deal with her presence for the rest of the day. At least with her gone, he wouldn't have to fight the temptation to speak to her.

Scarlett pulled open her car door, climbed inside, then went to start it. But the poor excuse for a car didn't turn over. Again, she turned her key, but the engine whined at her instead.

She stared at her dash with confusion and what appeared to be disappointment. It figured that her trip would be thwarted

by a fancy new car that had no business being here in the first place. There went his day of solace.

Elijah continued to watch her until her eyes met his through the glass. She scowled at him before shoving the door open and stepping outside. “Elijah!” she yelled. “Can you come here?”

He shook his head.

“What do you mean, no? You’re a car guy. You can probably tell me what’s wrong.”

“Sounds like a bad battery.”

She stared bewildered at her vehicle. “The battery? But this car is new.”

He shrugged. “Don’t happen too often, but sometimes they go bad sooner than they should. Then again, you might have left some lights on. Who’s to say?”

Scarlett released a groan. “This can’t be happening.” She gestured toward the car. “Can you jump it or something? I have to get to Colorado Springs by four.”

Elijah shook his head again. “I ain’t lettin’ you drive all the way out there without knowing if that battery needs to be replaced. You could get stranded and then someone would have to come get you.”

Her scowl deepened. “Then you take me.”

He laughed, though he wasn’t sure why. It only made her madder. She could have put on a hornet suit and joined the local hive for how livid she looked. Elijah sobered. “Sorry. I got plenty of work here that needs to get done. I can’t exactly be chauffeuring you around. Can’t you use your father’s truck?”

“He’s got a doctor’s appointment.”

“Then I guess you’re out of luck and you’ll have to make it another time.”

“I can’t do that. Today is the only day they can fit me in.” There was a sliver of desperation in her voice—enough that

pulled on him, making him severely uncomfortable. Did he really have too much work that he couldn't help her out?

No, he'd just given that as an excuse. If their trip was a quick one, he'd be back right after supper and still have an hour or two of daylight to finish up what he needed to get done.

Elijah blew out a frustrated breath. "Where do you need to go?" He took a few steps toward her, digging his keys out of his jeans pockets as he crossed the distance between them.

"I'm meeting with my lawyers."

He slowed. "Why do you need to meet with your lawyers?"

"I don't think that's any of your business. But if you must know, I'm trying to figure out how things will go when I get the farm handed over to me. There are taxes to be paid, capital gains, and other things. I want to make sure I'm prepared so nothing is a surprise." Her eyes cut to meet his as he stopped directly in front of her. "And don't go telling me that it won't matter because I won't be around when that time comes. I've already told you—"

"You're staying. I know," he said. Only there was a bigger problem he was worried about. She wanted to stay but had no idea that the farm wouldn't simply be given over to her. He had a stake in it now. He needed it to succeed so he could purchase it.

This was just one more reason he needed to keep his distance from her. If Scarlett ever found out about the deal he made with her father, she'd hate him for it. Elijah motioned toward the truck. "Well? Get in. I'm not going to wait all day. We'll head out there and come right back. Clear?"

"Crystal."



THEY MADE it about halfway to the city when the rain started.

Large water droplets pittered and pattered against the truck and the glass. Fifteen minutes later when they drove into town, his windshield wipers had a hard time keeping up.

Water coursed down the gutters in town, the drains overflowing.

Scarlett didn't seem fazed at all. When he pulled up to the lawyer's offices, she darted out into the rain and headed inside without a word to him.

He kept the heater and the radio running. She wouldn't be long. Or so he thought.

Two hours later, Scarlett materialized at the side of the truck. She banged on the window and he jumped, staring at her before realizing he'd locked the truck out of habit.

Scarlett climbed in, dripping wet and a little irritated.

Unfortunately, she was in good company. "You get what you needed?" he ground out.

She shot a look toward him. "Yeah. I think so."

"Good. Because we're not going anywhere."

Scarlett stopped rustling in her purse to gape at him. "Um, yeah we are. We're going home. I'm done—so if you don't have anything you need—"

"You don't get it. There have been flash flood warnings for the past hour. If your appointment was a normal length, then we might have been able to get through it." His voice seethed with frustration. They didn't have anywhere they could go. The rain wasn't due to stop for the next eight hours.

"It's just a little rain—"

"It's not just a little rain. The roads could be washed out. There's no way my truck is going to make the drive if there's no road to take. We have to find somewhere to stay the night."

She gaped at him. "No."

"No?" He laughed. "You say that like you have a choice. Okay, I'll give you one. We find a motel to stay at, or you can sleep in my truck. Either is fine by me." He crossed his arms,

hating just what this would do to him—tear up his insides, that’s what. He could already feel his stomach unraveling.

“Fine. There’s a motel just on the outskirts before we head out of town. We can get some rooms there.” She shivered, and then her teeth chattered. The temperature must have dropped a lot more than he’d anticipated.

He reached for the dial and turned up the heat. “Fine. You better call your father. I don’t need him worrying about you.”

She nodded and reached for her phone. It was probably the first time she’d done something that he’d told her to do right away.

And Elijah secretly loved it.

Scarlett

“*W*hat do you mean you don’t have two rooms?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. There’s only one left. It’s got two queen beds, though. There were a lot of folks who had the same idea as you. They can’t take the road out of town with the way the weather’s turning out.”

Scarlett glared at the receptionist. Any moment, Elijah would come inside from parking his truck and he’d accuse her of sabotaging their plan. He wouldn’t want to share a room, and she wasn’t about to sleep in his truck. Either way, they were stuck.

She glanced over her shoulder toward the door and then leaned closer to the receptionist. Her voice lowered and she did her best at making it sound sweet. “I know how places like this work. You have to keep a certain amount of rooms on hand in case of emergencies. Well, this is an emergency.”

“You’re right. It is.”

Scarlett was about to smile, but the woman in front of her stopped her with one statement.

“This is an emergency, and every room has been taken. You can have the last one, or we can give it to the next person who comes through that door.” At that very moment, the door opened and Elijah entered. He shook his head like a pup, flinging rainwater in every direction.

Then he glanced toward her with those eyes that seemed to be able to see right down to her soul.

Their eyes locked and a whole conversation seemed to pass between them. How was she supposed to tell him that they’d be stuck together tonight? She couldn’t, not with a straight face. Elijah was stuck with her and she with him.

“Well? You get our rooms?”

She took his wrist in her hand and dragged him a few feet away. “There’s a little... hiccup.”

“What do you mean hiccup?” The edge in his voice returned. “They’re going to give you a room, right?”

“Yes,” she assured them. “But that’s it. They only have the one.”

“The one what?”

“The one room.” Her face blossomed into color—or at least that’s what it felt like. Scarlett looked away, not willing to see his reaction just yet. “They said they have two queen beds, so it’s not like we’re going to be forced into sharing one...” Finally, she glanced up at him. “But if we don’t take it, then someone else might. I’d say we could go check out the other options, but at this point, I’m not sure there will even be availability elsewhere.”

“You’re probably right,” he muttered. “Fine. Let’s take it.”

They checked in, got their keys, and when they opened the door, Elijah let out a curse.

“This has to be a mistake,” Scarlett whispered, her eyes landing on a king-sized bed. “She assured me that it would have two queen beds. She promised.”

“Sometimes people just want to get your money. It even happens in places like this.”

“Should we... go get our money back?”

He gave her a flat look. “Do you seriously think they’re going to care? They just lied about the bed situation.”

“Maybe they have a cot we can use.”

Elijah shook his head. “I doubt it. The place is full, right? We’re probably lucky we got what we did.” He tossed his hat on a small table near the door. “I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“Absolutely not!” Scarlett burst in front of him, arms crossed. “I won’t make you do that.”

“You’re not.”

She crossed her arms. “Okay, I won’t let you. This is your room as much as it is mine, and we both need a good night’s sleep if we’re going to be of any use tomorrow.”

He stared down at her, studying her, making her feel small. That was the Elijah way. From the moment she'd gotten into town, Elijah had made sure she knew where she stood. And that was at the bottom of the food chain.

Scarlett swallowed hard, losing her nerve the longer their gazes remained locked. She'd been dealing with a lot of mixed emotions since their kiss. It didn't matter that Elijah had told her that it meant nothing or that she'd said the same thing. She'd scrutinized how the kiss had made her feel over and over until her head hurt and had come to an unfortunate conclusion.

There was one thing she knew without a doubt.

The kiss had meant something to her.

She hadn't wanted it to. In fact, she'd done her best to make sure she didn't let it affect her work or her friendship with Annabel.

And yet she couldn't forget about it.

A month had gone by and Elijah had probably forgotten all about it.

"It's a huge bed, Elijah. No one would say it's inappropriate if we were to share it. We could stack pillows between us if that would make you feel better."

His eyes seemed to darken, swirl with an energy that terrified her. He shook his head slower this time. "It's highly inappropriate."

She threw her arms into the air. "I know I can't force you to sleep somewhere you don't want to, but it's fine. I don't care if you're on one side and I'm on the other. Nothing's going to happen." Scarlett turned away from him, unable to withstand his stare. But his hand darted out and captured hers, tugging her back toward him.

"I care."

Scarlett blinked. "Why?" It was the only thing she could think of to say, and it came out in a raspy sound that only made her more embarrassed.

Elijah didn't speak right away. He'd seemed to master the dark, brooding, quiet type that she'd read about in books. Just when she thought he'd drop the conversation and let her go, he explained himself. "If I sleep in that bed... with you sleeping three feet away, I don't know if I could control myself."

A chill coursed through her body, her blood running cold. What was she supposed to say to something like that? He had to be messing with her. That was the only explanation. Elijah was upset with her for manipulating his family, so now he was taking it upon himself to do the same to her.

Unfortunately, she couldn't play the game. If she were to join in—tease him a little—she had little doubt he'd be able to see the truth in her eyes, in the way her breathing grew shallow. So all she did was stare at him.

"Aren't you going to say something?" he said.

She tugged on her arm, but his grip tightened slightly. "What do you want me to say?" she whispered.

"I want you to tell me you feel it too."

"Feel what? That you have been doing nothing but judging me from the moment I got back? That every conversation we've had with one another has inevitably turned into an argument? How about the fact that you either boss me around or give me the cold shoulder? There is no in-between with you, Elijah. How do you expect me to believe a single word you're saying?"

His jaw tightened. "You're right. You don't have to believe anything I've said. But let me point out one thing. I don't have any reason to lie to you right now."

"Sure you do." She hurled the accusation toward him like it was a grenade—anything to keep this from escalating into something that could hurt her.

He lifted his brows but didn't release her.

"You said so yourself. You didn't think I'd last. You didn't want me near your sister. Heck, you've told me I'm the reason something bad happened to her, and yet you won't tell me what. I can't bring it up to her because heaven forbid she lies

to me and I'm left wondering which one of you is the liar. So, forgive me for not being willing to fall for whatever it is you're trying to pull off right now."

Elijah released her then as if she'd burst into flames and burned him on the spot. He didn't move from his position, though, and they continued to glare at one another mere inches apart. "You don't have to believe me," he murmured, the low tone in his voice causing a fresh shiver to skitter down her spine. "Perhaps it's better that you don't. Because heaven knows we'd be a terrible fit."

He brushed past her, his shoulder knocking against hers.

Scarlett spun around. "Why?"

Stopping, Elijah let out a defeated-sounding sigh. "Why what, Scarlett? Why, against my better judgment, do I find you intoxicating, irresistible, and more tempting than any woman I've come across? Or why would we be a terrible fit?"

She shifted all her weight to one foot and dropped her gaze to the floor. "I suppose I want to know the answer to both."

He released a mirthless laugh before facing her. "You're exhausting, you know that?"

"I've heard worse."

Elijah took a step toward her. "I've thought about it real hard for the last few weeks, and I can only come up with one reason why I can't get you out of my head."

Scarlett waited, not knowing what to expect from him. She found herself holding her breath, praying he could shed some light on why she felt the same way about him. Perhaps if he could give her a good reason, then she wouldn't feel so lost herself. When he didn't give her the answer right away, she stepped forward slightly. "What's your reason, Elijah?"

He took a deep breath, then expelled it harshly. "It's so wrong that it's right."

"You can't be serious."

Elijah lifted a shoulder. "I don't know what to tell you. Sometimes two people who don't look like they'd fit together

end up that way. Call it stupidity or dumb luck. Either way, these two people are stuck together by some kind of divine intervention.”

“You expect me to believe that you think we’re... what? Soul mates?”

He shrugged again.

“And that’s why we’re a bad fit? Because you don’t want to like me, but you do?”

“That’s one way to put it,” he said softly. This time, he lifted his hand to graze her jawline with his thumb. His eyes seemed to soften, but not enough to give her any confidence in what he’d been saying.

She stepped backward. “Do you hear what you’re saying? Do you honestly expect me to fall all over myself when you’re basically admitting that you like me against your will? How is that romantic?”

“I didn’t say it was romantic.” He dropped his hand and his eyes darkened, but this time with an intensity that almost scared her. “Sometimes things happen not because we want them to, but because it’s the world’s way of creating balance.”

Scarlett rolled her eyes and let out a huff, but before she could turn from him, he snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her brusquely against his body. She gasped, hands coming up between them.

Her heart immediately went into overdrive and her thoughts bounced around her head like a bucket of ping-pong balls. Scarlett studied his face, searching for any indication that he was going to do something that they’d both regret.

Her whole body seemed to be at war, both wanting him to take her into his arms and steal the kiss that he’d been alluding to wanting and wishing she had the mental strength to push him away.

The problem was that the former part of her was winning this battle.

All she could see was their first kiss. It had been unexpected and brash, but also one of the best she'd ever had.

Now, as they stood in this quiet motel room with the rain pelting the windowpane, she couldn't think of a more perfect moment to throw herself headfirst into a bad decision. She nodded her head slightly and moved her hands to his shoulders, then around the back of his neck.

It was as if Elijah had come to the exact same conclusion at that moment. His mouth crushed over hers—desire, passion, and long-awaited anticipation all rolled into one. He claimed her, his lips warm and sweet against hers. She kissed him back, closing her eyes as she reveled in his touch.

This kiss was nothing like their first one.

It was better.

In every nuanced movement, Elijah showed her just how beautiful he thought she was. The way his fingertips caressed her, trailing up and down her arms, set her body aflame. She'd been in denial for what felt like an eternity, even though it had only been a few weeks.

How had she managed to make herself believe that their kiss had been nothing—had *meant* nothing?

Elijah moaned, reluctantly pulling back. She teetered, unsteady on her legs. A kiss that felt like it had lasted three times as long as it had in reality was enough to make her dizzy. Thankfully, Elijah continued to hold her steady until she could meet his gaze.

When she looked up at him, she found the fiery passion in his eyes only burned brighter. "Now, do you see?" he muttered with longing. "There is absolutely nothing good that could come from sharing a bed with you. I respect you far too much to put you at that kind of risk.

Scarlett held a hand to her chest, feeling the thumping of her unsteady heart as it seemed to agree with him. If she were honest with herself, she'd have to admit that it was just as dangerous for her to be in this room with him. The chemistry between them was extraordinary.

Especially after that kiss.

She released a shuddering breath. “Well, then, what are we going to do? You need your sleep, and I practically dragged you into this.”

He took a step backward as if the additional distance was necessary for him to think more clearly. Then his eyes swept through the nearly empty room. “Like I said. I can sleep on the floor. Or I can sleep in my truck.”

“Maybe I should—”

“Under no circumstances will I allow you to sleep on the floor, Scar.” His use of her nickname added more chills to her already unstable body. “Just give me a few pillows and I’ll make do. I’ve had worse, I assure you.”

“If you’re sure...”

He nodded resolutely.

They stared at one another, neither one of them seemingly willing to discuss what had just happened. No mention of whether this meant they should start seeing each other—or if they should fight their innate desires. They were stuck working with each other and bound to cross one another’s paths.

Then there was the issue of Annabel.

Scarlett’s head pounded and she closed her eyes briefly.

“You should get to bed.” His gentle touch forced her eyes to open, finding him standing at her side. He took her elbow in his grasp and led her toward the bed. With a gentle push, he forced her into a seated position. Scarlett scooted all the way onto the bed, then slipped beneath the covers. It was a little early to get to sleep, but after the day she’d had, dreams would be a welcome distraction.

Unless Elijah took control of those, too.

Elijah

Elijah sat up in the darkness. The floor was harder than he'd expected, so he didn't get nearly the sleep he should have. Scarlett's heavy breathing drifted toward him, even, steady. She wasn't snoring, but he could tell she wouldn't easily be disturbed.

Groaning, he got to his feet and wandered through the pitch black toward the window covered with drapes that blocked out every bit of light that would have filtered in from the moon.

He glanced at the bed but couldn't see her, guided only by her sound and the memory of where everything was in the room. His hands reached out and brushed against the drapes first, alerting him to where he needed to stop. With one swift movement, he pushed aside the drapes a few feet and stared out at their beautiful view.

The parking lot.

A full moon hung overhead, no longer shrouded by the rain clouds from earlier. Puddles littered the asphalt and droplets clung to every surface, including the vehicles. They'd be able to head out at first light as long as the roads hadn't been washed away.

And when he got back, he'd have to have a very important conversation with Carlos. Scarlett wasn't letting up. He believed that she believed she wasn't going anywhere despite him knowing full well her past habits would prove otherwise.

Then again, his assumptions now teetered. Elijah could also see a possibility where Scarlett would stick around.

His stomach churned with a trepidation he wasn't prepared for. Scarlett would be furious when she found out about the plan he'd made with her father. And could he blame her?

No.

Because if he were in a similar situation, he would be demanding that she take a hike.

Elijah shot a look in her direction, now able to see her in the light of the moon. Her face glowed with a pearl effervescence that made her even more beautiful. Hair fanned out around her face, giving her an angelic appearance.

The digital clock glowed red on the side table. Three in the morning and there was no chance he'd get tired enough to fall asleep again on the hard floor. Not even the stuffed chair in the corner of the room was alluring enough to get him to try it out. He might as well accept that he'd be surviving solely on the coffee he drank in order to get through the day.

For reasons he couldn't entirely make sense of, Elijah moved across the room and stood beside the bed. Up close she was even more beautiful. It wasn't any wonder why he couldn't get her out of his mind. As far as looks were concerned, she was definitely his type. He had been attracted to her from the get-go and all because of her genes.

She moaned softly and rolled over. The phone on her bedside table lit up and he glanced toward it only to freeze. It was a message with images attached. Strangely enough, Scarlett didn't seem to have her phone locked down—an issue he'd probably want to bring up with her. The temptation to pick up her phone and look at what had been sent was far worse than expected, and he gave in.

He shot a quick look toward Scarlett once more to make sure she wasn't going to wake while he snooped, and then he picked up her phone and swiped through images of Scarlett spending time with children. The message at the top was from someone named Felix. It was short and to the point.

