

A man with a beard and a wide-brimmed brown hat is shown from the chest up. He is wearing a dark, worn leather jacket with a thick white fur lining. He is shirtless, revealing a muscular physique and several tattoos, including large, intricate designs on his chest and shoulders. He is holding a wooden staff or handle. The background is a dark, misty forest with evergreen trees.

MCINTYRE
SEARCH AND RESCUE

TATTERED AND TORN

MCINTYRE SEARCH AND RESCUE - BOOK 3

APRIL WILSON

Tattered and Torn

McIntyre Search and Rescue

Book 3

by

April Wilson

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Character List

Main Characters

Gabrielle Hunter – 28 yrs old – former sous-chef at Renaldo’s in Chicago. Recently relocated to Bryce, Colorado, to manage the restaurant at the McIntyre Wilderness Excursions

John Burke – 40 yrs old, former Army Ranger, now stable master at McIntyre Wilderness Excursions

Supporting Characters

Hannah McIntyre – 28 yrs old, co-founder of McIntyre Wilderness Excursions and McIntyre Search & Rescue

Killian Devereaux – 34 yrs old, co-founder of McIntyre Wilderness Excursions and McIntyre Search & Rescue

Maggie Emerson – 40 yrs old, owns Emerson’s Grocery Store in Bryce

Owen Ramsay – 35 yrs old, former military, married to Maggie Emerson, participates in search and rescue missions

Jennie Lopez – 29 yrs old, owns Jennie’s Diner in Bryce

Ruth Jackson – 35 yrs old, owns Ruth’s Tavern in Bryce

Micah Jackson – 32 yrs old, former US Marine, now owns the car repair shop in Bryce, on-call helicopter pilot for McIntyre Search and Rescue

Maya McKendrick – 25 yrs old, professional rock climber, works for McIntyre Wilderness Excursions and participates in search and rescue missions

Travis Hicks – 32 yrs old, professional rock climber, works for McIntyre Wilderness Excursions and participates in search and rescue missions

Nora Ellison – 22 yrs old, John Burke's assistant at the stables, helps take care of the horses

Chapter 1 – Gabrielle

“You must be Gabrielle Hunter.”

I turn to the source of that deep voice and find a stranger standing a few feet away from me. He’s dressed in well-worn blue jeans, scuffed boots, and a blue-plaid shirt. Perched on his head is a tattered old cowboy hat, clearly meant for function, not fashion. It’s a bit worse for wear, like the rest of him. I’d guess him to be in his late thirties or early forties, maybe ten years older than me. It’s hard to tell because the brim of his hat shades a lot of his face.

I nod. “Yes, I’m Gabrielle,” I say hesitantly, very much aware that I’m talking to a complete stranger. I’m from the city. I don’t talk to strangers. Especially men. “And you are?”

He tips the brim of his hat. “I’m your ride to McIntyre Lodge. Hannah sent me to fetch you.”

Hannah McIntyre. Inwardly, I’m relieved. Hannah’s the reason I flew a thousand miles from Chicago to Denver. She’s my new boss.

I’m standing in the baggage claim section of Denver International Airport, waiting for the luggage from my flight

to magically appear on the carousel. I was expecting someone to pick me up and drive me out to the lodge, so this cowboy's appearance doesn't come as a complete surprise. "Wait. How did you know it was me?"

He shrugs. "Easy. Hannah told me to look for the prettiest redhead at the airport."

I smile. "Good guess." I glance around the crowded baggage claim area. "I'm also the *only* redhead."

He doesn't seem fazed. "Still, the description fits." He studies me a moment. "Name's Burke." He offers me his hand. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

Ma'am? I refrain from laughing as I take his hand, and we shake. His grip is firm, but not too firm. His hand is dry and pleasantly warm. He holds my hand for all of two seconds, then releases it quickly.

At that moment, the carousel starts up, making a loud whirring sound as it begins to turn. Luggage finally starts to appear through an opening in the wall, and my fellow passengers crowd around to collect their suitcases. Mine is easy enough to spot—it's bright orange in a field of black.

I shuffle slowly into the crowd, but it's a bit of a challenge as I'm already loaded down with my backpack, purse, and wheeled carry-on. I finally make it to the front of the pack, but I miss my chance to grab my suitcase the first time it appears and have to wait for it to come back around. When it finally does reappear, I reach for the handle, but a hand snakes in from beside me and grabs it, pulling it off the conveyor belt and setting it on the ground beside me.