FELIX: Missing you at the center. Pictures of your last visit.

AS FAR AS he'd known, she didn't work with kids. Her job was corporate—or at least that was what Annabel had said. And

yet here she was, surrounded by children who looked to be kindergarten aged.

Elijah shot another glance at Scarlett, and the realization that she wasn't what she appeared to be hit him over the head like a ton of bricks. These images were recent enough that they had to have been taken within the last few months. The children were happy and smiling, but so was Scarlett.

For someone who had always said she wasn't interested in starting a family, seeing her like this caused a strange kind of sensation in his gut. Scarlett had mentioned she wanted to start a family and he'd thought she was just saying whatever she could to get on his good side.

Scarlett rolled over and exhaled, causing him to scramble with the phone and hold it behind his back. He needed to remove the evidence that he'd invaded her privacy and do it quick before she happened to wake up.

If she had an iPhone like he did, there would be no way he could mark the message as unread. But thankfully, she had an Android phone and the app that Felix had messaged her from permitted Elijah to do just that.

With a quick swipe to the left, he removed the evidence and then quietly placed the phone on the table once more. In a couple hours he'd head out and get them both some coffee before they got on the road. After their kiss and his confession, he wasn't sure how everything would progress.

He'd steeled himself for her to tell him she wasn't interested. But at this point, he was beginning to feel pretty good about the idea of seeing her as more than just a coworker or a friend.

There was only one roadblock that he could see in his way.

Annabel.

She wouldn't be thrilled at all over this development, and that meant he needed to have a serious talk with Scarlett over what they needed to tell his sister. Could they live with keeping this secret? Or would they have to plead their case before her like the judge, jury, and executioner she was?



ELIJAH JUGGLED the two cups of coffee in his hands as he attempted to unlock the door to their motel room. Scarlett had been asleep when he left, and he figured she'd still be out by the time he got back so he didn't bother leaving a note or anything.

Wrong decision.

He entered the room to find her sitting up in bed, a scowl on her face, arms wrapped around knees that had been brought to her chest. Her eyes darted to him and that was when he saw that they were red-rimmed.

"Have you been crying?"

Apparently, that was also the wrong thing to say in this moment.

Her scowl deepened. "I'd ask where you went, but it's clear now. Why didn't you tell me where you were going?" The accusation in her voice had him nervous to move across the room and approach.

"You were asleep. I didn't want to wake you up..." He set the cups down on a nearby console table. "I'm sorry. Are you upset with me for getting coffee?"

She blushed with fury. "Of course not!" Scarlett wouldn't look at him then. Instead, she shifted her scowl to the bed. "That would make me sound a little crazy."

"Well, you sure seem like it."

In a flurry of blankets, she was off the bed and grabbing her things. "Well, I'm not."

He watched with veiled interest as she pulled on her boots and did everything she could not to look at him directly. It was almost humorous how things were shaping up at this very moment. Elijah crossed his arms and stayed by the door until her hustling slowed, then stopped.

Scarlett glanced at him, the redness in her cheeks fading. “I’m not mad.”

“Yes, you are. And you can admit it if you want. I’m not going to be offended. I just don’t know *why* you’re mad.”

She pulled her lower lip between her teeth and nibbled on it. “You’re going to think I’m being dumb.”

“Maybe.”

That got a sharp look—one he probably actually deserved. Her hands dropped listlessly to her sides and she backed into the bed until she fell to a seated position. “You want to know the first thing I thought of when I woke up and you weren’t here?”

He hadn’t expected this argument to go so smoothly. He’d been prepared to wrestle the information out of her if he had to.

Scarlett continued without prompting. “When I woke up and you weren’t here, and your truck was gone... the first thing that came to my mind was that you’d abandoned me.”

Elijah’s brows shot up. “I’m not a monster, Scarlett. I would never do something like that.”

“Yeah?” she muttered bitterly. “Not even to make a point? You kissed me last night and then...” The blush returned. “We didn’t talk about it. And then you were just... gone.”

He took a step toward her, suddenly making sense of what she was trying to say. She’d thought he’d abandoned her because of what he’d said about how she treated his sister.

Scarlett held up a hand. “You know what? I’m madder at myself than anything else. I realized this was what you’ve been talking about. I’ve never been the one to *stay*.” She peeked at him this time, looking far more vulnerable than he’d ever seen her before. “It’s just not been something I really thought about.” Her voice got real quiet and she sucked in a sharp breath which caused him to look at her a little closer. Was she crying? That wasn’t like her at all.

“Hey,” he murmured, inching closer still. “It’s not a *bad* thing.”

She let out a watery laugh. “You’ve literally been telling me how awful I’ve been to do just that. I’m only now understanding... what it does to people.”

Elijah closed the distance between them fully. He reached out and took her hand, because doing anything else felt strange. He didn’t have the words he knew she probably needed to hear. Telling her that she was fine just the way she was wouldn’t go over well, because Scarlett had never liked it when people beat around the bush anyway. She’d probably call him a liar and cite every instance of him telling her exactly what he hated about her.

Instead, he placed his free hand over the top of the other one and patted it. “I’m sorry I didn’t leave you a note.”

She laughed again. “You don’t owe me anything.”

Didn’t he? They’d kissed last night—a kiss that could only be considered magical. It had woken something inside him that had been buried so deep he hadn’t even known of its existence until she had touched him—or he had touched her.

Scarlett ducked her head, fidgeting all the while, not lifting her gaze to meet his. She gnawed on her lips and then laughed again, but this one was more strained. “I should probably thank you for the coffee, huh?”

“Yeah,” he whispered, “that’s usually the etiquette when someone gives you a gift.” Inwardly, he begged for her to look at him, to bestow on him her beautiful dark gaze that had managed to capture his heart so unexpectedly.

The deep brown color of her eyes reminded him of the rich soil in his fields. It was soft and strong, just like she was. But until she gave him any indication that she wanted something more, he wasn’t sure what to do. The last thing he wanted was to make her feel trapped.

“Then, thank you,” she whispered, still not looking at him.

He waited, wishing for her to mention the way things had shifted between them, and at the same time, praying she’d

leave it alone so he had an excuse to do the same. Then she looked up at him, lashes fluttering.

“What are we going to do now?”

“Now?” he wheezed.

“Now,” she repeated. There wasn’t a hint of a smile on her lips. She didn’t appear to want to elaborate, so all he could do was assume she was thinking the same things he was.

“You mean... about us.”

She nodded. It was a short, sharp nod, one that spoke far more than anything she might have said verbally. “What about Annabel?”

And there it was. The clue he’d been looking for that changed everything. She wasn’t thinking about herself. She was thinking about his sister—her best friend. And he should have been doing the same.

The guilt was unbearable and he knew exactly how to respond. “We should probably pretend that this never happened.”

No arguments. She didn’t voice a single reason why he was wrong.

“We need to head out,” he muttered. Elijah dropped her hand. They had to get out of there if they hoped to get any work done on their properties. Love wasn’t in the cards, at least not right now. He turned away, refusing to let her see any evidence of his disappointment.

Elijah made it halfway across the room until something stopped him. He shook his head, frustrated with himself. He’d rarely done anything for himself. He’d gone about his life consistently thinking about others and their feelings. He’d tried to keep Lucas away from Scarlett to keep the peace at home. He played the dutiful brother who pulled more than his fair share at the ranch.

He deserved this.

Spinning on his heel, he crossed the room in three long strides and pulled her into his arms. This might be the biggest

mistake of his life, but right now he didn't care. Something about Scarlett spoke to him on a level that was unreal.

She gasped initially but didn't pull away from him. Her arms draped around his shoulders, tugging him closer though it was impossible. Each minute reaction to his touch, his kiss, fueled him to press forward. They had to be the most unlikely couple that had ever attempted something, and yet the idea thrilled him far more than any rodeo ride ever could.

Scarlett was trouble, and he was ready to take her on despite it all.

Whether it was the kiss or the buzzing sound on the nearby bedside table that rattled him to his core, he wasn't certain. Elijah was still the first to withdraw from their embrace. It felt like static electricity connected every nerve ending in his body, and he wouldn't have been surprised if his hair stood on end.

Scarlett blinked once, twice, then smiled before she slipped over to the table. Her eyes widened and her flushed skin paled slightly. "It's Annabel. She wants to know when we're going to be headed home."

Scarlett

“*J*t’s fine. She doesn’t know.”

“You can’t say that,” Scarlett murmured as she looked out the truck window. Trees and landscape flew past her as they made their way back from the motel in town.

“Sure I can. She knew we got stuck here because of the storm. It’s not like that was a surprise. And you didn’t even tell her that we had to share a room.” Elijah glanced over toward her. The smile he offered was probably meant to soothe her anxious heart somehow, but if she were honest, she’d have to say he looked just as uneasy as she did.

“Do you think we’re making the wrong decision?”

“And tell her that we hooked up?”

She flushed. “We didn’t *hook up*. We *kissed*.”

“Twice,” Elijah amended.

Scarlett couldn’t help herself. She laughed. “Okay, so we kissed. Twice. But that doesn’t mean anything, right?”

He was quiet for a moment. Okay, it was longer than a moment. It dragged on long enough that she had to glance toward him to make sure he hadn’t jumped out of the truck secret agent style. Elijah shot her a heavy look. “It does to me.”

Her heart thundered, colliding with her ribs and making her whole chest ache. “It meant something to me, too,” she whispered.

Strange to admit something like that—here, now. She didn’t know what else to say. She couldn’t just let him think that she’d kissed him without feeling anything. She wasn’t a monster. Scarlett stared down at her clasped hands, finding that they’d turned pale from the effort.

Before she knew it, he was reaching out toward her and taking her hand in his. “It’s going to be fine.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because it’s true. We can keep it a secret until it’s absolutely necessary to tell her. If it doesn’t work out, then no one gets hurt.”

Scarlett couldn’t bring herself to look at him. That statement alone couldn’t be more wrong. Already she could tell that she was getting far more attached than she should have been. That had been the case since a little after he’d started working for her father.

But she’d never admit that to anyone. Not to Elijah, and definitely not to Annabel. She didn’t want whatever this newfound thing was to end. But she had to be realistic. There were no guarantees in life. And falling for her best friend’s brother added to the probability of that exact thing happening.

Elijah gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “How about we just play it cool for the time being. We can work on getting to know each other better on our own time, and if or when the time comes to tell Annabel about us, then we’ll do it.”

Her gaze cut to him, and she offered a wan smile. Everything besides the secrets being kept from her friend sounded like a good plan. If it weren’t for Annabel, she might have jumped on board so much faster.

Scarlett nodded, swallowing back her apprehension that they were heading down a path they weren’t going to like in the future. It was just the normal kind of jitters someone got when they started to fall in love.

Hot, searing flashes rippled up and down her body, finally settling in her gut and in her face. She wasn’t in *love*. That was silly. She was *attracted* to Elijah, but love was something that wouldn’t come for a long time.

A *very* long time.

She gave him a side-eyed stare and something in her chest fluttered slightly. Maybe it wasn’t as far off as she was originally thinking. What if he was making the best decision right now? They could play it by ear and decide what was best

for them after they realized where they were going to be in a few weeks.

A surge of confidence flooded her being. Just because she was making changes in her life didn't mean she had to suffer for them. Hadn't she wanted to come home and find someone she could spend the rest of her life with?

Elijah might just be that man.

He was a hard worker, and he could tell it how it was. He loved his family, and he was kind and generous. But most importantly, he'd always been honest even when that honesty was harder to swallow.

She should be thrilled that Elijah was the one who had caught her eye.

"There it is."

Scarlett glanced over toward Elijah and gave him a funny look. "There what is?"

"Your smile. She's been missing far too long, and I wanted to see her again before we made it back to town."

Her smile deepened. "You're ridiculous."

"Maybe." He squeezed her hand again, and the rest of their ride was spent in silence. She didn't know what was going through his head, but as for her, she was thinking about how this would change a lot more than her friendship with Annabel. The way things worked out at the farm would change as well.

But this time, she found herself looking forward to it. If she weren't buckled into her seat, she would have scooted closer to him just to feel the warmth coming off his body. There would be plenty of time for that later. For now, she'd revel in the way he was making her feel at this very moment.



SCARLETT MESSAGED Annabel when they got home, but rather than head over to the Keagan's ranch, she got right to work.

There was so much that had to be done before she could even think of spending time with her friend.

At least that was the excuse she'd made herself. In all honesty, she was looking forward to seeing Elijah. The stolen glances were the best part of finding herself in this particular predicament. Every time she glanced up from her chore or felt his gaze on her, she was filled with a rush of exhilaration—and all because they'd shared a few kisses.

On a normal day, Elijah would finish up a little before supper and then leave to spend it with his family. There were the rare occasions when he wasn't done by the time she'd finished fixing dinner and her father would insist on having him stay. Today was one of those days, and when she exited the house to retrieve their personal cowboy helper, he was already trudging up the steps.

While her body stopped, her heart went into overdrive. He stared up at her from beneath that hat of his. His lips quirked upward into a crooked grin and he cocked his head. They stared at each other for a few moments before he finally broke the silence. "I take it that supper's ready?"

Scarlett crossed her arms and shot a look behind her toward the house. "What makes you think you're invited today?"

"I'd say the fact that you were already on your way out here was a pretty good indicator."

"Maybe I came out here to tell you to call it a day." The smile on her face wasn't doing her any favors. Teasing him was harder when she couldn't keep it straight.

Elijah moved up a few steps and then stopped so he could stare up at her from the one just below where she stood. His voice lowered, containing a quality that made the hairs on her arms lift like there was lightning in the sky overhead. "I'll leave on one condition."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," he murmured. "You give me a kiss goodbye."

Her body tensed with pleasure. They'd kept their distance enough throughout the day just for appearances, and she was beginning to wonder if they would ever get a chance to explore their newfound status. "I think I could manage that."

His hand slid up the railing at his side as if he were preparing to crowd her on the step where she stood. They were already close enough—only a few inches separated her nose from his. Elijah's kisses were different than she would have ever expected. Already she craved more of him, wanted to feel caressed by him.

Was she going crazy?

"There you are! I've been texting you all day. Lucas isn't doing a dang thing at home and is claiming the chores you wanted him to finish will be done by you."

Scarlett's smile faded just as fast and she jumped back. How had she not seen Annabel drive up to the house? How had she not heard her? It had to be the blood rushing in her ears, drowning out anything else besides the thumping of her heart.

Elijah was more casual in his reaction, turning around almost lazily and making eye contact with his sister. "There's a reason I wasn't answering my phone. I'm working. I have a lot to do, and I didn't have my charger on me."

Annabel looked him over from head to toe and gave him a disgusted look. "You could have at least come home this morning and changed. Isn't that what you wore yesterday?" Her focus flitted up to Scarlett and her features brightened. "Hey, so I wanted to talk to you about that night we went dancing. That guy I was with asked me out." She moved past Elijah, leaving him on the steps as she slipped her arm through Scarlett's, and they headed inside.

Scarlett glanced over her shoulder to find Elijah heading back down the steps and toward his truck. If she weren't such a coward, she might have yelled after him to come in for supper, but with Annabel there at her side prattling on about her latest date, she couldn't bring herself to do so.

Annabel said hello to her father, to which her father gave Scarlett a surprised look. He didn't ask about Elijah, which was actually preferable. Scarlett didn't know what she would have said with her friend there. Annabel could probably sniff out when Scarlett was uncomfortable, and that was the last thing she needed right now.

They spent dinner chatting and catching up regarding the night they'd gone dancing—mostly it was Annabel telling her story because there was no way Scarlett was willing to tell her about what had happened with Annabel's brothers.

When supper was all cleaned up, they moved their chat out to the front porch.

“So are you going to keep seeing him?” Scarlett leaned over the railing, resting her elbows on the edge and glancing to her side where Annabel had done the same.

“I don't know. I've been spending so much time trying to figure out where I want my life to go that I feel like I've been at a complete standstill. Life is moving on without me and I have nothing to show for it.”

“That's not true,” Scarlett said. “You have plenty going for you.”

Her friend shot her a flat look. “Seriously? I have a ranch that isn't completely mine. Everyone in town either hates my family or avoids us because of our history, so this one guy asking me out was strange enough as it was. And to top it all off, I—” She cut herself off, clamping her mouth shut and shifting her gaze out toward the landscape before them.

“You, what?”

“Nothing. It's... nothing.” She sighed and then flashed a smile. “I've got a history of issues a mile long, but I'm done with it.”

“You know you can tell me, right? I'm here for you. Like always.” It was something she'd said a lot when they were closer. Scarlett wanted her friends to know that she was there for them. Only now, it seemed wrong to suggest such a thing.

Elijah's judgments flooded her thoughts and she felt sick to her stomach.

She'd never *really* been there for Annabel—not the way that truly mattered. And now her friend didn't trust her or was unwilling to share the secrets of her past because of it.

Scarlett sighed when Annabel still refused to talk. Part of growing up meant she couldn't force her friend to do something she wasn't willing to do, and this was one of those times. "You don't have to tell me. It's fine."

Annabel smiled. "Thanks."

"Of course." Scarlett returned her gaze to the darkening skies, the silhouettes of the trees and shrubs in the distance, and the handful of animals that were out grazing for the night. Back in Germany, she'd be staring at a cityscape.

"Do you miss it?"

Scarlett glanced once more toward her friend. "What?"

"Germany. Do you miss it? All the rushing around and doing a job that you loved?" Her voice was tinged with longing, as if Annabel were the one missing out on a life that she could have had and not Scarlett.

With a slow shake of her head, Scarlett smiled. Then she bumped her shoulder into Annabel's. "I missed this more than I will ever miss my life in Germany. You and me."

"Really?"

"Yeah," she said. "It took me coming back home to things being so different for me to realize everything I've been missing out on over the last several years. I should have never been gone for so long."

"No one judges you for it, you know that, right?" Annabel turned to face Scarlett. "No one who matters anyway."

It was hard not to think about Elijah in that very moment. He'd judged her the most ruthlessly. But things were changing. And perhaps he was seeing another side of her that he found redeemed her prior selfish behavior. If he could do that, then why couldn't everyone else?

A warm sort of feeling flushed out all the insecurities Scarlett was dealing with. She nodded and reached out to bring her friend into a hug. “I’m so lucky you’re my friend. You have no idea how much I’ve missed stuff like this.”

“Me, too.” Annabel pulled back first, then she leaned her back against the railing as she peered at Scarlett through the encroaching darkness. “Are you really serious about dating someone? Like seriously dating someone?”

It took a great deal more self-control to contain herself when Annabel asked that question. There was no way she knew about Elijah, and yet it felt like she was fishing for such information.

Scarlett nodded. “I am.”

Annabel’s look of disbelief faded somewhat. “Well, then I guess we have our work cut out for us.”

A laugh burst from Scarlett’s chest. “What?”

“You had to have come home to one of the smallest towns there is in the country. I don’t think you’re going to find anyone nearly as interesting as the men you met abroad. So, we’re going to have to hunt around, look under rocks, and go diving into haystacks to find someone suited for you.”

The temptation to tell her right then and there that she had actually found someone she was interested in pulled at her. Annabel wouldn’t like it, though, and Scarlett wasn’t about to ruin their friendship over something so trivial.

At least for the moment.

“I guess you’re right.”

Annabel beamed. “We’ll come up with a game plan this weekend. Maybe we can go to the next town over and see if they have any fun hangout places. That guy I was telling you about? He’s from that direction. I’m sure he could find someone we could double with.”

There would be no point in arguing with Annabel over this. Scarlett would just have to make it clear to Elijah that this

was what would happen if they wanted to keep their secrets.
“Sounds fun.”

Elijah

Elijah gave himself a once over before he grabbed his hat and slipped from his house into the night. Annabel had just gotten home a few minutes ago, and from the sound of it, she'd headed straight for her bedroom.

It was easy to avoid detection from his whole family, but what made this situation so much better was *who* he was planning to see in the next twenty minutes.

He might have missed out on supper, but now that everyone had settled down for the evening, he'd get more quality time with her instead.

His heart skipped a beat just at the thought of going for a walk with her or getting to know the Scarlett he'd only caught glimpses of so far. Elijah didn't know what exactly had been the thing that made the shift for him, but that didn't matter anymore.

He'd stuck around just long enough to see her prioritize Annabel and the friendship they had. That was enough evidence that she had changed.

When he arrived at Scarlett's farm, it was quiet. The only sounds he could hear were from the livestock. Sheep bleated, cows lowed, and the horses whinnied. The scent of fresh-cut grass from earlier in the day hung in the air. The whole place was just... peaceful. This was the kind of place he could call home one day—perhaps with Scarlett by his side.

His little deal with Carlos didn't seem nearly so villainous as it had even a few hours ago. If he and Scarlett ended up together, then the plan to take over this farm would be well-received.

A smile touched his lips as he hurried up the steps to her front door. He lifted his hand to knock, then thought better of it. Carlos had been looking a little more tired as of late. For whatever reason, he just didn't seem like the man who had run this place before his wife passed. It might have been a

combination of age mingled with grief. Or it could be as simple as the man not getting enough sleep.

Regardless, Elijah wasn't about to wake him up from a possible slumber. He'd earned a well-rested night. Elijah backed down the steps and peered up at the second-story windows. They were also dark, and there was no telling which one Scarlett might be behind. His best bet would be to send her a message on her phone and ask her to come down to meet him.

He pulled the device out from his pocket and excitedly announced his arrival before pressing send.

For what felt like hours, he waited for her to receive the message and reply. The temptation to call her or message again filled his thoughts, and he glanced once more at the windows. Just before he'd made up his mind to send another text message, he heard footsteps behind him. Elijah spun around and came face to face with Scarlett.

She tilted her head slightly and crossed her arms. "With how much time you spend here, perhaps you would prefer that we set you up with a bed of your own."

He couldn't tell her how much that idea pleased him—though it was for different reasons than she might have realized. Elijah took a tentative step toward her. "While I love the sentiment, we both have to acknowledge that such a suggestion would only further sabotage our plan to keep our relationship secret."

Even though it was getting dark, he could still see the flush that crept across her skin. Scarlett grinned at him and then glanced toward his truck. "Did you come all the way out here just to tell me you shouldn't be here, then?"

"That's what I probably *should* be doing."

Her eyes flicked to him, locking with his gaze before her smile widened. "Then what reason do you have to be on my front porch at this hour?" Her teasing voice drew him nearer and nothing thrilled him more than realizing she wasn't stepping back from him.

Elijah hooked his finger beneath her chin and tilted it upward. “So I could do this.”

He captured her lips, stealing her breath from her lungs as he attempted to show just how much he wanted only her in this moment. Out of all the quiet moments they’d shared during the past couple days, kissing her was his favorite.

Scarlett could make him feel seen, heard, and adored all at once. She gave him everything when she responded to his touch. He would never be able to explain in words how her kiss was different from other women he’d shared similar moments with; it just was. It was as if her soul was able to speak directly to his, power coursing between them, linking them like they were magnets.

She moaned softly, her hands grasping him tighter around the back of his neck. Fingers wove through his hair, ultimately knocking his hat to the ground. Elijah could lose himself when he was with her like this. There was only one thing that seemed to itch at him in the back of his mind.

Elijah couldn’t fully trust her. While he’d seen so much change in Scarlett—witnessed it first-hand—he didn’t know if he’d ever be able to believe she’d changed completely. Those intrusive thoughts were like a splash of ice water, dousing him from head to toe.

He extricated himself from her, fighting to catch his breath. There was no room for negativity right now. He had no reason *not* to trust her. This relationship was still new and developing. She’d never tried to settle down before.

Scarlett’s breathless smile brought him back to reality, to the present, where he could allow himself to give in to this joy he felt when he was near her. “So, what are you *really* doing here?” she whispered.

Pressing his forehead to hers, he stared into her eyes and returned her smile. “I wanted to see you—spend time with you so that we can see where this whole thing is going.”

“I’d like that,” she murmured. “What should we do?”

Elijah glanced around, then swung his focus back toward her. “What were you doing out here? All the chores were done.”

“I thought I’d take a little walk.”

“Was it nice?”

One side of her smile lifted more than the other and she released a soft laugh. “I didn’t get a chance to go because I heard a truck pull up.” She jerked her head toward his vehicle. “If you’d like to tag along, I was thinking of saddling up one of the horses.”

“Sounds great.”

In no time they were heading down a trail beneath the moon’s soft glow overhead. Every so often he’d glance in her direction to find her staring back. They continued to plod along until Scarlett led them to a small, familiar clearing.

Elijah tossed back his head and laughed. “I should have known.”

“What,” she said innocently. “This is one of my favorite places on the farm.”

“It’s also the place where we shared our first kiss.”

“And,” she emphasized, “it’s the place where my mother would always take me when we went for rides, just the two of us.”

Elijah sobered. “I didn’t realize that.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed.” She still smiled, though the one she wore seemed sadder than usual. “I have several wonderful memories here with my mother. I wish I had more.”

He hopped down from his horse and moved to her side before she had a chance to dismount on her own. Hands at her waist, he lifted her gently from the saddle and placed her on her feet. Her hands rested on his shoulders as she stared up at him. “I’m glad we were able to share our first kiss here, though I have to admit I don’t think it will be my favorite.”

“What? *Why?*”

She arched a single brow, making him laugh some more. “I don’t think I have to answer that.”

“Well, it will be my favorite.”

Her confused expression pushed him to elaborate. “It’s the kiss that made me realize there was more to you than self-preservation.”

This time she was the one who let loose a string of laughter that caused several nocturnal animals to scurry away. “That kiss was the definition of self-preservation, you realize that, right? I only kissed you because—”

Elijah placed a finger to her lips. “That exact moment might not have been a demonstration of your selflessness, but it was what woke me up to the realization that you were capable of more.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Thank you? I guess?”

He rolled his eyes with a chuckle. “Yes, it’s supposed to be a compliment because it means you were capable of growth.”

Scarlett’s expression returned to a neutral position, though there was a hint of a smile that graced her lips. “Okay, then thank you.”

Elijah pressed a kiss to her forehead, then slipped his hand into hers and they started walking. “You want to know what I find so interesting about Copper Creek?”

“That so many people choose to live here even though there’s nothing great to show for it?”

He shot her a sharp look, only to realize she was teasing him. “Very funny.”

“I thought so.”

“No, it’s that you can live here your whole life and you can still find places like this. New landscapes to explore, new sights and smells to experience. I would bet we’d discover a lot if we just explored for thirty minutes a day.” When he glanced down at her again, he found her staring at him curiously. “What?”

“You would make a really good dad,” she murmured.

Hot and then cold sliced through him, melting and freezing him, making him feel numb and electrified all at once. All the back and forth was just giving him a big headache.

Scarlett reached for his hand. “Is that something you want?”

His brows furrowed. “Of course it is. You?”

She nodded. “Like I said, I came back to be with my family and to start one of my own.”

He watched her for a few moments, then felt prompted to ask her something he wasn’t sure he should have. “Why?”

“Why what?”

Elijah ran his free hand through his hair and glanced away before he steeled himself to ask the question that burned into his soul. “What made you change your mind? I think I heard you mention that losing your mom was a big trigger, but this is a life-altering change.” He hurried on to add, “If you don’t feel comfortable telling me—”

“It’s fine. You’re allowed to be curious. And I’ve had a lot of time to think about it. I realized something the other day that probably contributed to all of this.”

He hung onto her every word. Change wasn’t easy, and what he longed to hear was a guarantee. He wanted to know if he gave her his heart she would take care of it and not let him down. Logically, he knew that wasn’t going to be an option. There were no absolutes in life. Love fell under such an umbrella.

Scarlett shrugged. “I think it happened small at first.” She shot a quick look toward him. “About a year ago, I started volunteering with at-risk children.”

The text message.

“I don’t know what made me decide to do that either. I just saw a flyer one day and I knew I needed to be there, to help them through whatever they were dealing with.”

“I had no idea,” he said. It was a lie, but she didn’t have to know that. What was a harmless lie like that in the grand scheme of things?

“Yeah, pretty crazy, huh? I started wanting children of my own—to raise them to speak different languages and to know how to handle a horse.” She laughed bitterly. “I realized pretty fast that I wanted them to be raised like I had been, and that’s when I reached out to my folks. I was planning on coming down at the end of the year and seeing what I could do to help around the farm.”

He knew what was coming next. She lost her mother, her cheerleader, the one strong connection she had to her childhood home.

Scarlett brushed a tear from her cheek and laughed again. “Don’t mind me. I’m just a little emotional.” Her eyes darted to meet his and she didn’t look away. “She would have *loved* you.”

Elijah smiled back, unable to find the words to tell her how sorry he was for judging her.

“I think my dad blames me for not coming right away when my mom got in her accident. She only lasted twenty-four hours in the hospital, and by the time my flight would have landed, she would have been gone. But maybe I should have tried harder.”

“It’s not your fault,” he said quietly. “You did your best.”

“But I didn’t. I wasn’t as close to them as I should have been. I didn’t call regularly, and I didn’t visit during the holidays. And when I did touch base, all I talked about was my job and how much I loved being there.”

A twinge of discomfort sliced through his chest at that confession. Even if she decided to stay for good, could he really ask her to? If she loved being in Germany so much, why would she want to return to a life that she didn’t love? It was as if she were making these choices because she felt the need to serve some kind of penance.

No.

He refused to believe that. Scarlett wouldn't return just to make herself miserable. He was going to choose to believe that she had made these choices out her hearts true desires. If she started a family here, then her relationship with her father was bound to improve. Once he saw that she was serious about staying here and being a part of his life again.

Elijah focused on her face again, not surprised that she was watching him but praying he hadn't given anything away. "You okay?"

She nodded. "I'm worried about my dad, though."

"You are?"

"Remember when I said he needed his truck for a doctor's appointment? He's got another one at the end of the week. I think something might be wrong."

He frowned. "Did you ask him about it?"

"I don't think he'd tell me even if I figured it out on my own and caught him lying about it. My dad is way too private for something like that."

"I'm sure he's fine. Probably just regular checkups. When you get to be his age, there's a lot of working parts that have to be looked at. And he just lost your mother. Maybe he's seeing someone to help him cope."

"Maybe." She didn't sound convinced, and her sad voice tore at his heart.

Elijah pulled her into his chest and rested his chin on her head. Whatever she needed, he'd be there for her, that much he was certain.

Scarlett

Over the next few weeks, things started to settle. Scarlett fell into a routine with her father and Elijah—one that hadn't been expected when she'd arrived, but now she was thrilled about. No one knew about her relationship with Elijah, and that was how it would stay for the time being. He was there for her when she needed him, and that was enough.

With each passing day, they were able to right the farm and run it the way it had been intended. Scarlett couldn't be more excited as everything continued to come together.

Her friendship with Annabel improved as well. She was busy with her new love interest, and while she kept insisting that they go on a double date, Scarlett had managed to keep busy enough that dates simply weren't a priority.

At least not doubling with her friend. Scarlett did spend a great deal of her evenings in the presence of a man she was quickly falling in love with. This only became a problem when Annabel finally had had enough of Scarlett's excuses.

"I don't care what you have going on. It's been three weeks and you still won't come out with us. I thought you said that you wanted to get serious with someone. That's not going to happen if all you're doing is spending time with my brother."

They sat perched on the wooden fence that surrounded the edge of the horse corral where Elijah was exercising one of the mares. He glanced in their direction, and Annabel stuck out her tongue at him.

Scarlett laughed. "How old are you?"

"What? He keeps looking over here like he's expecting us to do something." Annabel nudged her friend, forcing Scarlett to drag her attention from Elijah back to her. "So? What do you say? Derek says that he has a cousin coming into town, and he thinks you would be perfect for him."

She didn't mean to, but Scarlett snorted. "And what exactly does he have to base that off of? The one night when I practically forced you to dance with him? You know that's a little ridiculous, right?"

Annabel rolled her eyes. "I just wanted to go on a double with my best friend before you—"

Scarlett's whole body stiffened as her friend cut herself off. She swung her gaze to Annabel and frowned. "Before I what?"

She blushed and her lashes fluttered. "You know."

"No, I don't. That's why I'm asking you. Before I do what?"

Annabel shrugged. "Before you leave again."

Scarlett couldn't even be mad at her. The more time she thought about what Elijah had accused her of, the more she realized just how right he'd been. She didn't exactly plant roots here when she was younger. But everything had changed.

She found herself glancing toward Elijah again. At least a lot had changed. Scarlett wasn't interested in leaving. She was fully prepared to stay put for her father, her friends, and Elijah.

"You're upset. Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything." Annabel hurried on to say, causing Scarlett to glance at her once more.

"What are you sorry for? You don't have to apologize about anything."

"But what I said—"

Scarlett placed a hand over her friend's where it rested on the wooden rail. "You're right. Well, not anymore, but you would have been right if this conversation had been taking place a few years ago. Normally, I'd be planning my next trip." She hated the guilt that crept into her chest over Annabel's sad expression. She'd been the one to cause that, and she could see that as clear as day. "But I want you to know that it's different. I'm different. I'm not going to just up and leave."

Annabel smiled, but it wasn't one that offered much confidence in Scarlett at all. It would take more time for Scarlett to retrain her family and friends to understand why she wanted to change so much—an everyday process with baby steps. Thankfully, she was prepared to make such adjustments.

“Okay, so we're on then? You'll come?”

“Wait, what? I didn't agree to that.”

“Sure you did. You promised you weren't going anywhere.”

Scarlett laughed. “Yeah, that doesn't mean I want to go on a double with Derek's cousin. What if he's a weirdo?”

Annabel groaned. “Everyone has a little weirdo in them. I mean, look at my brother.” She gestured vaguely toward Elijah. “Out of the oldest of my brothers, he's probably the weirdest.”

Scarlett bit back a laugh but failed miserably when it came out like the strangled sound of a pig. Annabel shot a concerned look in her direction but didn't comment on it. Instead, she continued with her point.

“He's handsome, a hard worker, and yet he's spending all his time over here helping you guys. I mean, what kind of guy would be willing to waste so much of his time on his sister's friend? There has to be something he's getting out of it, right? Your dad isn't paying him, is he?”

Her questions were hitting a little too close for comfort. Before she could brush them off, Annabel continued.

“It's either that, or he's got a major crush on you.”

There it was. She'd hit the nail on the proverbial head. Great. Scarlett had a decent poker face, but she wasn't so sure she could keep this one from Annabel if she looked too closely. Turning her focus to Elijah, Scarlett cleared her throat and then forced a laugh. “Your brother hates me. You saw the way he treated me when I got here. And it hasn't stopped. He's still insisting that I'm going to leave, just like you did...”

Oh, great. She shouldn't have brought that up. Now Annabel would get down again and they'd have another apology session. She needed to get Annabel off her back, and the only thing that came to mind was probably a really bad idea.

"How about instead of a double date, we do some kind of group thing. We can bring a couple girls and a couple guys and just have one big, fun party."

"I guess that would be kinda fun. Who did you have in mind?"

Ugh! Scarlett hadn't thought that far. She didn't really have any friends who were girls around here. Neither did Annabel, for that matter—at least they hadn't when they were younger.

Annabel laughed. "You can't think of a single one, can you?"

Scarlett joined in. "Well, I bet you couldn't either." She flung her hand in a gesture toward Elijah. "I bet he'd have an idea or two. And you're always saying he's too serious around here. How about you invite him?"

She wrinkled her nose, glancing toward her brother. After a few seconds, a subtle consideration seemed to fill her eyes. "I suppose he'd be a better option than Lucas, right?"

"Right," Scarlett said firmly. "So now we just need another girl."

"You know what? I think I have the perfect idea. I work with a girl who might be interested. Let me call her and see if she'd like to go on a date with my brother."

Scarlett held up both hands to stop Annabel from making any plans. "Whoa. I said we do a group thing, not a couples thing. Elijah might not even want to go, so if you think assigning a date to him is going to work, I'd think twice."

Annabel gave her a funny sort of look. "Are you actually giving me advice on how to set up my brother on a blind date?"

“No,” Scarlett shot back. “I’m just saying—”

“Sounds like you’ve gotten a little too close to my brother,” Annabel sang teasingly. This drew Elijah’s gaze, and Annabel got a wicked-looking grin on her face. She absolutely looked like she’d swallowed the yellow canary. “Oh, Elijah!”

Scarlett’s eyes flew wide. She knew that look. She would recognize the tone of Annabel’s meddling any day. What got her the most, however, was the fact that her best friend actually seemed to think it would be funny to set her up on a date with her brother.

Her brother!

The one rule they’d had growing up, and now Annabel was willing to break it.

“What are you doing?” Scarlett hissed. “This isn’t funny, Anna.”

“Sure it is. Mostly because it’s like you said. You guys can’t stand each other, and it’s not like he’s Lucas. Elijah’s not gonna hit on you like Luke would.” She waved her hand in the air, calling her brother’s name again.

Scarlett snatched her friend’s hand out of the air. “Don’t you dare.”

Annabel laughed again. “Oh, come on, Scar. What are you afraid of? You think something serious is gonna happen between you? Doubtful. Elijah is weird, but he’s boring. I don’t even know if he’d agree to it.”

“Agree to what?” Elijah materialized in front of them.

Scarlett’s focus bounced from sibling to sibling as she watched the whole thing unfold. This could go wrong in so many ways. Elijah could give away their secret. Annabel might already know, and she was just trying to get them to confess to it. There was a slim chance nothing would happen and they’d all walk away from this conversation scot-free.