"Just the one bag?" the cowboy asks. He sounds surprised.

"Yes. I traveled light."

"I can see that." He extends the long handle of my suitcase and starts wheeling it toward the exit. "This way, ma'am."

Hearing him call me *ma'am* makes me cringe. "Call me Gabrielle, please. Being referred to as *ma'am* makes me feel old."

He chuckles. "All right, then. *Gabrielle*."

I follow him, pulling my carry-on behind me. I notice he walks with a slight limp. His left leg seems a bit stiff. "I take it you work at the lodge."

"Yes, ma'am." He shoots me a wry look. "Sorry. *Gabrielle*. I guess old habits die hard. Yeah, I work at the

lodge. I manage the horses and take guests out on trail rides.”

Wow, he really is a cowboy.

“You ride?” he asks.

“Afraid not. I was born and raised in the city.”

“Chicago, right? That’s where Hannah and Killian are from.”

“Yes.”

“I understand you’re a chef at some fancy restaurant.”

“I *was* a sous-chef at Renaldo’s. It’s a five-star Italian restaurant—but don’t worry. I can cook any cuisine you want.”

“Sounds fancy. Why’d you leave?”

“It’s always been my dream to manage my own restaurant. But I was pretty far down on the seniority list at Renaldo’s. It would have taken me years to rise in the ranks. When Hannah offered me an opportunity to run my own kitchen, I couldn’t resist.”

Burke nods. “It’ll be nice havin’ a real chef in the kitchen. Two ladies from town have been helping out with meals since the lodge opened, and they do a decent enough job. I’m not complainin’, mind you. Beggars can’t be choosers, right? But

everyone's gettin' pretty sick of canned soup and cold sandwiches. It'll be real nice to have some hot food for a change."

I laugh. "I think I can help with that."

"Sure hope so," he mutters. "We don't need anything fancy—just hot. And maybe something homemade. I reckon the guests will sure like an upgrade."

He comes to a stop beside a battered red pick-up truck and sets my suitcase in the back bed. Then he takes my carry-on from me and sets it in the truck bed as well. He points to my backpack. "Want me to stow that for you?"

"Sure." I hand him my backpack, and he tucks it between my other two cases. Then he secures everything in place with a couple of bungee cords.

"This way," he says as he walks around to the front passenger door. He unlocks it and opens it for me. "Up you go. Need a hand?"

"No, thanks. I can manage." It's a big truck, and I have to use the hand grip to haul myself up into the cab.

By the time I've got my seatbelt buckled, he's already behind the wheel. He buckles his belt and starts the engine.

Burke grips the steering wheel with his right hand and backs the truck out of the parking spot. I find myself studying his hand. His skin is tan and weathered, and his knuckles are scarred, like he's been in a few fights in his lifetime or punched some walls. He's got a man's hands—used to hard work. I'll bet his fingers are calloused, the tips rough. At the thought, a tingle courses through me, and I mentally shake myself. “So, how far is it to the lodge?”

“An hour's drive.”

“My understanding is they arrange wilderness adventures for guests. Like rock climbing and hiking and camping, things like that?”

He nods. “And horseback riding. That's my job. I'm the stable master. I take care of the horses and take guests out on trail rides. The purpose of the excursions business is simply to fund the search and rescue efforts. That's where Hannah and Killian's passion really lies. Helping people.”

“Do you participate in rescues?”

“Sometimes. I'm no rock climber, but if we're searching the wilderness for a missing person, I often lead a search team on horseback.” He glances over at me. “Search and rescue is a

volunteer activity. The paying guests at the lodge fund the rescue operations.”

As we head west on the interstate, I study the landscape, watching as the city of Denver gradually turns into suburbs, and then the suburbs fall behind us to be replaced with open country. I can make out the Rocky Mountains in the distance, even this far away.

I’ve never seen mountains before—at least not in person. TV and movies don’t count. Right now they don’t seem as high as I expected, but I’m sure that’ll change as we get closer.

We ride in silence, which is fine with me. I check the time on my phone—it’s eight a.m., still early on a Friday morning. I’m tired from having gotten up at four to get to the airport in time for my flight. It’s been a long week, as I had a lot to do to prepare for this move—give away a lot of my stuff and donate the rest. I managed to downsize my entire life to fit into one 50-pound suitcase, a carry-on, and a backpack. Hannah told me they had a fully-furnished one-bedroom apartment all ready for me, so I decided not to bring much with me.

Everything I own is in the back of this truck.