That last one was least likely to happen, and Scarlett knew it in her soul. This conversation had turned into a runaway

train. All she could do at this point in time was watch the outcome like it was a very bad accident.

Annabel elbowed Scarlett in the ribs. “I’ve been telling Scar for weeks that we should go on a double date with the guy I’m seeing, and she keeps telling me that she’s too busy. Either you’re keeping her from me, or she’s just scared to get out there even though she claims this was why she came home in the first place.”

Elijah lifted his brows, a smile playing at his lips. He shot a mildly smug smile at Scarlett. He couldn’t possibly think this was funny, could he? If anything, he should be upset that she didn’t tell him about Annabel pressuring her to go on a date.

And yet here he was, acting like this was the funniest news he’d heard in a while. “Okay, so what did you need me for? I thought you didn’t want Scarlett to date any of your brothers.”

Annabel scrunched her face and made a disgusted sound. “Date? No, I don’t want you guys to date her. I want her to get out there again. And I wanted her to go out with Derek’s cousin.”

The smile faded from Elijah’s face faster than butter melting on a hot sidewalk in the middle of summer. “What?”

“Yeah, Derek wants to do a double date. But Scarlett thought it would be better to ease into things if we were all part of a big group.”

Elijah’s eyes flitted to Scarlett. Still, he didn’t seem pleased with this concept, and she already knew the reason why. If they were in a group setting, everyone would be fair game. What if one of the other guys asked her out or flirted with her. Heaven forbid they tried to hold her hand or steal a kiss. Elijah wouldn’t be up for that.

Yep, Scarlett should have just kept her mouth shut about this little plan of theirs. Maybe she could have gone on one date with Derek’s cousin and then called it good. She would have had to let Elijah know, of course. But based on his current lack of enthusiasm, it wasn’t likely he would have gone for that idea either.

“A group date,” Elijah ground out.

“Yeah. A couple girls. A couple guys. And we all hang together and do something fun. You work too hard as it is, and Scarlett seems to think that you would never agree to something like that.”

“She’d be right.”

Annabel laughed, though Elijah’s statement couldn’t have been more serious. “It’s fine, Elijah. Maybe if you got yourself out there every once in a while, you would have found a girlfriend already. Heck, you might even be married already by now.”

“Maybe I’m not ready to meet anyone new.” He gave Scarlett a meaningful look, one that was short-lived and undetectable by his sister. “Maybe I’m already dating someone.”

Annabel gasped.

Scarlett flinched.

Here it was. The moment Elijah spilled the beans and ruined everything they had together.

“What?” Annabel practically screeched. “I thought you weren’t going to date anyone anytime soon. What happened? Where did it happen? Can you show me a picture?”

Elijah frowned, clearly realizing just what kind of monster he’d unleashed. “It was unexpected. None of your business. And absolutely not.”

“Why?” She nearly whined. “I’m your sister.” She nudged Scarlett again. “Scar wants to know, too, don’t you, Scar?”

It was her turn to be amused at the current predicament. If he hadn’t wanted to be cornered by his family, he should have just kept his mouth shut. “Yeah, Elijah. Who is she? Do we know her?”

His scowl deepened. “I’m not sharing anything with the likes of you. But if I were you, I’d get your head out of the clouds and realize that not everyone wants to go on a blind date.”

Annabel crossed her arms. “Well, if that’s how you’re gonna be, then you just shouldn’t come.”

Scarlett nodded. “And I guess that means the group date is off.”

“What? No, it isn’t. But Elijah doesn’t need to worry himself about coming out with us. He can just spend time with his fictional girlfriend.”

“She’s *not* fictional,” Elijah gritted out.

Scarlett could hear the underlying tones from beneath his voice and shot a look of warning at him. The last thing either of them needed right now was for them to be found out.

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” She flicked her hand toward the horse. “Now, get to work while I fill Scar in on all the details of the handsome city slicker who wants to take her out dancing.”

Elijah stormed off, his expression worse than the sky from that night when they’d been rained in. He’d be fine. He might not like that she was going on a casual date with someone else, but he’d have to accept it if he wanted this charade to last just a little longer.

Elijah

Elijah spent most of the next few days avoiding Annabel and Scarlett altogether. He wasn't sure what Scarlett agreed to in terms of going on a date, but just thinking about her spending time with another guy—even platonically—got under his skin.

But what else could he do? He couldn't tell Annabel about dating her best friend. He wasn't sure how she'd take it. If he had to guess, he would say that she would either get angry and fight with both of them, or demand that they break it off because it was a betrayal to her.

Both of those options weren't ideal.

He was stuck.

Thankfully, there was plenty of work to be done, from caring for the animals to finishing up the harvest. He could distract himself with physical labor.

Or at least he would have if he wasn't so consumed with the knowledge that Scarlett wasn't seeking him out to reconcile. Was there a chance she hadn't gone along with Annabel after all? Something told him not to count on it.

His gut clenched and twisted into excruciating knots. What if she'd gone on that date with that guy and had figured out she liked him, too? What if she felt guilty because he kissed her? Elijah's fury continued to mount with each passing hour. He wasn't ready for this kind of trial in their relationship.

Maybe this was a sign he just needed to accept that they shouldn't be together.

His avoidance strategy wasn't doing him a lick of good. He needed to have a conversation with Scarlett about the expectations of their relationship if he wanted to survive with his heart intact.

Elijah kept an eye on the house, waiting for Scarlett to make an appearance—even if it was to leave the premises to

go spend time with his sister. Last night was Friday—and he still wasn't sure if they'd gone on that double date.

He didn't dare ask his sister when he'd gotten up this morning.

Coward.

That was what he was. He couldn't fight for the girl he cared for. He couldn't tell his sister where to stick it. He couldn't do anything to guarantee that the woman he loved would become his.

Love.

The realization was a kick to the stomach. This was why he couldn't swallow what was happening right under his nose. It wasn't simple jealousy. And his feelings ran deeper than simple attraction. He loved Scarlett enough that he wanted this to work out.

He wanted to be with her more than he'd wanted anything—even more than he wanted a farm of his own.

Elijah slowed his work, the metal end of the pitchfork in his hand clanging against the dirt at his feet. Neither one of them had told the other that they were in love. They were taking it slow. Could he really blame her for being willing to go on a date with some random guy when neither of them was capable of telling anyone about their romance?

The answer to that question was simple enough. He couldn't.

But even acknowledging that little tidbit didn't change the fact that he was hurting, angry, and he needed to figure out a few things before it got worse.

The storm door of Scarlett's house screeched open and then banged shut. His head snapped up and he found Scarlett watching him from the porch. She looked like an angel straight from heaven in a pale blue dress—a dress that wasn't made for working her father's farm. She was going somewhere.

His immediate assumption was that she was heading out to see another guy—to go on another date. Elijah's stomach

roiled and he glowered at her from his location. In one swift motion, he threw the pitchfork much like he would have thrown a javelin into a bale of hay he hadn't gotten to yet.

Hands balling into fists at his sides, he marched over to her house, stopping before he got to the stairs. She moved to the edge of the railing, resting her arms on it as she peered down at him with a blank expression.

Did she really not know why he was upset? Could she not see the pain in his eyes?

“Are you going to tell me what happened? Or are you going to pretend you didn't just rip my heart out of my chest and feed it to me on a platter?”

Scarlett glanced out around them. Of course she wouldn't be able to meet his gaze. She was probably feeling guilty over what she did.

Thoughts swirled in his head, bouncing back and forth and going haywire as he continued to think the worst that might have happened. He swallowed down the ache that threatened to explode from his chest. This was not the time to blow up at her. If he wanted this to work out, they needed to have a calm discussion about expectations.

He could be reasonable.

At least he hoped he could be, but the jury was still out on that one based on how frustrated he was at this very moment. “Well? You and Anna. You were going to go on a double date? With that city boy?”

Scarlett brought her gaze back to Elijah and frowned. She didn't appear as remorseful as he would have liked, which made *him* feel even more guilty. She fidgeted with her fingers a moment, then sighed. “Yeah, I went on the double date.”

The frustration and uncertainty shifted into full-blown fury. “You did?”

She shot him a sharp look. “I didn't *want* to. But you were so upset about the way I treated Annabel that I didn't feel like I could tell her no. Our friendship has been getting so much

better lately. And I wanted you to come, but then you just stormed off.”

“So now this is *my* fault?” How dare she imply that he was responsible for her going on a date with another guy? Wasn’t there supposed to be an unspoken rule regarding dating? They were together. She couldn’t just go spend time with another guy.

Her face flushed bright red. “Of course it’s not. But I didn’t know what else to do. What was I supposed to say?”

“How about no thanks? How about telling her you are with someone else?”

“You know I couldn’t tell her that.”

“Well, maybe you should. Maybe we should go tell her right now. How about we stop pretending this isn’t what it really is?”

“And what is it? Because right now, no one knows. We hide how much time we spend together from everyone. And I’m tired of it.” Her last five words came out in a defeated rush. Her eyes seemed to plead with him for something, and he couldn’t figure it out.

They had officially come to a crossroads.

Three simple words came rushing to the tip of his tongue. He wanted to say them, was ready to say them. But looking at her now, dressed and ready to go out with someone else, held him back. Was she even interested in dating him anymore?

Elijah lifted his shoulders and let them drop. “What do you *want* this to be?” His voice was quiet, more diffused than before.

She gazed at him, her stare delving into him in ways he wasn’t prepared for. He couldn’t tell if she actually wanted anything to do with him. Could he blame her for wanting to walk away after he’d let his jealous side come through? Scarlett moved away from where she stood on the porch against the railing and came around the post at the stairs. Her hand glided down the handrail until she stood on the bottom step. “I want to know where you think this is headed.

Everything has been moving so fast—not that I’m complaining or anything. I just want to know what you had in mind.”

He let his gaze sweep over her petite frame, noting just how pretty the dress looked on her. Again, he was accosted with jealousy and helplessness from wondering where she was going and who she planned on seeing. Elijah found her eyes again. “I don’t know if this is something you want to hear right now, but I do have an answer for you.”

“Then tell me.”

Taking in a deep breath to calm his nerves, he nodded. “Okay. Here it goes. I don’t want you to see anyone. I don’t want you holding hands or kissing anyone else. I don’t want you to get all dolled up for anyone but me.”

From the looks of it, she was trying to hide a smile, which only put him more on edge. “This isn’t funny, Scarlett! I love you, and I don’t want you to be with anyone but me.”

Finally, her smile faded. There, she knew where he stood on this matter now. If only she looked as excited as his heart seemed to be with its racing and galloping antics. All he could read from her was surprise.

Well, shoot.

He’d gone and done something he couldn’t take back, and there was no way of knowing how she was going to react. If he could just crawl into a cave at this moment, he would. It wasn’t like she didn’t have other options at her disposal.

Elijah couldn’t take the suspense anymore, standing here having just handed over his heart to her for her to do... what exactly?

She wasn’t doing a dang thing.

He dragged a hand down his face with a rough motion and turned around. “You know what? Do what you want. I don’t care anymore. If you’re not going to stay with me—”

“Elijah, what are you talking about?”

Stopping where he stood, he didn't dare turn around to face her.

"I never said I wasn't staying."

Still, he couldn't bring himself to look at her, see the confusion and surprise. Clearly, she hadn't been prepared for this conversation to head in this direction. Otherwise, her reaction would have been different.

"Will you look at me?"

He shook his head. "I'd rather not."

"Why?"

Elijah groaned. "Because of the way you're dressed. The way you just stared at me when I told you I loved you. I don't think I can look at you knowing that you're not mine—not really."

Her hand wrapped around his arm and she stepped in front of him. Her touch was gentle and somewhat reassuring—at least that was how his skin interpreted it. His head, on the other hand, wasn't ready to accept anything she had to say in this moment. Still, he refused to meet those brown eyes, not wanting to be completely broken by this conversation.

Next, Scarlett lifted her other hand to his face and pressed her palm to his cheek. Elijah lost all his resolve in that moment and his eyes dipped down to hers. For the first time since he'd spoken to her that other day before her double date, he could see something different behind her warm, brown gaze. She cared for him.

And it wasn't just as a friend. She *really* cared about him. It might not be enough to keep her stateside, but it was enough to give him hope. Scarlett smiled at him. "You're an idiot, you know that?"

"Ouch," he said with indignation.

"But you're my idiot, and I love you, too."

His brows lifted and his breath froze. He couldn't move.

Paralyzed was a better way to describe what he was feeling in this moment. Was being paralyzed by love a thing? Well, it was now, because that was how he felt. “You do?”

She laughed. “Of course I do.”

“But the date... the way you’re dressed.”

“What about the way I’m dressed?” She glanced down at her outfit and then brought a confused look to his face. “I’m going to have brunch with Annabel.”

“*Brunch?*”

Scarlett laughed again. “Yeah. There’s this place in Colorado Springs I looked up. They have mimosas and cucumber sandwiches. It’s a whole thing, and I thought Annabel would love it.”

For a brief moment he thought about telling her that Annabel shouldn’t be taken somewhere they pushed alcohol. But then he had to remind himself that his sister’s secrets weren’t his to tell. Annabel needed to be the one to tell Scarlett about what was going on in her life. He swallowed down his instincts and offered her an apologetic smile. “Brunch.”

She nodded her head. “What did you think I was doing?”

“I dunno. I guess I figured you’d be going out again with that guy. That he’d taken you out and given you the time of your life.”

Reaching up, she pushed her hand into his hair and subsequently, his hat tumbled to the grass at his feet. “Last night was the worst night of my life.”

“It was?”

“Don’t go sounding so hopeful,” she chided. “I was with someone I didn’t love. I wasn’t in the arms of someone I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.”

Elijah frowned. “You were in his arms?”

She gave him a gentle slug on his arm. “It’s a figure of speech. All I could think about was how much I wanted to be

there with you. So no, I won't be going on any more dates with guys who aren't... *you*."

He grasped her at her waist and pulled her close. "You better not." Still, his insecurities seemed to be dancing behind the scenes. "So... you didn't... kiss him?"

The corner of one side of her mouth lifted into a silly-looking grin. "No. I didn't kiss him. And he didn't kiss me. I gave him a hug at the end of the night and thanked him for the date, but I didn't give him my number and I'm not going to see him again—much to the frustration of your sister, I might add."

Elijah kissed the tip of her nose. "She'll get over it."

"I'm not so sure. She really seems to think that since I'm back and interested in dating, this is the only way we can really get to spend time together. I don't know how I'm going to avoid it unless I tell her about us."

He grimaced. "I'm not sure that's a good idea yet."

"Why not?"

There was no sure answer he could give her. It was a gut feeling that was pulling him away from this confrontation in particular. "I don't know. I just feel like she's not going to take it well yet. Maybe we give it a few more weeks? Let the harvest settle down or something?"

"I don't like lying to her, Elijah. I really think we should tell her."

He studied her for a few moments, then nodded. "We should tell her together."

She shook her head. "I think maybe I should ease into it first. Let me tell her a little bit about it and then we'll go from there. Can you let me do that? Please?"

Once more, he tried to come up with some reason for her to wait. He wanted to be there, to support her, come to her rescue in case Annabel lost her cool. But he couldn't. "Fine. Just... give me a heads-up when you do it so I can be prepared."

“Deal.” She stood on her toes and kissed him deeply. When she pulled back, she patted his cheek. “I love you. I’ll see you later tonight, okay?”

“Yeah. See you tonight.”

Scarlett

Scarlett wasn't sure she was ready to tell Annabel about Elijah just yet. During the whole drive to Colorado Springs, while Annabel tried to convince her that their double date last night needed to have an encore, Scarlett struggled with telling her best friend about her deepest, darkest secret.

She glanced toward her friend out of the corner of her eye a handful of times, just letting her chat about Derek and everything she liked about him. It was a little strange to hear Annabel talk about someone like this. There was only one other person Scarlett could recall that had this kind of influence on Annabel—at least that was how it was when she had been living in Copper Creek.

They'd been high school sweethearts if she remembered correctly, but at the moment she couldn't recall his name.

“And he said that he wants to move back to the city to be closer to his family after he's done interning at the country club. And maybe if we're still together, then I'll find a place there, too.”

That caught Scarlett off guard, and she swung her head around to stare at her friend. “I thought you hated the city.”

“I don't *hate* the city.”

“Yes, you do. You've said so a thousand times. You think it's dirty and crowded and only good for shopping, if that.”

Annabel sliced a dismissive hand through the air with a laugh. “Don't be ridiculous. It's not like it's happening tomorrow. I'm up to do something different.”

There was something off about what Annabel was saying, but Scarlett couldn't put her finger on it. It was as if Annabel was adapting.

Was that so bad? She was changing herself, was she not? Scarlett shouldn't be judging her friend for the same thing that was happening in her own life.

She needed to just brush this off like Annabel was clearly doing.

They arrived at the restaurant and Scarlett pulled into a parking space. It wasn't super busy for a Saturday morning, but it would be by the time they left. At least that was what her research suggested. There was still plenty of parking on the street and in the small lot behind the historic building. On Sundays, this beautiful brick building boasted tea parties for mothers and daughters alike.

Scarlett took a moment to appreciate the Dutch Colonial Revival architecture that had managed to stand the test of time in this particular part of the city. Surrounding the building was a variety of old and new buildings, but this one stood out mostly because it used to be a home. It was as if the city had grown around it, and yet left it intact. There was a balcony on the second story to the right, several windows on both floors and a large, almost arch-shaped awning over the front door.

Annabel glanced up at the building, her expression almost the opposite of Scarlett's. "This is the restaurant you wanted to take me to? Are you sure it's not like an old folks home?"

Scarlett laughed, looping her arm through her friend's and moving them both toward the front entrance. "They converted it to a restaurant on the inside but left the outside the same. You'll see, it's going to be amazing. I've seen all the pictures online."

They entered what would have been the foyer back in the day and a grand staircase came down to one side. On the other was a large parlor filled with small tables and ornate chairs. A hostess stood with a set of menus scooped into one arm. She smiled brightly. "Do you have a reservation?"

Scarlett nodded. "Perez for two."

The woman looked down at a clipboard on a stand and nodded. "Right this way."

Much of the interior of the building had been kept the same as far as décor was concerned. It appeared that the

biggest changes that were made had to do with moving walls to accommodate guests. The place was absolutely beautiful.

Their hostess placed two menus on a small table and gestured toward the chairs. "Today's meal comes with complimentary bottomless mimosas. Sound like something you ladies are interested in?"

"Um—"

"That's great, thanks," Scarlett said and nodded. She picked up her menu and glanced over to her friend, noting some apprehension. "Is everything okay?"

Annabel glanced in the direction that the hostess had gone, then brought a reassuring smile back to Scarlett. "Yes. Everything is great." She seemed a little more fidgety than she'd been in the car and Scarlett nearly demanded to know what was going on, but she thought better of it. This was supposed to be a fun morning out just for the two of them, and she didn't want to spoil it by discussing something that Annabel had no interest in talking about.