As the miles pass, I find myself wondering if I made the right decision leaving my life behind and coming here to

basically start over.

I found it much harder to leave Chicago than I expected. I had to say goodbye to some dear friends—Beth, Sam, Lia, and all the McIntyre Security employees I’d gotten to know over the past few years. I am, however, looking forward to making new friends. It helps that I already know two people here in Colorado—Hannah McIntyre and her business partner and boyfriend, Killian Devereaux.

The road is smooth, the truck is thrumming along like a well-maintained, if aged, dinosaur. My eyelids grow heavy. I guess everything is catching up with me. I lean my head back on the headrest and close my eyes, just for a minute.

* * *

“Gabrielle?”

A resonant male voice brings me wide awake, and I sit up abruptly.

“We’re here,” the cowboy says as he points to the right side of the road.

As I tidy my hair, I realize I actually dozed off. *God, I hope I didn’t snore.* I study the landscape surrounding us and see nothing but trees. “It’s all forest.”

“Right here, yeah, but the trees thin out the higher the elevation.” He slows the truck as we approach a big wooden sign that says *McIntyre Wilderness Excursions*. “This is it.” He turns right onto a two-lane gravel road. “It’s also the home of McIntyre Search and Rescue. One thousand and twenty acres of pristine wilderness.” He points straight ahead. “The lodge is a mile up this road.”

From what I can see, it looks like we’re in the middle of nowhere. My first thought is, where will I get supplies—kitchen appliances, food, produce, and fresh meat and seafood? You know, all the things one needs to run a restaurant. “It seems a little isolated.”

Burke chuckles. “That’s kinda the point. Folks come here from all over the world to get away from their day-to-day lives and have a bit of adventure. They like the isolation. But don’t worry, town’s just a few minutes away.”

I sneak a glance at Burke out of the corner of my eye. I noticed he drives one-handed, his right hand gripping the steering wheel firmly. His left hand rests on his thigh. There’s a light dusting of hair on the back of his hand, and a couple of tendons move and flex as he steers. He wears a frayed, braided leather band around his wrist. This is a man used to hard

living, one who gets his hands dirty doing manual labor. For this city girl, that's a whole lot of sexy.

From where I'm sitting, I can see only the right side of his face, but what I can see I like. He has a handsome profile, a straight nose, and a strong jawline covered by a neatly trimmed beard and mustache the color of dark chocolate. I imagine his hair is the same color, but it's hard to tell with that cowboy hat perched on his head.

"Here we are," he says as we come around a bend.

My eyes widen when I catch my first glimpse of the lodge. I've seen pictures of it on their website, but it's far bigger in person than I imagined. "It's huge!" The lodge is a sprawling log structure with a high peaked entrance in the middle and a wing on each side. It reminds me of a fortress.

"For decades, it was a private huntin' club. Hannah and Killian bought it last year and have put a small fortune into updating the place."

Speaking of Killian and Hannah, I spot them standing together at the entrance, their arms around each other's waist. When Hannah waves eagerly, I return the gesture.

Hannah McIntyre and I know each other pretty well thanks to her frequent trips to Chicago to visit her close-knit family. Hannah's oldest brother, Shane McIntyre, is married to my dear friend Beth. I know Killian Devereaux, too, from when he worked for Shane in Chicago.

Last year, when Hannah went missing during a hike in the Rockies, Shane sent Killian Devereaux out here to head up a search and rescue mission. Killian found her all right—in fact, he rescued her from poachers who were dealing illegally in bald eagle feathers. He's been glued to her side ever since. It's pretty darn romantic if you ask me. I wouldn't mind being swept off my feet.

Burke pulls the truck up to the front of the entrance. As soon as the vehicle stops, Hannah and Killian walk out to greet us. When I jump down from my seat, Hannah throws her arms around me and gives me a bear hug.

"I'm so glad you're here," she says, tightening her grip. "We're so lucky to have you joining us."

"Yeah," Killian says as he walks up behind Hannah and lays his hands on her shoulders. "We're starving."

We all laugh, even Burke as he walks around to the back of the truck and reaches in for my luggage. "I'll carry her

things up to her apartment.”

“We just finished renovating the staff quarters,” Hannah tells me. “There are currently six furnished apartments in the lodge. You’ll be in number 3.”

“Thank you so much,” I say. “It’ll be really convenient to live so close to the restaurant.”

Hannah motions me toward the entrance. “Come. I’ll show you your apartment, and then I’ll give you the grand tour.”