They glanced over their menus, and then Annabel suddenly placed hers on the table. "Okay, so tell me why you didn't give Derek's cousin your number."

Scarlett coughed, having sucked in a little too sharply. "I'm sorry, what?" She tried to make her words sound like they were coming with a laugh, but instead, she probably sounded like she was getting defensive.

"Derek's cousin. He told Derek that you didn't give him your number, so you clearly didn't want to see him again. Did he do something wrong?"

"What? Of course not."

Annabel placed her elbow on the table and then her chin in her hand. "Did you find him unattractive?"

"No. He was cute enough." Scarlett flushed and tried to keep her focus on the menu in her hands, but Annabel placed a hand on the edge and forced her to lower it.

"Then what was it? He wasn't inappropriate, was he?"

“No!” This time her voice was sharper than she’d intended, and it drew the focus of a few others in the room. “No,” she said quieter. “It’s just that I’m interested in someone else.” The second those words escaped her lips, she knew she was done for. Annabel wouldn’t let her walk away from this conversation without telling her exactly who she was crushing on—or rather, who she was in love with.

Scarlett grimaced and picked up the menu again, only to have Annabel let out a soft squeal and lower it to the table.

“You didn’t tell me you were seeing someone. Why did you let me set you up then?” Her eyes were wide, excited, and brighter than they’d been in a long while. “You have to tell me who it is! Is it someone I know?”

She didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t like she could pull out her phone and text Elijah to give him the heads-up that this was happening here—*now*. She could already hear what their next conversation would sound like. He’d tell her she was foolish for letting the conversation even get this far.

Shoot! What was she supposed to do?

Annabel looked at her expectantly, literally on the edge of her seat.

Scarlett sighed. There wasn’t any going back, only moving forward, and now that she knew Elijah loved her, she knew they’d be able to work out any bumps in the relationship—*together*. “I don’t want you to be mad.”

“Mad? I’m not going to be mad. You already came back and told me that you wanted to settle down and start a family. That was earth-shattering as it was. Why would I be mad about you actually doing it? You’ve always been an overachiever. I figured you’d make quick work of whatever you set your mind to.”

Annabel’s words hit harder than Scarlett had anticipated. Her sweet friend, who had been nothing but her cheerleader since they were younger, was still doing her duty to be there for her. How could she have kept this secret from her in the first place?

She worried her lower lip, dredging up the confidence needed for this conversation. Then nodded. “It’s your brother.”

The blood drained from Annabel’s face, and she sat back in her seat with a slump. “What?” she said quietly.

“Yeah. It wasn’t really expected, but—”

Annabel’s brows furrowed and she looked away. “But I told you I didn’t want you dating my brothers. They’re... well, you know.”

“I know.” Scarlett stumbled to find an explanation that would make sense, anything that would make her friend not look so stricken. “I didn’t realize it was happening until—”

“Who? Lucas? Because you know how he whips through his relationships with women. I thought you knew better than to let his flirting get to you. Are you so insecure that—”

“Elijah,” Scarlett blurted. “It’s Elijah.” She wrung her hands in her lap and looked away, suddenly feeling more ashamed than she had before. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” Annabel mumbled. “I guess that’s not as bad.”

Scarlett glanced up, but Annabel still looked like she wasn’t ready to handle anything she might say about Elijah, period. She opened her mouth, figuring anything would be better than saying nothing at all, but the waitress interrupted.

“Here are your mimosas, ladies. Have you had a chance to look over the menu?”

Annabel grabbed the flute and downed it in seconds flat, then held the glass out toward the waitress. “Could I get another one of these?”

“Of... course.” The waitress took the flute and then glanced toward Scarlett unsurely.

“We’ll need another minute,” Scarlett said with a smile.

“Keep ’em coming!” Annabel called after the woman the second she’d left their table.

“Annabel,” Scarlett murmured, “you don’t seem like you’re okay with this.”

Her friend shot her a look, not hard or sharp, but blank. “Well, you *did* start dating my brother behind my back. That’s what happened, right? This didn’t just happen this morning or anything? I’m right to assume this has been going on for a few weeks?”

Scarlett nodded numbly.

“When? Since you got back? Before?”

Her eyes widened. “Of course not. We even fought it. I thought he *hated* me.”

“Well, clearly not enough.”

Scarlett flinched. “You know what? If you don’t want us dating, then—”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare tell you what to do. You’re Scarlett Perez. You always get what you want.”

She stared hard at Annabel. Hearing this sort of thing from Elijah was one thing, but hearing it from Annabel was something entirely different. “Then why are you even friends with me?” she spat out bitterly.

Annabel’s expression softened, but she didn’t answer the question. She looked away for a few minutes, leaving Scarlett wondering if they should just leave. Turned out she’d been wrong about telling Annabel about this.

The waitress brought over the refilled mimosa and smiled at both of them. “What can I get you two?”

Annabel downed her second glass and then held it up. “Like I said, keep them coming.”

“Annabel...”

She glanced toward Scarlett and gave her a smile that almost seemed normal. “We’re celebrating. You’re dating the least abject of my brothers. I’m happy for you.”

The waitress’s focus shifted from one to the other, probably realizing she’d just walked into a strange sort of argument—one Scarlett wasn’t even sure what was going on.

Scarlett gathered the menus and held them out to their waitress. “We’ll have the yogurt parfaits and the French toast.” She waited for the waitress to leave before she leaned over the table and studied her friend. “I want you to know I’m *really* sorry.”

Annabel flicked her fingers in Scarlett’s direction. “I probably shouldn’t have even been surprised. You guys have been spending a lot of time together. It was bound to happen.” There was a hidden ache in her words, one that was barely discernable, but Scarlett heard it.

“Are you sure it’s okay? Because I’ll break up with him, really.”

For the first time since Scarlett had confessed, Annabel seemed to be staring back with clarity. “Go for it. Date him. We haven’t been all that close lately, right? I might as well share you with my brother.”

“Is that what this is about?” Scarlett gaped at Annabel. She’d imagined all sorts of reasons for Annabel not to want Scarlett dating her brother, but this wasn’t one of them. “Annabel, it’s not like that.”

The waitress returned, but this time she held two flutes that she placed in front of Annabel, to which Annabel made an appreciative noise. “*This* is what I’m talking about. We’re going to have to celebrate this one, right, Scar.”

Scarlett eyed the drinks uneasily. “You’ve already had two on an empty stomach. Don’t you think you should slow down?”

“How about you don’t tell me what to do, and I won’t tell you who to date? Sound good? Come on, we came out here to have fun. So, let’s have a little bit of fun.” She gestured toward Scarlett’s untouched drink. “Don’t leave me hanging.”

Scarlett forced a smile, realizing that this might just be how Annabel needed to cope with this information. After the news settled, she’d probably be better at discussing her feelings and they could get to the root of the problem. “How

about you have the fun, and I'll get us home safe." She needed to stay clear-headed for the drive home.

Over the next hour, Annabel had at least three or four more mimosas while not even touching her French toast. She might have had a bite of her parfait, but then again, it mostly looked stirred up.

By the time Annabel started talking a little too loud and obnoxiously, Scarlett knew it was time to herd her out to the car and get her home. Annabel draped herself across Scarlett's shoulders and laughed loudly as they exited the building. "This place was actually pretty good," she slurred. "I didn't know that having mimosas could be so freeing."

"Yeah," Scarlett grunted, "I don't think they thought someone would take them at their word and keep ordering the mimosas either." She adjusted her hold on Annabel as she opened her car door and helped her friend inside.

Annabel's head lolled as she peered up at Scarlett. "Can you take me to your place?"

Scarlett's brow furrowed. "Sure... but why?"

Her friend laughed. "Because Wade is going to kill me."

Again, confusion flooded Scarlett's entire being. "Why would he be mad?"

This time Annabel snorted. "Because two days ago, I got my six-year chip."

"A chip?" Scarlett stared through her friend. What was she even talking about?

"You know, for AA."

Her whole body went cold and her stomach bottomed out. Scarlett's first instinct was to yell at Annabel for not telling her. But how could she do that when they hadn't been close enough for her to confess she was in AA in the first place? She wanted to yell at Elijah for keeping this from her as well. If she'd known, she wouldn't have brought Annabel to the restaurant in the first place. It had been a recipe for disaster.

But watching her friend now, she knew yelling wouldn't get her anywhere. Instead, she gently pulled the seatbelt around her. "Yeah, I'll take you to my place."

She shut the car door and leaned against it, squeezing her eyes shut. What was Elijah going to say?

Elijah

Elijah didn't like it. Not one bit.

The message he got from Scarlett had been vague enough to make his anxiety levels rise, and he continued watching the road every time a new vehicle flew by. All he knew was that Scarlett had told Annabel and now there was a problem.

What kind of problem? Was she mad? If so, then why didn't they come home earlier so they could have a discussion that included him?

His focus suffered as he did his work. Colorado Springs was too far away for him to be dealing with any of this. Maybe the ride home would be enough to help clear the air. It should be, right?

All of these thoughts and more continued to crush him.

By the time Scarlett's car pulled up, his nerves were frayed. He hurried to her side of the car first, but she opened her door fast and darted around the front of the car. "Hurry, she said she's going to throw up."

"What?" he barked.

She yanked open the door just in time for Annabel to retch outside. She wiped her mouth and groaned. Scarlett helped her to her feet, and another groan slipped from her lips. Her eyes seemed to dart around without seeing much of anything, and that was when Elijah was able to put all the pieces together.

He charged toward them, stopping them from moving anywhere. He glowered at his sister. "Are you *drunk*?"

She scowled back, but not after wincing first. "You're a jerk, you know that?"

"You *are* drunk. I can't believe this. What happened to you getting your chip the other day?"

Annabel's dirty look was all it took for him to lose what little patience he had left. "Get in my truck. We're going home."

"No," she bit out. "I'm not going anywhere with you. I'm staying here. You're a traitor."

He shot a surprised look at Scarlett, who looked completely lost. "You can't stay here. You have to come home. What am I going to tell Wade?"

"Jack squat. You're not going to tell him a single thing because this is your fault."

His head reared back as Annabel stumbled forward and Scarlett attempted to help her stay on her feet. He watched them enter the house, the door slamming shut behind them. He couldn't go inside, not with the rage that was building within him. All that work that Annabel had put into her recovery—wasted.

He raked his hands through his hair, tugging on it until his scalp stung. Back and forth, he charged until the door opened and Scarlett came out again. He stopped suddenly, not sure of what to say or what to ask.

"She's sleeping now."

That was fast.

Scarlett didn't say anything else. She just heaved a sigh and moved over to a chair on the porch.

For reasons he wasn't entirely sure of, his anger intensified. He marched up those steps and glowered at her. "I can't believe you let her get drunk like that."

Surprise pooled in her eyes. "I didn't let her do anything, Elijah. She chose to drink all those mimosas on her own."

"Yeah, but you *took* her there."

She shot to her feet and scowled right back. "And I had no idea that she'd been in recovery."

"Well, you didn't bother to ask, now did you?" His words were sharp and unyielding. Some small part of his brain tried

to remind him to be gentler, that Scarlett didn't have all the information, but the bigger, angrier side refused to deny that she'd been so stupid. Scarlett was one of the smartest people he knew. She had to have at least some clue.

Scarlett crossed her arms and lifted her chin. "We all have the agency to do what we want. Annabel chose to get drunk today, just like she'd chosen to do it before. None of this is my fault. But you know what? If *any* of you had offered even a tiny amount of insight into this struggle, I would have never taken her there in the first place."

They continued to glare at each other for what felt like an eternity.

She heaved a sigh and pinched the bridge of her nose. "You know what? I've got some more paperwork to do regarding the farm, and now I have to help your sister through whatever she's dealing with. Maybe it would be best for you if you left."

Finally, he threw his hands into the air and stormed off. If she couldn't see where she'd gone wrong, she never would. He couldn't force her to acknowledge that there were things addicts did that people should recognize, behaviors that were obvious.

He headed for the barn to finish off what he needed to do for the day and then he'd leave. Of course he'd have to let Wade know. Their brother was the one in charge of the family and he would want to make sure Annabel got back on track with her recovery. If this became a setback like the one that had triggered her last bender before she began her six years of sobriety, they were all going to be in trouble.

Wade had been a drinker, but he'd pulled himself out of it. Annabel hadn't been so lucky. And she'd need all the support she could get. Unfortunately, that might mean that she needed to remove herself from Scarlett's life.



ELIJAH HADN'T STEPPED foot inside Scarlett's house for a full week, not even for supper. He hadn't spoken to her besides a few short sentences regarding Annabel's welfare. Apparently, his sister didn't want to come home due to some very personal text messages between herself and Wade.

He couldn't blame her. Wade had been through the program, and he knew how to handle this particular situation, but he also knew his sister needed a firm hand at times, and right now, Annabel was incredibly vulnerable.

If there was one thing he was grateful for, it was that Scarlett had really stepped up to take care of her, again proving that Scarlett wasn't the same woman she'd been when she'd first left for Germany.

Elijah was slowly realizing that he needed to do something to clear the air between them. While he knew he had every right to be upset about Scarlett leading Annabel into the lion's den, he had to admit even to himself that he had maybe taken things a little too far.

He just couldn't bring himself to call her, text her, or even knock on the door to have that conversation. For now, it was easier to just let Scarlett come to him when she wanted to give him an update.

Elijah focused on doing all the chores that Scarlett had neglected for that day. He was so deep into his routine that he didn't see her come charging through the field to speak to him.

Scarlett shoved a stack of papers into his chest hard enough to set him off balance. She gestured wildly at it, her eyes flashing. "What is *that*?"

He fumbled with the paperwork until he could get a good look at it, and then his stomach bottomed out. Weak all over, he lifted his gaze toward her with trepidation. She wasn't supposed to know about this. Carlos had all but guaranteed that it would remain private between the two of them.

"Well? Are you going to admit that you've been trying to steal my farm out from under me, or what?"

“I wasn’t trying to steal your farm out from under you,” he replied and then sighed.

“It sure looks like it,” she snapped. “Right there at the bottom of that document. Is that not your signature? Unless you know of some other Elijah Keagan that I don’t.”

He scowled, his hand tightening on the document. “You weren’t supposed to know about this.”

She let out a surprised and yet shrill sort of laugh. “I can’t believe you just said that. And right to my face!”

Lifting his gaze to meet hers, he held the papers out for her to take. “This was the agreement your father made with me to keep working here. He needed the help.”

Scarlett snorted derisively. “You took advantage of him right from the start. I can’t believe I didn’t see it sooner. This is the whole reason you’ve been helping out. Not because you’re kind and generous. Or because you... *loved* me.” Her voice broke. “It’s because you wanted the land for yourself. You make me *sick*.”

“Hey now! I didn’t come over here to just take your land. I came over here to help and this was something your father *offered* me.” His defenses shot up like a drawbridge to keep out any words she’d fling at him like flaming arrows. “I accepted because if it wasn’t me, it would have been someone else. At least now, it’s going to stay in the—”

“What? *In the family?* You’re no family, Elijah. You’re a traitor. The only ones I care about are my father and Annabel. I don’t need you or what you consider *love*.” She turned to go, but he stopped her, reaching out to snatch her wrist.

It was a last-ditch effort for her to understand where he was coming from. He needed her to know that it wasn’t what it appeared to be. He’d fallen in love with her after the contract was drawn up. Did they have a lot to unload here? Sure. His sister. The farm. The contract. All of it would need to be discussed, but first he had to ensure she knew his feelings for her hadn’t changed.

She stopped and stared at where he held her, then her heated gaze landed on him hard. “Let. Go.”

He released her as if her body had turned into flames itself. “Scarlett, we need to talk about this.”

“No, we don’t. For the first time since I’ve arrived, I see you for who you truly are. Do you think for even a second that I could trust you again after what you did? You’ve clearly never trusted me. You never thought I’d change. No matter how hard I’ve tried to prove to you that I’m a different person, you still manage to find new ways to push me back to the ground and keep your boot on my neck. I’m never going to be good enough for you. I’m never going to be perfect.”

“I’ve never said that!”

“You didn’t have to,” she rasped, her voice now emotional. “The second you blamed me for your sister’s mistake, I knew.” She placed a small fist over her heart. “I *knew* right here that you would forever see me as a selfish girl who had no thought for others.” She took in a deep, shuddering breath, then released it.

Elijah took a step toward her and she stiffened, moving away from him. Her hands lifted into the air and she shook her head. He’d never felt his body go so cold so quickly. “Scarlett —”

“You wanna know the worst part? I thought out of everyone, you were finally the person to see me for who I really was—for the person I wanted to be. I thought you were the person who would push me to become the best version of myself. I can’t believe I actually thought that you wanted me to stay.”

“I do want you to stay.” His breath hitched and his heart drilled deeper and deeper, making a cavern in his chest. Was she suggesting that she didn’t plan on staying here? Was she going to leave?

“No, you don’t. You never wanted me to stay because that meant you wouldn’t get your farm. You know I would have fought you tooth and nail in the courts until we were both

penniless. I put my own money on the line to help my father get out of the ditch he dug after my mother died, and you *let* me. How do you explain that?" The pain in her voice tore at him with every syllable she uttered.

He wanted her to stop.

Needed her to stop.

Already he was hollow inside. He couldn't take anymore.

His legs buckled and he did everything in his power to make sure he stayed upright. "What are you saying?" he said. "Are you really going to leave?"

She stared at him hard, a tear slipping from her eye and tumbling down her cheek. "I don't have any other option. I can't stay here and watch you take my family's legacy, now, can I?" Scarlett lifted the papers in her hands listlessly, then dropped them. "I guess everyone was right after all. I don't belong here. I never did." She turned and hurried away far too quickly for him to say anything to stop her. Even if he'd found the right words to tell her he was sorry for what had happened, he wasn't sure he could bring himself to say them.

Fact was fact.

Elijah had signed that paperwork to take over the farm, knowing full well that Scarlett had wanted to do the same. He'd kept that and a couple other secrets from her that he shouldn't have. He didn't deserve her trust.

He glanced toward the house just as the door opened and Annabel's form emerged. Scarlett launched herself up the steps and the two of them hugged. There was only one good outcome from the last week. It appeared that Scarlett and Annabel were as close as ever. They had figured everything out between themselves. Annabel needed that relationship more than he did—even if his heart disagreed with that sentiment.

His hands tightened on the handle of the landscape rake, and he all but attacked the hardened dirt he'd been trying to loosen to pull some stubborn weeds. He didn't need a

relationship. He needed to get his head on straight and make sure he would be able to provide for his future family.

Scarlett could do what she wanted for all he cared. They both had their freedom.

Scarlett

“*I* can’t believe he’d do this!” Scarlett threw the documents on the kitchen table as Annabel followed her into the room. “He was literally going to just keep going along with this plan and hope that I wouldn’t find out. What a... a... *jerk!*”

Annabel was unusually quiet where she stood by the doorway. Ever since she’d sobered up, she’d been acting strange—like she was embarrassed over the whole fiasco.

Scarlett couldn’t blame her. The situation had been tough. But what hurt her the most was realizing that Annabel hadn’t trusted her enough to tell her about her struggles with alcohol. Scarlett glanced up to make sure Annabel hadn’t slipped out of the room without detection. She was still there, always watching, possibly judging.

Neither one of them had thought Elijah would be capable of doing something like this. It was like Annabel had mentioned several times before. Elijah was one of the better ones.

It was unlike him to be so selfish and not at least tell someone what was going on. He was so good at being frank.

Scarlett sighed. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be talking about him like this.”

“I get it,” Annabel said quietly. “I really do. You loved him.”

Her sharp gaze cut to Annabel, wide with surprise. “I never...”

Annabel moved into the room, hugging herself. Her hands rubbed her arms up and down and she let out a soft laugh. “It was written all over your face. I can’t believe I didn’t see it earlier. Like that day when I got you to agree to going on a date with me and Derek.” She made a face. “I can’t believe you let me talk you into it! Elijah must have been livid.”

“Yeah,” Scarlett murmured. “That wasn’t a great conversation.” Her heart stumbled. That conversation had been tough to begin with, but in the end it had been the one where they’d admitted they loved each other. It felt like such a lifetime ago.

Hot tears sliced down her face and she sucked in sharply as she brushed at them with the heel of her hand. “I can’t believe I’m crying over him. Anger I get. He betrayed me. But sadness? He’s not worth my tears.”

Annabel touched her arm, drawing her focus again. “I know it didn’t seem like I was being honest, but when I told you to go for it... back at the restaurant... I meant it.” The genuine tone of her voice took Scarlett off guard.

“But... you were...” She flushed, unsure if it would do more harm than good to bring up the drinking.

“Getting drunk?” Annabel looked away. “Yeah, I didn’t take it really well, did I?” She brought her thumbnail to her teeth and chewed on it, twisting it back and forth. “Honestly? I was a little hurt, but mostly because you didn’t tell me right at the start.” Annabel peeked at her. “It’s stupid, I know.”

“No, it’s not.” Scarlett reached for her friend’s hand. “We’re supposed to be best friends—that means not keeping secrets like this from each other... secrets like what you’ve been struggling with, too.”

Annabel grimaced. “I didn’t want you to think I was some weakling who couldn’t control herself.”

“I would *never* think that about you. I hope you know that.” Scarlett fought the emotion boiling inside her. What kind of person had she been ten years ago that those she considered her closest friends seemed to think so little of her? Was she really so selfish?

The ache continued to grow—from her broken relationship with Elijah, to the shattered ones with her father and Annabel. The worst part was that there seemed to be nothing she could do about it.

Her reputation was cast in stone.

“Hey.” Annabel nudged her. “You okay?”

“Not really,” she admitted. “I’m just realizing that I must have been a really bad person for everyone to have such low expectations of me.”

“It’s not like that.”

Scarlett laughed if only to keep herself from bursting into what would only be described as a leaky faucet. She gave her friend a wan smile. “I wouldn’t blame you if it was. I’m realizing that I haven’t been the best kind of friend.” She laughed again upon seeing the sadness in her friend’s gaze. “It’s fine. I’m going to be fine. But I think it’s going to be better if I leave.”

“What? No!” Annabel reached out and held Scarlett’s other hand. “You can’t leave, not when we’ve finally connected again.”

“I don’t think I can stay with everything being ripped from me.” It was probably the most honest thing she’d said in a long time. She shut her eyes tight, but it didn’t stop the tears from streaming down her face. The water had been released. “My mom is gone. She was my biggest support. My dad doesn’t look at me the same. I don’t know what it is, but he obviously doesn’t trust me to keep this place running. Otherwise he would have given it to me to inherit. Your brother is taking my home. The only reason I would stay is... you.”

It was Annabel’s turn to cry. She sucked in and let out a watery laugh. “Look what you’ve made me do. Now we’re never going to stop.” She pulled Scarlett into a crushing hug.

Scarlett’s body trembled as she fought to catch her breath. Everything she’d wanted to have happen had failed. Her plans had slipped through her fingers and there was no salvaging them.

“I don’t want you to leave,” Annabel said. “But I understand.”

“I’m so sorry,” Scarlett whispered. “For everything.”

Annabel pulled back sharply and stared at her hard. “Whatever for? You don’t need to apologize to me. You didn’t

do anything.”

Scarlett wiped at her already puffy eyes. “You don’t have to pretend that I didn’t contribute to... a lot of stuff.”

Annabel narrowed her eyes. “What did he say?”

This wasn’t what Scarlett had wanted to get into. She had hoped they’d just have a good couple of days while she packed up again and said her goodbyes. “I don’t want to talk about Elijah. Let’s just say that he opened my eyes to a lot.”

“Scarlett, you can’t just say something like that and expect me to drop it. Whatever he said, I need to know.”

“No, you don’t,” Scarlett assured her. If what she said ended up causing a rift between Annabel and her brother, then she’d only blame herself. She forced a smile. “Can we just—”

“No, we can’t just anything. What did Elijah say to you?”

She looked away, her face flushing. “He said that you were susceptible to being a follower and I was a leader. Essentially, anything bad that you went through was because I’d convinced you to take a path that wasn’t the best thing for you.” Scarlett peeked at her friend. “Like the alcohol thing. I took you out drinking for the first time. And the whole not getting married and having a family. I insisted how important it was to find ourselves before we fell in love.”

“*What?*” Annabel glanced toward a nearby window as if she expected to see Elijah outside and within view. “You can’t be serious,” she growled. “Elijah is such a jerk! I’m going to give him a piece of—”

Reaching out, Scarlett grabbed onto Annabel’s forearm. “You’re not going to do anything. He was just telling me what he witnessed you going through any time I came into your life. And maybe he has a point...” Her voice trailed off. As much as she appreciated Annabel’s determination to come to her defense, she didn’t want anyone making excuses for her. Not anymore.

“You’re wrong,” Annabel muttered. “And he’s wrong.” She shook her head and let out a frustrated growl. “You want to know something? Being in AA has taught me a great deal

about myself and the choices *I* make.” She placed her hands on Scarlett’s shoulders and set her with a firm stare. “You are not responsible for *my* choices.”

Scarlett’s heart hammered. The crushing weight she’d been dealing with for the last little while lifted somewhat.

“Did I follow you around and let you make most of the decisions when it came to what we did on the weekends or the people we spent our time with? Sure. But you were the outgoing one. You were the one who could make anyone like you. I could see that. I understood it. And I wanted to be part of it.” Another tear slid down her cheek.

Scarlett wanted nothing more than to pull her friend into another hug and just hold her. They were both unveiling all their baggage—stuff they’d kept hidden from themselves. Then again, Annabel seemed to have figured a few things out. She was taking control of her life, including the consequences that came with her poor decisions.

“I love you, Scar. No. Matter. What.”

“I love you too, Annabel. You were always the sister I never had.”

They shared the next few moments, letting the weight of their heavy conversation settle. Then Scarlett brought up the one thing that started nagging at her. “I’m sorry about the mimosas.” She avoided looking directly at her friend and opted instead to grab a couple glasses so they could get some water.

Annabel rolled her eyes. “That *wasn’t* your fault either.

“But if I had known—”

“How could you? It was my secret to tell.” Annabel accepted the glass Scarlett offered and took a sip. “I should have told you about it or said something when we were at the restaurant. In fact, I could have told you six years ago when I started the program. But I didn’t.” She shrugged. “We could have both done a lot of things differently. How about we focus on the future instead, okay?”

Elijah's argument last night must have had a lingering effect because Scarlett was having a real hard time letting go. "But if I—"

"*Scarlett.*" Annabel sighed. "What's in the past is in the past. I just need to go to a meeting and get started again. It happens. I'll get further next time." She smiled softly. "Don't worry."

"You can't tell me that. We don't have that kind of friendship anymore." Scarlett took a sip of her water, having never felt more validated in her life. There was a reason she'd gravitated toward Annabel, and this was one of them. It just felt good to be with her, to talk to her, and know that everything would turn out alright.

"Okay, fine." Annabel laughed. It was the first actual joyful moment they'd shared since she'd come in with the documents she'd found in her father's office. She motioned toward the table and then took a seat.

Scarlett followed suit. "You know, maybe one of our problems is that we're not seeing enough of each other."

"I could tell you that," Annabel drawled. "You never visit nearly enough."

"*Well*, what about you? You've never visited me in Germany." Scarlett gave her a pointed look.

Annabel snorted. "Um... I don't have money for that kind of visit. That would require a passport, and tickets, and who knows what else. It would just be better if you'd come here a couple times a year."

"A couple times a year?" Scarlett scoffed. "I would never be able to manage that." She cocked her head. "But maybe I could sponsor you."

"Thanks, but I've already got one of those, and I'm pretty sure she's not going to be thrilled to hear from me when I give her a call."

"No, I mean I'll pay for your trip. Or trips. You can come see where I work and what it's all about."

Annabel's eyes widened. Her mouth fell open and a little bit of water drizzled from the corner, causing Scarlett to let out a laugh. Annabel brushed a hand over the spill before staring at Scarlett again. "You can't be serious."

"Sure, I can. It's no different than me coming here. But at least I won't have to take a ton of time off work." She grimaced. "Hopefully, they'll take me back. I hadn't thought about that." The unease swirled within her. So many uncertainties. What if she couldn't get her job back? What if she were stuck here in Copper Creek?

With Elijah...

Her heart breaking once more, she pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes, causing stars to appear.

"Really, Scar. Are you going to be okay?"

Scarlett nodded, not releasing the hold she had on her eyes. "I'll be fine. I just need to get a hold of myself."

"What are you going to tell your father?"

Finally, she pulled her hands down and glanced blearily at her friend. "I don't know. I don't want to make him feel bad. There was a reason he didn't tell me. I would rather not start a fight, you know?"

Annabel nodded. "Yeah, I get it."

"I suppose I'll just tell him that my job wanted me back so bad that they offered a raise or something. He'd believe that." Lying didn't sit well with her, but it was one of the only options she could think of. Her father wanted her gone. Just like Elijah wanted her gone. The only one here who wanted her to stay was sitting in the kitchen right now.

Scarlett smiled at her friend. "I'm so glad we were able to get back to a good place," she whispered. Annabel would never know just how much she helped Scarlett heal from this particular brand of bad that this trip had become.

"Me, too," Annabel added.

"We're going to have to make the most of the time we have left, don't you think?"

Annabel nodded. “Absolutely.”

“But not dancing.”

She made a face and they both laughed. “Agreed. No dancing.”

“So...” Scarlett grasped for any topic that they could discuss that would take her mind off the farm, her father, and Elijah. “Tell me how things are going with Derek. After our brunch, I haven’t seen you messaging him as much. Is everything alright there?”

Annabel shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t *know*?”

“Honestly? I think he might have just been looking to help his cousin find someone. When he saw us at the club, he probably figured we’d both be available.”

Scarlett gasped. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope.” She swung her eyes back to Scarlett. “You wanna know something else? I think I finally realized why I have been so willing to avoid relationships.” She looked away briefly, turning her now empty glass between her hands. “I sorta take on characteristics of the guy I’m dating. I don’t feel like I’m myself. Does that sound crazy?”

“It makes total sense.”

“Maybe I’m just not ready to find anyone. Maybe I never will.”

“Don’t say that,” Scarlett attempted to comfort her. “I’m sure there’s someone out there for you—someone who will see you for you and not try to change you.”

Annabel shrugged again but didn’t comment.

They made quite a pair. It was probably for the best. They had a lot they both had to work out. At least now, they each had a plan.

Elijah

It had only been a week since their breakup, but Elijah felt like it could have happened yesterday. The wound was still fresh. No matter how much he told himself to get over it, he couldn't seem to forget how she had made him feel.

Elijah's crush on Scarlett had run deeper than a bottomless crevasse in the Himalayas. He'd fooled himself into believing it wasn't there, and all it had taken was for her to tell him how she felt about him.

It wasn't fair.

Every day was a new struggle. He'd watch Scarlett come and go from the house to do her chores, but she'd never speak to him—not that he deserved it. He probably beat himself up over what he did to her more than she ever could.

Annabel wasn't speaking to him either. Between the two women, he had been officially shunned. His sister had managed to take it upon herself to tell the whole family about what he'd been up to and everyone seemed to come to the same consensus.

Elijah deserved every bit of guilt and shame that came with his decisions. It was as if he'd betrayed his family by trying to create a life for himself outside of the Keagan household.

The only one who didn't seem to care was Lucas. But then, Lucas was the black sheep of the family anyway. He probably secretly enjoyed the fact that everyone was focused on someone else rather than him.

Elijah couldn't help but dwell on this ominous thought. He had always been the one everyone could depend on. He didn't get into trouble. He took care of those who were younger than him. He'd prided himself on not being the sibling Wade had to worry about.

All these mind-numbing recollections swirled in his head as he stared out in the distance at the bright skies. The sun

dipped behind the trees, putting a chill into the air. The cold was good. At least he could feel something rather than the endless ache in his chest.

A low, rumbling chuckle came along with a pair of boots connected to some faded Wranglers. Lucas settled beside him on the back steps of the house. He didn't say anything right away, but Elijah knew better than to believe Lucas would leave him alone. Lucas never really could keep his thoughts to himself, and up until now, Elijah hadn't really cared.

"I'd really rather you didn't say a single syllable."

Lucas laughed again. "You know better than that. How many evenings did we sit out here chatting about how ridiculous it was for Wade to fall for a Callahan when that rich guy came to town? How many times did we take bets on how long it would take for Wade to give up? Think about it. There's nothing much to do besides work, date, and judge people."

"Yeah, well, I'm a little tired of all the judgments."

"My judgments aren't the same as the ones you're getting from the rest of the family, and you know it. I don't think you did anything wrong."

Elijah stiffened, his gaze sweeping over to his brother. "You can't mean that."

"Sure, I can. You were looking out for number one. You have to think about your future as much as any of us. I think it was smart. And if I had your work ethic, I might have done the same thing."

That wasn't what Elijah wanted to hear at all. Lucas wasn't exactly the one with the best moral compass. At this point, Elijah was wondering if he should just wash his hands of the whole thing. He didn't need the judgmental stares from his family, and he had a feeling it wouldn't be long before the whole town heard about how he'd usurped the farm out from under Scarlett.

His brother nudged him. "Cheer up. This was what you wanted, right? You didn't go over to that farm to win a girl.

You went to solidify your future.”

Bile rose in Elijah’s throat. The problem with Lucas’s words was that Elijah *had* won the girl, and that had been the best thing that had happened to him all year. He’d had Scarlett in his grasp. There wasn’t much he could have done to mess it up, and yet he’d managed to do so. “Yeah,” Elijah muttered, catching his brother’s pointed gaze. “I guess you’re right.”

“You know I’m right. Scarlett was pretty and all, but she wasn’t your type.”

Elijah froze, the ache, nausea, and every other emotion coming to a complete standstill. “What?”

“Scarlett wasn’t your type. She wasn’t a cowgirl. She probably doesn’t know the right end of a pitchfork. She’s pretty, and she’s smart, but not in the way that would help you run a farm. I don’t know why you let that relationship drag out as long as you did.”

Without realizing it, Elijah’s hands balled into fists. “Take that back.” His voice was a low growl and it seemed to catch Lucas off guard.

His brother stared at him as if a pair of snakes had crawled out of his mouth. Lucas let out a weak chuckle. “What?”

“Scarlett is more of a cowboy than you will ever be. She’s smart and hardworking, and she’d be able to run that farm into the next century with her determination alone. She might not have realized it at first, but she could do it if she wanted to.”

“Easy, Elijah. I was just saying that you shouldn’t be beating yourself up about what happened.”

“Well, leave Scarlett out of it.”

“Sure, fine. Got it. Geez.” Lucas scooted away as if he expected Elijah to take a full swing at him. “I’m on your side, okay? I was just trying to help.”

“Don’t.”

“Noted.” They both turned their attention to the sky, the quiet filling the space between them. If Lucas was on his side, Elijah knew he wasn’t doing right by anyone. He loved his

brother, and he'd take a bullet for him. But he didn't agree with about ninety percent of his brother's choices.

Eventually, Elijah got to his feet and headed inside. There was nothing his brother could say to make him feel better about his latest decisions, and he wasn't sure he wanted Lucas to manipulate him into it anyway. He'd just have to live with the consequences of his actions.



ANOTHER TWO DAYS had passed since Elijah's little conversation with his brother. Lucas had chosen to keep his distance, which was probably for the best for the time being. If his brother continued to discuss Scarlett in the way he had, Elijah couldn't make any promises not to throw some well-deserved punches.

The only thing left to do was to throw himself into his work. The farm was going to be his, and he wasn't going to let anything happen to it now.

He spent most of his time out in the fields, avoiding the barn and the house when he knew Scarlett would be coming and going. He was always acutely aware of when Scarlett would be around, and today just felt different.

It was probably just in his head. For the first few days after Scarlett found out about his contract with her father, he'd braced himself to get a visit from her lawyer, but when that didn't happen, he also prepared to hear about her packing up and leaving.

But due to his family giving him the cold shoulder, he hadn't heard a peep. Scarlett had also remained quiet. At this point, he wasn't sure what she was planning. It shouldn't matter anyway. He wasn't going anywhere, and she wanted nothing to do with him.

Like the few nights before, Elijah worked late. He told himself it was because no one else was doing what had to be done, but part of him wanted to see as much of Scarlett as possible, even if she refused to speak to him. He'd catch

himself staring up at her window after it got dark just to see the shadow of her figure pass the window.

Tonight, he'd left only slightly earlier than usual, though that didn't mean anything when he still worked overtime. It was probably the conversation he'd had with Lucas that spurred this change. He was holding onto something that just wasn't going to work. When he entered the house, the first person he saw was Annabel.

She was seated in the living room with her phone in her hand. When he closed the door, she didn't even bother looking up. She probably knew it was him. Either that or she had finally gotten to the point where she didn't care who came and went from the house.

He stopped in the entryway and watched her as she swiped through whatever it was she was looking at on the screen.

"You can stop staring. I'm not going to talk to you."

Yep. She definitely knew it was him.

Elijah moved closer to her, crossing the threshold into the living room. An apology hovered on his lips. "I wanted to tell you I was sorry."

She snorted.

"I mean it, Anna. I don't want our relationship to suffer because of what happened."

Annabel shot him a dark look as she placed her phone beside her. "You're an idiot if you think you can get on my good side again after what you did."

"I'm not expecting to get on your good side," he said quietly. "I just want to get to a point where you don't hate me anymore."

She shook her head, eyes narrowed. "You don't get it, do you? What was the one rule I gave you, Wade, and Lucas?"