The lodge entrance consists of a pair of massive, heavy double doors. They’re at least ten feet tall, made of glass panes framed by carved wooden panels depicting images of wolves, bears, and mountains.

Killian beats us to the doors and grasps a long brass handle to open one for us. We walk into a spacious lobby with a gift shop to the right, an impressive curved wooden staircase to the left that leads up to the second floor, and a check-in desk directly ahead. The interior walls are constructed of logs, and the ceiling high overhead is made up of exposed wooden beams. A large chandelier far overhead casts a warm light over the entire space.

“Here’s where the guests check in,” Hannah says as she points to the long wooden counter, where a dark-haired young woman and a young blond man are on duty. “That’s Tammy and Kevin—they’re in charge of guest relations. Tammy also helps out a lot in the restaurant. Guys, this is Gabrielle, our new kitchen manager.”

The two behind the counter smile and wave.

Hannah points to the hallway to our left. “The south wing houses the restaurant and the guest lounge on the ground floor. The staff apartments are directly upstairs.”

“It’ll take me a whole three minutes to get to work,” I say. “That sure beats my commute time in Chicago.”

Hannah points in the opposite direction. “The north wing houses the indoor recreation areas—the pool and sauna, a game room, and a snack room. We have eighty guest rooms on the first and second floors. Right now, we’re averaging about a twenty-five percent occupancy, but the rate is increasing steadily as word gets out.” She gestures to the staircase.

“Come, I’ll take you up and show you your apartment. Then we’ll go see the restaurant. I can’t wait to hear your ideas on what renovations it needs.”

I follow Hannah up the staircase to the second floor. At the top of the stairs is a lounge featuring plenty of seating—brown leather sofas and chairs arranged in small groupings—as well as bookcases filled with books and board games. There’s one long table in the center of the lounge that seats eight. The focal point, though, is an impressive stone hearth at one end of the room, with a wet bar beside it.

“This is the staff lounge,” Hannah says. “We often hang out here as a group to play games or watch movies. There’s another lounge downstairs for the guests.”

“How many people are on staff?” I ask.

“Well, with you here now, that brings us to fifteen so far.”

We continue down the hallway. “We combined two guest rooms to make each apartment.” She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a key, which she hands to me. “Here we are.” She stops in front of a door marked with a big brass number 3. “It’s all yours.” She gestures for me to unlock the door.

I open the door to find a beautiful, modern space. The lights are on, illuminating a living room and kitchen. “It’s gorgeous.”

Hannah smiles. “I’m glad you like it. Sophie oversaw the remodeling and the design.”

I’ve met Hannah’s older sister, Sophie, before. She’s an interior decorator in Chicago. “Well, she definitely outdid herself.”

“It’s a pretty standard open floor plan,” Hannah says. “Living room and kitchen here, and down the hallway is the bedroom and bathroom. The apartment is part of your compensation package, as are the utilities and Internet, so there’s no charge.”

My gaze sweeps the room. “You’ve thought of everything.”

The living room looks comfortable and inviting, but it’s the kitchen that catches my eye. The stainless-steel appliances are top-notch, as are the cherry cabinets and granite countertops. I open a few cupboard doors to find them filled with stylish glassware and plates. I check out the silverware drawer, as well as the cookware neatly organized in a cabinet next to the oven. Almost everything I could possibly need is already here. “It’s perfect, Hannah.”

I say *almost* because my set of chef’s knives is one of my most prized possessions, and I made sure I brought mine with

me from Chicago.

“Excuse me, Gabrielle,” Burke says from the open door.

“Where would you like me to put these?”

I turn to see him standing just inside the apartment, my two suitcases in hand. My backpack is slung over his shoulder.

“You can set them down there.”

I notice his head is turned slightly to the left, shadowed by the brim of his cowboy hat. I realize I’ve never seen his full face. It’s like he keeps the left side in the shadows on purpose.

Burke sets my luggage on the floor. “All right then. I’ll leave you two ladies to it.” And then he’s gone.

I’m a bit stunned by his abrupt departure. “Crap. I didn’t get a chance to thank him for the ride or for bringing up my luggage.”

Hannah pats my back. “No worries. You’ll see him again soon. You can thank him then.”

I roll my big suitcase into the bedroom. Hannah follows with my carry-on and backpack.

The bedroom is just as impressive as the rest of the apartment. The focal point is a cherry four-poster bed with a matching dresser and two bedside tables. The walls are painted

a soft gray, complementing the cream-colored comforter and pillows. “Remind me to call and thank Sophie,” I say.