Elijah swallowed hard.

"What? Have you forgotten it?"

He shook his head.

“No, I didn’t figure you would. Both of us know exactly what I asked of you guys when you each got to about fifteen. You can’t date my friends.”

“I know,” he whispered.

A sharp bark of laughter pierced the air. “You know what? I finally realized what an idiot I’d been. You didn’t want to let her date Lucas and I thought it was because you were backing me up. But you wanted her for yourself.”

“Anna—”

She held up her hand. “You’re an idiot.”

“You said that already.”

“No, this time you’re an idiot because she actually fell in love with you, and you went and messed it all up. You could have been with her, dummy. You could have started a family with her, and instead, you steal her family’s livelihood. Who *does* that?” Annabel got to her feet and gave him a derisive look. “You deserve to be unhappy. I hope you figure this out. Otherwise, you’re going to be alone for the rest of your life.”

She grabbed her phone from the couch and strode out of the room. That conversation could have gone so much better. At least she was willing to talk to him, even if she called him an idiot.

Twice.

He let his shoulders sag, the weight of his shame and guilt overpowering him. He had always valued Annabel’s opinion above most of the others—due to her own history with learning from her mistakes. This conversation was basically like putting a nail in the coffin. She was right. He’d destroyed any chance he had with Scarlett. He’d made his bed and now he had to lie in it.



THE FARM WAS QUIET.

Elijah couldn't tell what it was exactly, but something had shifted.

It was cooler; the autumn months had finally made an appearance.

Leaves were tugged from the trees and they danced wistfully to the ground as if they didn't want to say goodbye to the summer season. That was the way life went. Everything changed with each passing season.

Elijah's season with Scarlett had ended, and the new one with him at the helm of the farm would begin.

So why was this emptiness in his chest refusing to leave? He'd told himself over and over again that there was no changing what had happened between himself and Scarlett. The time for that was long gone.

He'd nearly been able to convince himself of this fact, except something bothered him. It was small, like the annoyance he would get from a bug bite between his fingers. Something was itching to be scratched; he just couldn't place it.

Elijah worked throughout the whole morning and into the afternoon when he finally realized what it was.

Scarlett hadn't made an appearance for even a second today.

It had been like clockwork—the way she'd come out of her home to do the simple chores she insisted on doing. Today was different. She wasn't here.

Where was she?

Elijah put away the socket wrench he'd been using on the tractor that had been having issues again. He headed toward the house, not knowing what he was going to say to her. Shoot, he probably shouldn't even be doing this. And yet his feet misbehaved. They continued pushing him forward until he made it to the front door. The only thing he knew was that he needed to clear the air or end up being miserable for the rest of his life. So, if his feet and his heart wanted to go rogue, there was nothing his head would be able to do to stop him.

He got to the bottom of the steps and a rush of memories accosted him. He'd stood here looking up at her countless times. He'd admired her, fallen for her, wanted to make her his for so long and in a blink of an eye, he'd shattered any possibility of doing just that.

Elijah might not have much of a chance to fix this, but he could try. He knocked on the door, the wait unbearable. When the door opened, he had to take a quick step back. Carlos stood between him and the woman he needed to see.

They stared at one another for a few minutes until Elijah finally found his voice. "I came to speak to Scarlett, but I also need to discuss something with you. I don't think I can take over the farm. If it's something Scarlett wants, then I should step back and allow her the chance."

Carlos frowned. He glanced back toward the house, then stepped forward and shut the door behind him.

Elijah could feel the walls coming up. Carlos didn't understand. He probably thought Elijah was just being swayed by his daughter, but it wasn't like that. "I love her," he blurted. "I've loved her since before I can remember. I should have never agreed to your conditions."

The man in front of him lifted his brows slightly, then sighed as he shook his head. "I don't want Scarlett here."

"You... don't?"

"Son, I'm going to tell you this only to put your mind at ease. I was never going to give Scarlett the farm because I don't want her to have to deal with all of it."

"All of it? That's ridiculous. She's more than capable—"

"I'm dying."

Elijah clamped his mouth shut.

"I've got the test results. I have Huntington's Disease. At the current progression, I've got maybe ten years left."

A multitude of thoughts, questions, and concerns raced through him. This news knocked him off his feet. Did Scarlett know? If she did, she hadn't said anything. Perhaps she

thought it wasn't her place to tell him. Elijah swallowed hard. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you. But I don't need your pity. You'll be carrying on my family's legacy, and that's enough."

Elijah shook his head. "What about Scarlett. It should stay in the fam—"

"I'll not have my daughter trying to run this farm while worrying over me. It's too much."

"Is that what she thinks?" Elijah demanded.

"It doesn't matter. I've made my decision. Everything has been set and she'll find out when I'm good and ready."

"She doesn't know?" His voice rose a few decibels and he half-expected Carlos to get upset and tell him to keep it down. "You have to tell her. She needs to know what you're dealing with. That's what family is for."

"I'm her father," he said with a hint of fury. "I raised her. I cared for her. It's my job to make sure she's okay, not the other way around."

"You're a fool if you think she wouldn't want to know." It was all he could think of to say. "She's caring, and she loves you. She deserves to be able to make that decision on her own."

"Well, lucky for me, it's too late. She's gone and left for the airport, and she'll be unreachable for hours. She's heading back to a good job and a place where she's felt more at home."

"Do you really think that?" It felt like poison had seeped into his stomach. It swirled and contaminated everything inside him, making everything taste bitter. "Because if you do, then you don't know your daughter at all." His heart hammered, making him feel even more sick to his stomach. If she was at the airport, he had only a short amount of time to stop her. "I'm calling her."

Carlos scowled at him. "This isn't your information to tell."

“That may be. But I love Scarlett more than I love this farm, and I’d rather you be mad at me than her.” He pulled out his phone and dialed her number as he hurried for his truck. He didn’t care what it took. He’d find a way to reach her, even if it meant going to the airport himself.

Her phone went to voicemail. Again and again, no matter how many times he called it. Was she already in the air? Had she blocked his number?

Elijah wasn’t sure he’d have a chance to make it to the Colorado Springs Regional Airport if she was scheduled to fly out already. He probably should have gotten the flight information from Carlos. From Colorado Springs, she was likely to hop over to Denver, and there were several options for international travel from that location. For all he knew, she was already on a plane. But then, she could just be waiting and refusing to take his calls. Annabel had done just that, which was why he couldn’t get through to her either.

Shoot! Why had he waited so long to finally get his head on straight?

Scarlett

Scarlett sat on the plane, having just taken her seat. She stared out the small window at the dismal afternoon, not surprised that it matched her mood completely. It wasn't just walking away from the friendship she'd fixed with Annabel.

It was so much more than that.

She'd lost the farm.

She'd managed not to get as close to her father as she'd wanted. He'd been holding back and keeping his distance—something she realized he'd done a lot of over the past several years.

And she'd lost Elijah.

Coming home to Copper Creek was supposed to be the one thing to get her on track with her life. Yes, she'd taken a few detours to finally realize what that meant, but this was it.

And yet, it had turned out to be wrong.

There was no one and nothing left in Copper Creek for her to start the life she truly wanted.

No one but Annabel.

And she could travel to Germany when they wanted to get together.

Scarlett let a sad sigh escape, her elbow propped up on the armrest. People continued to flood onto the plane, finding their seats and getting settled. The white noise from the air conditioning wasn't nearly as soothing as it had once been.

There was no more excitement.

That had left her when the truth about Elijah had been brought to light. As much as she wanted to blame him for the part he played, she couldn't. He was only a small reason she was going back home.

Home.

Tears burned in the back of her eyes and she quickly blinked them back. She would not cry. Not here. Not on a plane full of people. She turned her attention to the people boarding the plane if for no other reason than to distract herself. A man loaded down with three duffle bags climbed on, followed by two small children who were chatting excitedly.

A boy and a girl. They looked to be about the same age, around seven. Their eyes darted back and forth, sweeping across everything and everyone. Behind them a frazzled-looking mother held an infant who couldn't be more than a few months old. They passed her seat just as quickly as they'd arrived, leaving Scarlett yearning for the family she realized she wanted only a few months ago.

She turned her attention to the window, telling herself to get over her disappointment. Just because her life had turned out pretty well over the last several years didn't mean she'd get to have everything she ever wanted. Maybe her luck had simply run out.

That was probably the first thing that actually made sense to her. She'd glided through her life so easily up until now. At some point things had to change. Life had to get hard. There were consequences to how she'd treated the people she'd cared about.

No.

What was she thinking?

Scarlett had never been one to take things lying down. She'd never been one to give up. It was as if the loss of her mother was the trigger. She'd come home to be with her father, and now she was just going to leave?

She shot out of her seat, much to the surprise of those around her. "I'm sorry," she mumbled as she reached for the overhead compartment. "I have to get my things. There's an emergency."

The line of people stopped, giving her dark looks.

“I just have to grab my things and get off this plane.”

“Miss? Is everything okay?” A flight attendant materialized as if out of nowhere. She moved closer and her voice lowered. “Is there a problem?”

“No. No problem. I just can’t be on this flight.”

“But you said there was an emergency.” The woman in front of her stared at her with concern. Her gaze darted toward the front of the plane and back to Scarlett. “Would you like me to escort you off the plane?”

“Really? That would be wonderful.” Scarlett wanted to hate how relieved she sounded. Part of her still clung to the decision she’d made to get on this plane in the first place. There were plans in place. She’d prepared to have an apartment ready for her when she got back.

And yet, none of it felt right.

After some maneuvering, they were able to get the group of people to shift enough for Scarlett to disembark. The second her feet hit the carpet of the airport waiting area, she released a pent-up breath. The heat and buildup in her stomach dissipated.

Thankfully, all she had was a carry-on. Her belongings weren’t scheduled to ship until she’d arrived, and at this point she could cancel that. She moved around a group of people who were still preparing to board, and she turned her attention to the plane outside. There was nothing special about it. She’d been on hundreds just like it.

But for some reason she viewed it differently. It was the thing that would have kept her from being with her father, no matter how much he probably didn’t like the idea. Her mother had often mentioned that he wasn’t the kind of guy to show his feelings. He had them all bottled up no matter who it was trying to be let in.

Scarlett just needed to try a little harder with him. And even if she hated it, she would try to convince Elijah to allow her to work beneath him. She wasn’t going to let him take

control of her farm without a fight. There had to be something a lawyer could do in this situation.

Even if there wasn't, she'd be standing behind him every single day until he finally gave in. She lost track of time as she stared out the window at the airplane. At some point it became fully loaded and pulled away from the terminal. Lights flashed and the wings bounced with the movement. She watched it shrink as it drove out onto the tarmac, stop for a moment, then lurch forward.

The aircraft picked up speed and the wheels lifted into the air. Scarlett sighed again. This felt right. It was terrifying, but something inside her seemed to thrum with the anticipation of what was next in store for her.

She spun around with her carry-on luggage in hand and headed toward the exit. There was a lot on her list now. She'd have to cancel her lease and the order to send her belongings. On top of that, she'd have to find a buyer for her car. She'd have to apologize to her supervisor at her company—again.

Even with this list stacking up, she felt good about her decision. Copper Creek was where she wanted to be. It was her home more than anywhere she'd ever lived. A weight had been lifted from her shoulders, and a smile spread across her face.

Everything would be okay.

She stepped outside and pulled her phone from her purse. Right, it was still in airplane mode. Scarlett toggled the switch and then turned to her right to head for the pickup area. Her phone pinged, buzzed, and chirped at her several times, causing her to stop in her tracks and look down.

Several missed calls from Elijah and Annabel. Her heart leaped into her chest as she stared at the voicemails that populated her screen. A few text messages joined them, all telling her to call one of them immediately.

That wasn't good. Annabel was willing to forgive Elijah for what he'd done, but she wasn't happy about it. She'd

already told Scarlett she wouldn't be speaking to Elijah for at least a month.

A dizzying amount of anxiety attacked, and she wasn't sure she wanted to listen to that first voicemail. Whatever it was that could pull these two together wasn't going to be good.

Her hand shook slightly as she hovered her finger over the first notification. It was the first voicemail, and it was from Elijah about an hour ago.

She tapped the screen and held the phone to her ear.

"Scarlett, it's me." Elijah muttered a quiet curse, and it sounded like he was jogging. "I know you don't want to talk to me right now, but you need to call me back right away. It's important." There was a pause, then he sighed. "Please."

There were four other messages, three from Elijah and one from Annabel. She nearly opened the one from Annabel first, but her curiosity was getting the better of her.

Scarlett tapped the next voicemail.

"It's about your father. He's keeping something from you, and you need to hear it from him. Even if you don't want to talk to me or even listen to me, just... call your dad, okay?" The sound of a car horn honking in the background was the last thing she heard.

Onto the next one.

"Scarlett, please, please, pick up your phone. You're not going to want to go to Germany. You're not going to want to leave the country." This time there was a longer pause. She nearly thought the message was over when he spoke again. "I don't want you to leave."

Her heart thundered erratically, and her mouth went dry. They hadn't really spoken since she'd found evidence of him taking the farm. She hadn't wanted to see him or speak to him after that, and he knew it.

For his part, he didn't really fight to keep things going either. Elijah hadn't come to her house in the middle of the

night to toss pebbles at her window. He hadn't cornered her in the barn to tell her he was sorry. He hadn't done anything to try to win her back.

That was proof enough for her to realize just how little he cared for her and how much he had wanted her family's property. Therein lay the reasons she had for steering clear of him and making her plans.

She stared hard at the last message with his name on it. Something was wrong with her father. Elijah didn't want her to leave. What more could he say that he hadn't said before? Did she even want to know? He'd taken her future from her without a lick of guilt.

Against her better judgment, she tapped on the last message and held her breath until she heard his voice. This time it was calmer—the way he'd spoken to her when they were alone and there was nothing else they had to worry about.

“I'm calling you because...” He sighed. “Because I'm in love with you, Scar. I could make a thousand excuses as to why I did what I did, but none of it matters without you.” His quiet voice made it hard to hear what he was saying and she had to stop walking to focus on his words. “I don't know if you'll ever forgive me. Heck, I don't think I deserve your forgiveness. But I'm going to try. If I have to cross oceans for you, I'm going to do it. So, when you get this message, know one thing. I'm going to make you mine one day.”

Her pulse roared in her ears as the message ended. She couldn't breathe, couldn't walk. All her weight was placed on the handle of her suitcase at her side. Standing still, her phone was pressed to her ear as she let his confession wash over her.

Scarlett shouldn't be thrilled or excited. She shouldn't be giddy with this information. If anything, she should be blocking his number and deleting the message. He'd betrayed her trust.

What she should be doing right now was letting the dust settle. She could listen to Annabel's message and then decide what she wanted to do.

She finally pulled the phone away from her ear and tapped the final message.

“Scar? It’s me. Your dad is sick. He was keeping it from you to protect you, but Elijah found out. He wasn’t willing to tell you because he thinks your dad should, but in case you aren’t listening to his messages, you should probably not get on your flight to Denver. You need to come home or at least figure out what you want to do.”

Scarlett nearly dropped the phone from her hand. Her dad was sick. How sick? Was it terminal? She’d already lost her mother; she couldn’t lose her father too. Annabel’s message was still going and she’d missed a part of it, but she forced herself to stay focused.

“He’s coming. I know you don’t want to talk to him, but hear him out. He really loves you, Scar.”

Her eyes locked on a familiar figure sitting on a bench a few yards away. He was hunched over, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. His fingers were dug through his hair, making it look far messier than it should. But she’d recognize those cowboy boots anywhere.

Scarlett’s whole body went numb.

This wasn’t happening.

It was like it was straight out of a fairytale. All her feelings for him came rushing to the surface and it took every ounce of self-control she had left to maintain her composure. She was frozen on the sidewalk with travelers rushing by, but in that moment she felt like it was just the two of them.

He’d come to talk to her. He’d tried to stop her from leaving. From where she stood, he looked so lost, so desolate. Even if she tried, she wouldn’t be able to stop the feelings rushing through her body at this very moment.

Elijah’s head lifted and his hands fell. Slowly, he turned and his eyes landed on her, gluing her to her spot. He got to his feet but didn’t walk toward her like she expected. Time stood still. So many things she wanted to tell him, and yet she couldn’t bring herself to utter a word.

Their eyes remained locked for what could have been an eternity and she would have never known. Finally, he took the first few steps toward her. “You didn’t leave.”

“I didn’t,” she whispered. As he walked toward her, she searched his gaze for any evidence that what he’d said in his messages was true, telling herself that she was willing to give him another chance for love. Unfortunately, she was finding it difficult to find the evidence she was looking for. She couldn’t tell if it was due to his own guarded nature or if it was because she was terrified of seeing it.

“Did you get my message?” he asked, now standing in front of her.

Her throat was thick with both emotion and amusement. “Which one?”

The corner of his mouth twitched upward slightly, then faded just as quickly. “The one about your father. He needs you now more than ever. You can’t leave.”

“And that’s why you didn’t want me to get on the plane?” she rasped. “Because you think I should stay for my father?”

He pressed his lips together in a tight line, but his gaze never left hers. “If you’ve listened to all of my messages, you know the answer to that question.” His palm cupped her cheek, and his gaze swept over her from head to toe. “But if I’ve learned anything over the last week, it’s that my selfishness can get in the way of my happiness and the happiness of those I care about.”

“That’s not an answer to my question.” She couldn’t bring herself to speak at a normal volume. Every word was a chore to get out. Staying for her father was a given. She’d do what it took to repair the relationship where she’d failed the first time.

But if Elijah was serious about trying to mend their relationship after everything they’d been through, she needed to hear it from him and not just in her voice messages.

She needed to hear it from his lips in person.

Elijah’s entire expression grew even more serious. “Stay.”

Scarlett lifted her chin, searching for that adoration in his eyes she'd grown to crave.

“For me,” he murmured.

Elijah

Asking Scarlett to stay was risky. Elijah knew it. He'd much rather prefer letting her get settled with her father first. He dropped his hand from her face and took a step back, reminding himself of his place. "Let me take you home—to see your father."

Scarlett blinked rapidly. "What?"

"You need to clear the air with him first. That's more important." Elijah reached for her hand, focusing on the way their fingers intertwined so he didn't have to look her in the eye and pretend he didn't want to make this all about them. "Your family is the most important thing."

She made a soft sound but cut herself off. At least she wasn't arguing with him. She could probably see that he was just trying to give her what she needed.

The drive back to Copper Creek was far too quiet for his liking. If he could have things his way, he would have attempted to have a conversation about how sorry he was. He'd have done everything he could to convince her that she was the one for him.

The time he spent on his way to the airport, each message he'd left her, all of it had brought him to one undeniable conclusion.

They were meant to be together.