After taking a few moments to freshen up in the bathroom, I join Hannah for a tour of the rest of the lodge. I’m dying to see the restaurant, of course, but I want to save that for last. We return to the ground floor and check out the pool and sauna, the game room, and the snack room.

“The kitchen is open for meals only during certain hours of the day,” Hannah says as we enter the snack room. “But guests are free to come in here any time they want for something to eat or drink.”

Refrigerated cases offer a variety of beverages—soft drinks, water, bottled teas, bottled cold coffees—as well as premade sandwiches, salads, yogurt, and desserts. There is also a single-serve coffeemaker, a kettle for tea, a microwave oven, and a display of chocolates and other candy.

When we return to the lobby, I happen to glance out the front doors and catch sight of Burke and Killian talking outside.

Killian says something to Burke, who nods. As Burke walks away, he takes off his hat and wipes his face on his sleeve.

I finally catch a glimpse of the left side of his face.

Oh, dear. What happened to you, Burke?

Chapter 2 – John

As I cross the gravel drive and head for the barn, my pulse is still racing. Normally, I'm a pretty calm and measured guy. Not much riles me up. But honestly, being around Gabrielle Hunter threw me for a loop. Yeah, Hannah told me to look for the prettiest redhead at the airport, but she was mistaken. I mean, yes, Gabrielle was most definitely the prettiest redhead at the airport, but what Hannah failed to mention is that Gabrielle is the type of woman who makes a man go weak in the knees.

Once I'm inside the barn, I take a moment to collect myself. I'm too old to be feelin' this way. I'm also too old for Ms. Hunter. She's probably in her late twenties, and I'm at least a decade older than she is, if not more.

Besides, an ugly monster like me would have no chance in hell with a goddess like her. I can just imagine how the single men will be hovering around her, like moths to a flame.

My thoughts are interrupted by a sharp whinny coming from the last stall on the right. "Yeah, I hear ya, buddy." I head down the center aisle. When I reach Zeus's stall, I reach over

the gate to scratch his neck. “Hold your horses, will ya?” And then I smile at my own joke.

I grab Zeus’s halter off the hook beside his nameplate with my left hand and unlatch his stall gate with my right. My gaze goes unerringly to the tight, puckered skin covering the back of my left hand. I should be used to seeing it by now. These burn scars are a decade old. Surely that’s plenty of time for me to come to grips with them. I’d planned for the Army to be a life-long career, but fate had other plans for me—namely an IED, improvised explosive device, in Afghanistan. I ended up with facial burns, a burned left hand, and shrapnel embedded in my left leg. After receiving a medical discharge, I came back home to heal my wounds, and eventually I ended up here.

As I lead him out of his stall, Zeus nudges me with his big black head.

“Yeah, I know, pal. It’s good to see you, too. Now let’s get you saddled. We’re takin’ some folks out for a morning trail ride.”

Zeus’s whinny reverberates through the barn.

Nora Ellison, my earnest young assistant, comes up behind me and pets Zeus’s forelock. “Hey, boss. The other horses are

saddled and ready to go. I left Zeus for you 'cause I know you prefer to saddle him yourself.”

Nora's a local girl, just twenty-two years old, who works here at the stables. She grew up on a horse ranch, and she's been riding since she was five. She's a natural around horses.

“Thanks, Nora.”

I lead Zeus down the aisle. I see Nora's got Zeus's blanket and saddle waiting for me.

About the time all five horses are saddled and ready, Killian leads two middle-aged couples out to the barn. The four of them are friends, up here from San Diego.

“This is John Burke, your trail guide,” Killian says as he introduces us. “This is Terry and Cindy Johnson, and Steve and JoAnn Pritchard.”

Nora already has four horses lined up and tied to hitching posts. After I assign each of the guests to a horse and go over the ground rules, Nora and I help them mount, and then I mount Zeus and lead us off.

My trail horses are well trained and good natured. I don't need eyes in the back of my head to know they're following the trail and keeping up with me. It's rare that a guest acts up

and causes problems, but it happens occasionally. But these folks are adults and seem a decent sort. They're also experienced riders.

This morning, we're going on a short, two-hour trail ride through the valley, across a slow-flowing stream, then up the other side. We'll be back in time for the tail end of the lunch period.