When they pulled up in front of her home, she turned to face him. She didn't have much time to say anything because the door to the house burst open and a very angry Carlos marched down the steps. His face was beet red, and his hands were pulled into tight fists. He moved like an angry primate, and if Elijah wasn't in his truck, he might have been nervous.

Carlos banged on his window and hollered something Elijah couldn't quite understand. Scarlett gasped, scrambling for the door handle before launching the door open. "Dad! What are you doing!"

Her father shot one look toward her, then back to Elijah. He gestured angrily through the window. “He should have never brought you home.”

“What?”

“It wasn’t his place. He should have never gone to get you. You should have just gotten on that plane and gone back to Germany.”

“Dad!”

Carlos sobered.

“Do you hear yourself?” Scarlett said, taking a step toward her dad.

Elijah could hear the pain in her voice, the desperation. All he wanted to do was get out of his pickup and shield her from this conversation, but somehow he knew doing so was impossible. Scarlett’s ability to take care of herself was one of the reasons he loved her so much.

He continued to watch her with admiration.

“Did he tell you?” Carlos said, his hands still clenched in fists.

“No!”

Carlos’s head reared back, and he stared in shock at Elijah through the glass pane. Scarlett walked around the front of the truck and took his hand in hers. “You should have told me...” Her voice broke. “Not Annabel. You should have told me we might not have much time together.”

His eyes clouded over. “So you know.”

Scarlett nodded her head. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s... complicated.”

“You’re my dad. You should be able to talk to me about this sort of thing.” Scarlett shot a quick look at Elijah, and he could almost swear that she wore a smile beneath her sad gaze. “Elijah was just the one brave enough to do something about it.” Her voice trembled, and she pulled his other hand into

hers. “I love you, Dad. I was coming home before I even knew what might be going on. I couldn’t leave you here alone.”

Carlos’s expression softened. His voice lowered to the point where Elijah couldn’t hear it through Scarlett’s open door. They spoke softly to each other, and Scarlett threw her arms around her father’s neck.

Elijah shifted uncomfortably in his seat. If he could shut Scarlett’s door and pull away, he would have. Scarlett and her father needed a moment together to heal. He could see that based on witnessing what might have very well been the first moment they’d connected on this level.

So he remained in his truck until they moved away and headed for the house.

Now he was torn between leaving and heading out to do the remainder of the work he’d planned on getting done before he found out about Carlos’s illness. There was no telling how long Carlos and Scarlett would be talking—not that he wanted to rush them.

Ultimately, he knew what he had to do. This wasn’t about him. It never had been. Elijah got out of his truck, retrieved Scarlett’s suitcase, and placed it at the foot of the porch stairs. Then he got in his truck and did the hardest thing he’d remembered doing since confessing his feelings for Scarlett.

He left.



EVERY DAY for the next two weeks, Elijah arrived at the farm that was still under contract to become his. He still hadn’t had the conversation with Scarlett that he’d wanted to have, but from what he could tell, she was getting along with her father better lately.

Scarlett also spent a great deal more time at his home—spending time with Annabel. He’d catch her eye several times, but nothing ever came of it. She didn’t seek him out, and he didn’t corner her.

While at work, he spent most of his time wondering when Carlos would track him down and demand to change the contract they'd signed. The rest of his time was spent waiting for Scarlett to make the first move. He could understand that she might need her space to figure out where she wanted things to go.

But the longer he had to wait, the harder it was to maintain his patience. Elijah couldn't think of a single thing he could do more than he already had. He'd told her he loved her. He'd confirmed he wanted her to stay. Heck, he even showed her that he wanted her to prioritize her family.

What more did she need? Was she still holding the contract against him?

That had to be it.

Neither Elijah nor Carlos had done anything to void the document. Well, that was going to change whether the Perez family liked it or not.

It was a Saturday afternoon when Elijah returned to his home, having seen very little of Scarlett, only to realize she was once again at his ranch with Annabel. He glanced at her new beat-up truck, noting how it seemed to match the personality of the new Scarlett, who had decided to stick around.

Upstairs, his contract for the farm called to him, demanding to be pulled out from its hiding place beneath his mattress. This was his opportunity to make everything right. Elijah retrieved the paperwork and headed down the stairs. The house was quiet, most of the Keagan residents having already gone out for the evening, leaving only Annabel and Scarlett visiting in the living room.

He shuffled the papers as he hovered outside of the room, unsure if his sister or Scarlett would turn him away. Annabel was like the gatekeeper as of late, though she hadn't mentioned even once that he should stay away from Scarlett. Quite the opposite, actually. She'd asked several times why he hadn't just gotten this part over with.

Elijah could do this—relinquish everything he thought he wanted for the one thing he realized was most important.

The room got eerily quiet, and his head snapped up. Two pairs of eyes stared at him expectantly. Annabel moved first. “I’m going to get us something to snack on.” She stood and brushed past him, but as she did so, she murmured, “Like a Band-Aid. Just rip it off.”

Elijah’s eyes were glued to Scarlett, all his nerves on edge. She rose to her feet and stared back with a confidence he admired so much. Gone were the high-end shoes and clothes she’d worn when she first arrived a few months ago. Her hair wasn’t perfectly coiffed but rather pulled into braids. She wore an old Stetson hat that had probably belonged to her mother.

She was beautiful.

Scarlett shoved her hands into her pockets as she stared at him. She tilted her head, and a small smile touched her lips. “Hey, Elijah.”

He nodded to her. “Scarlett.”

Her gaze flitted down to the papers in his hands. “Was there something you needed?”

This was harder than he’d thought. Elijah had figured he’d simply march up to her, hand over the documents, then tell her he loved her and he wasn’t going anywhere. He’d thought it would be romantic and she’d throw her arms around him and tell him it was about time.

But the more he thought about it, the more he realized they weren’t living in a fairytale, and he had to accept the consequences of what he’d done. He worked his jaw, glancing down at the paperwork once more. “I have something to tell you, and I need you to listen.”

“Okay.”

Swallowing hard, he lifted his focus to her. “I need you to know I’m sorry for what I did—for what I agreed to do. There are no excuses for my behavior. And it should have never happened in the first place.” With that, he strode forward and held out the contract. “This is my only copy. That should be all

you need to take over your family's farm. I should have given it to you weeks ago, but—”

“Elijah,” she murmured softly, “I’m not even sure I want the farm.”

His brows drew together. “But—”

She pressed her lips together, and then a small smile touched her lips. “Right now, I’m trying to fix my relationship with my dad. There’s a lot more to it than that, but I know it’s better to prioritize that over the property.” Scarlett handed the documents out to him. “Besides, I barely know anything about running the place. I know how to work it, but a lot of the rest goes over my head. It’s probably why my dad thought it was better to leave it to someone else.”

He stared at the papers, unable or unwilling to accept them. “But you love that farm.”

“I do. And if what my dad says is true, then in a decade, he’ll be gone and I won’t have anything to tie me to this place.”

You’ll have me.

The words clung to his tongue, refusing to be uttered. His heart jumped with fear—the kind of aching terror that came with the possibility of losing her. He couldn’t let her go.

Not again.

“Scarlett,” he whispered, “About what I said at the airport...”

“Yeah?”

“I meant it. Every last bit of it. I’m in love with you. I don’t care if I have to give up the farm or how long I have to wait. I’m willing to—”

Her hand shot out and reached for his, effectively cutting off his ability to speak. He rubbed his thumb over her knuckle, unsure of where she was going with this, then lifted his gaze to meet hers. All he wanted in the whole world was for her to tell him that she loved him too. He wanted her to assure him they could work this out. He wanted their happily ever after.

She edged closer. “I love you, too.”

He couldn’t trust that he’d heard her correctly.

Scarlett glanced away. She worried her lower lip and shifted but kept her hand within his. “There’s so much going through my head lately. First, there’s my dad. We’re not even sure he was diagnosed correctly. He’s still waiting on a second opinion.” She shook her head. “Can you believe he didn’t even go meet with other doctors?”

Elijah couldn’t tear his gaze from her. Was she finally trying to open up to him again? He leaned in closer.

“Then there’s the farm. I don’t know what I would do without you there. I thought I might be able to handle it... but I just... can’t.” She glanced up at him, a blush crossing her cheeks. “I’m realizing I was being a little silly about it all.”

“You weren’t being silly. It’s your home. It makes sense that you want to be able to continue running it.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, but it would make more sense if someone who knew what they were doing were to take charge. You are actually a really good fit.” She swallowed and then cleared her throat. “And then there’s you.”

He stilled.

“I wanted to hate you for what you did. Even when I knew it made sense, I just wanted to be angry. But... I couldn’t. I realized you needed it more than me.”

“I don’t need it—”

“Elijah, I can see it. You’re happier when you’re working on the farm. You are the kind of guy who feels complete when he has a purpose. You’ve never been very happy at being a follower. Having your own place just makes sense.” She gave him a small smile. “If my father had to give it to anyone... I’m glad it was you. I want you to be happy.”

That sounded an awful lot like she wanted to stay far away from him. Elijah’s hand tightened on hers and closed the distance between them. “I won’t be happy unless you’re in my life, Scarlett. That’s what I wanted to tell you. I don’t know

why I accepted the proposal your father made. But I knew he wouldn't accept my help if I said no to it, so I guess I just went along with it. I thought we could figure that out as time went on. I love you more than the farm—more than life itself. I don't know that I could live without you.”

He let his words sink in. She needed to know just how far he'd fallen for her.

“If you aren't interested, tell me now and I'll walk away. But if there's even a tiny possibility that you think we could make it work... I want another chance.” Elijah brought his hand to her cheek and whispered. “Please tell me we have a shot.”

Scarlett's smile widened and the sparkle in her eyes returned. “Of course we have a chance. Haven't you been listening? I love you, too.”

“Will you guys just kiss already?” Annabel groaned from the doorway.

Elijah grinned at his sister's voice, not breaking eye contact with Scarlett for even a second. He raised his eyebrows, scared to ask the next question but knowing he had to. “What do you say?”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, for heaven's sake.” Scarlett framed his face with both of her hands and pulled him close, capturing his lips in a breath-stealing kiss. With one touch Scarlett could claim him as her own. He had no doubts about how she felt or where he stood.

He was hers.

And she was his.

And neither one of them was going anywhere.

EPILOGUE

Scarlett

Scarlett gathered the glasses she'd filled with iced tea and placed them on the tray table. It felt like she'd been wearing a perma-grin since that day when Elijah had practically cornered her in his living room.

Everything had changed between them from that moment forward. They'd become inseparable. From the work on her farm to when she visited him at his family's ranch.

The few weeks of limbo had been nearly unbearable, but that was behind her—behind *them*. Not only had she found her place in the world, she'd found herself.

She hefted the tray and headed for the back door. Pushing against it, she emerged to find her favorite people lounging on the porch. Annabel was sprawled out on a hammock, her father rocked in a wooden chair, and Elijah sat between them. Lazy Sunday afternoons like this one were her favorite. A day of rest. Just as the Lord had intended.

Her father grabbed his glass and she moved toward Annabel, who accepted hers. Then she put the tray down and took Elijah his drink. She sat next to him on the porch swing, their free hands clasped together. Once upon a time, she would have been worried what the other two people present would have thought, but not anymore.

This simply felt right.

Her father smiled at her, though beneath the surface she could get the barest hint that he was still worried. It might have been about the uncertainties with his health or perhaps the future of the farm, but either way, she planned on being there for all of it.

Annabel was laughing at something Elijah had said—something Scarlett had missed when she had been inside.

“I’m serious. You can’t tell me that you still think relationships aren’t for you. Just look at Scarlett. She finally found someone.”

Annabel snorted. “Yeah, she found *you*.”

“Hey,” Elijah shot back. “Be nice. At least she didn’t fall for Lucas.”

“I’ll drink iced tea to that.” She lifted a glass.

Scarlett chuckled. “Lucas isn’t so bad. He’s just not ready for commitment. Annabel, you’re pretty much the same. And if you’re unwilling to do anything about it, then why should he?”

“Oh no, you don’t.” Annabel shifted in the hammock, nearly causing it to twist and dump her out on the wooden porch. “Don’t you dare lump me in with him. He and I are very different.”

“Yeah,” Elijah murmured beside her ear. “Lucas wants to sample everyone he can get his hands on, and Annabel only wanted the one guy. When he broke her heart, she swore off guys just like you had.”

Carlos seemed to be amused to simply be witness to this conversation, but Scarlett couldn’t believe her ears. “Wait, you’re not talking about...” she started.

Elijah nodded. “Oh, I’m talking about him, alright. You remember Dalton, don’t you?”

“Elijah! Don’t.” Annabel’s voice was firm. The humor had fled from her gaze.

“*That’s* who it was.” Scarlett grinned at her friend. “You had it *bad* for him, remember? Dalton was the one guy who you pined for even after *you* broke up with *him*. I never understood that, you know...” Except it made more sense now that she was aware of how Annabel had always tried to find ways to fit in with those she surrounded herself with.

“It just didn’t work out, and you know why.” Annabel gave Scarlett a pointed look as if that was all it would take to remind her about how hard it had been for Annabel to figure out where she stood in that relationship. “Sometimes things go bad. And sometimes love finds a way—just like it did with you two.” Annabel settled back into her hammock and avoided looking at them directly. “Besides, he went off and married

that one girl we all hated and moved out of town. It's not like I ever had a shot with him anyway. And we clearly weren't all that close to begin with or he would have told me when he decided to move away with his mom during senior year."

"He's back in town, you know," Elijah said.

Annabel's eyes widened, and Scarlett's head whipped around so she could stare bug-eyed at him.

Elijah chuckled at their reaction. "Yeah, I bumped into him at the feed store. Apparently, he moved back to town about a week ago. He's back to help his dad with their property." He glanced toward Carlos and a meaningful look seemed to pass between them. "His dad is struggling after he got in that accident and broke his leg."

Annabel gasped. "His dad got hurt?"

"It wasn't life-threatening, but he's having a hard time bouncing back. You should go look him up."

She shook her head vehemently. "Not going to happen. I don't go for married men."

Elijah rolled his eyes. "Not to *hit* on him. You should see how things are going. I'm sure he'd like to catch up. He asked how you were doing."

Annabel shook her head again. "Absolutely not. Men and women can't be *just* friends."

"Why not?" Scarlett pestered, her voice a sing-song sound. "You know you want to. What if you guys are the exception to the rule?" She lifted her brows up and down, loving the way Elijah slipped his arm around her waist.

"Yeah, there's an opening in the 'Annabel's best friend' position," Elijah chimed in.

Annabel waved a dismissive hand. "You guys just don't get it. I'm happy with the way my life is going. I don't need someone to make me fulfilled—guy or otherwise." Her eyes widened and she stared straight at Scarlett. "Not that you're doing that. I just don't think—"

Scarlett smiled at her friend. "I'm not even bothered by it. I've come to realize that I need a couple men in my life. And these two are the ones I couldn't be happier about." She pressed a kiss to Elijah's forehead, then shot another smile toward her father. "Life is far too short to be living it alone. But if that's what you want, then by all means, find your happiness in the way that makes sense to you."

Her friend didn't move for what felt like an eternity. Then she got to her feet and placed her half-empty glass on a nearby side table. "You know what? I'm going to take in a meeting. I told my sponsor I'd meet her there today. You guys enjoy your Sunday." She nodded toward Carlos. "Thanks for letting me visit, Mr. Perez."

"Anytime, Annabel." He waved at her and then rose from his chair as well. "I'm going to take a nap. It's been a long day, and I could use the rest. I'll see you at supper, sweetie." He went inside, leaving the two of them alone.

Elijah pulled her close, his grin widening. "I thought they'd never leave."

"Oh? Sounds like you have plans to be mischievous."

"Oh, I have plans alright, but mischievous downplays them all."

Her heart fluttered wildly. "Well, you better let me in on all of it because I've decided we're going to be partners in crime."

He laughed. "You have, have you?"

She nodded. "You're not going to get rid of me that easy."

"Who said anything about getting rid of you?" He shifted beneath her weight and then pulled something small and sparkly from his pocket.

Scarlett gasped, recognizing what it was immediately.

Elijah twisted the engagement ring between his fingers and stared at it thoughtfully. "I bought this yesterday. I figured I'd hold onto it until the moment felt right." His gaze flitted up to meet hers. "If there's one thing I've learned in my life, it's that

you can't sit around for something to *feel* right. Sometimes you have to reach out and take what you want. Sometimes you have to prioritize what's important. And sometimes you have to take a leap of faith that everything you want lines up with what's important."

Scarlett started biting her fingernail and wiggling her leg.

He stared at her, one corner of his mouth lifted into a grin.

"I thought you said you weren't going to be mischievous," she groaned.

"I'm not."

"Well, you sure look and sound like it." Scarlett eyed the ring, both hating and loving the way her whole body had reacted to not only him but how this just felt so... *right*. "Ok. I'm done waiting," she continued with a cheeky grin on her face. "You know I take matters into my own hands. Or at least I used to. So that's what I'm going to do." She took his hand that held the ring and lifted it. "Scarlett? You're the most amazing person I know. You're beautiful and strong. And best of all, you're smarter than me."

"Hey!" Elijah laughed.

She gave him a stern look. "I'm not finished."

He held up his free hand in a gesture of defeat and then got down on one knee. "Okay, go on."

"Scarlett," she continued. "Will you make me the happiest man alive and agree to be my wife?"

Elijah stared at her expectantly. She tilted her head as if this were the hardest thing she had to contemplate. Then she smiled and her gaze grew extremely serious. "I love you, Elijah. More than you will ever know. I want nothing more than to marry you and start a family with you. I want you to be there for my highs and my lows. I know you will protect me and care for me and put me in line when no one else will. You are my person. Yes, I will marry you."

He blinked a few times, and she thought that he might tear up. Instead, he slipped the ring on her finger and then kissed

the ridges of her knuckles. His mischievous grin returned, and he pretended to wipe away a bead of sweat from his brow. “Whew. That was a close one. I thought I’d never ask.”

He stood up and wrapped her in a loving embrace.

She rolled her eyes. “Just kiss me already.”

And he did.

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ABOUT AUTHOR - NATALIE DEAN

Born and raised in a small coastal town in the south I realized at a young age that I was more adventurous than my conservative friends and family. I loved to travel. My passion for travel opened up a whole new world and new cultures to me that I will always be grateful for.

I was raised to treasure family. I always knew that at some point in my life I would leave my storybook life behind and become someone's mother, someone's aunt and hopefully someone's grandmother. Little did I know that the birth of my son later in life would make me the happiest I've ever been. He will always be my biggest achievement. The strong desire to be a work-from-home mom is what led me down this path of publishing books.

While I have always loved reading I never realized how much I would love writing until I started. I feel like each one of my books have been influenced by someone or something I've experienced in my life. To be able to share this gift has become a dream come true.

I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I have enjoyed creating them. I truly hope to develop an ongoing relationship with all of my readers that lasts into my last days :)

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