Speaking of lunch—I usually eat alone in my cabin, which is located on the other side of the barn, but for half a second, I contemplate showing up at the restaurant. It's not because I'm anxious to see Gabrielle again. I'm just curious to find out what she thinks of the place. From what I've seen of the kitchen—which dates back fifty years if a day—it's an outdated mess. And if I happen to get a glimpse of the pretty redhead again, well, that's just a lucky bonus, isn't it?

You're kiddin' yourself, Burke, if you think Gabrielle Hunter gives a rat's ass about you showing up. Don't waste your time.

Chapter 3 – Gabrielle

Hannah and I stop just inside the entrance to the restaurant so I can take it all in. The dining room is spacious. I count a few dozen walnut tables and comfortable looking chairs in the main eating area. There's a smaller dining room off to the left, with French doors leading out to a large outdoor seating area. The wood floors are worn, but they've been burnished over the years to a deep, golden brown. There are plenty of windows to let in natural light.

On the back wall is a long counter that serves as a buffet. Right now, there are a handful of people lined up to get their breakfasts.

Just inside the restaurant entrance is a podium, where a host would presumably stand to check in diners. Right now, there's no one on duty. Instead, there's a freestanding sign that says *PLEASE SEAT YOURSELF*.

“We're short staffed at the moment,” Hannah says. She smiles apologetically. “We all fill in as needed—Killian, me, Tammy and Kevin. Everyone, really. Once you decide how much staff you'll need to run the restaurant, we'll start hiring.”

“The dining room looks pretty good,” I say. “Is there a menu?”

Hannah points to a chalkboard on the wall beside us, where the day’s options are handwritten in a charming style. “Tammy writes up the menu. She’s got the best handwriting out of the bunch of us.”

I move closer so I can read it.

Breakfast – buffet (eggs, bacon, sausage links, toast, cereal)

Lunch – deli sandwiches (turkey and cheese, ham and cheese, or BLT) and potato chips

Dinner – Chicken noodle soup or chili

Dinner sides – side salad, mashed potatoes, steak fries, steamed broccoli, green beans, warm rolls with butter

Dessert – blackberry cobbler a la mode and brownies

Beverages – soft drinks and coffee; wine/beer for dinner

“Is this it?” I ask.

“Afraid so,” Hannah says.

“Does the menu change daily?”

Hannah shakes her head. “This is about all Nelle and Betty can manage.”

“Who?”

“Nelle and Betty,” Hannah says. “They’re two local ladies who kindly offered to work in the kitchen until we get it renovated. It’s a lot of work for two people to manage. They do the best they can.”

I stare at the incredibly limited menu. Just when I think things couldn’t get any worse, they do. Spectacularly. I’ll be starting from scratch here, pardon the pun. Everything needs to be revised—the menu, the staffing, and of course the kitchen itself. “As soon as I can go shopping, I’ll pick up some ingredients to cook some hot meals. Just easy stuff to start with—pot roast, chicken and dumplings, burgers, steaks. And of course pasta dishes—lasagna, fettuccine Alfredo, Bolognese. They’re sort of my specialty.”

Hannah’s eyes widen. “Oh, that would be fantastic. I know it’ll take a while before the kitchen gets renovated, but if you could cook some hot meals before then, the guests would really appreciate it. So would the staff.”

I nod, hoping I’m not promising more than I can deliver. “Sure. That should be doable. Where’s the best place for me to get groceries around here?”

“My friend Maggie Emerson owns the grocery store in Bryce. She can hook you up with whatever you need. There’s a butcher shop in town, too, and a farmers market two days a week, Saturdays and Wednesdays. So, there’s one tomorrow if you want to go check it out.”

“Great,” I say, giving her my best attempt at a confident smile. “That sounds perfect. Why don’t we take a look at the kitchen now?”

Hannah’s smile falls. “Okay. Just remember, it’s really outdated and, well, I guess you’ll see for yourself.”

We meander through the dining room and pass through a pair of swinging doors to enter the kitchen. I freeze at the sight of two silver-haired women working frantically to keep up.

Hannah follows me into the kitchen, keeping quiet as I look over the grill and the stoves and the ovens. Everything is rusted. There are two residential size refrigerators—not nearly big enough to run a restaurant. The one chest freezer is hardly big enough to do the job. The door to the sole dishwasher is hanging off its frame. There’s only one residential sink, and it doesn’t even have a sprayer.

“Where do you wash the dishes?” I ask, scanning the kitchen, hoping I’m missing something.

“In the sink.” Hannah points at it.

Good grief. How can they expect to run a kitchen of any size without a proper wash station with an industrial sprayer and a functioning dishwasher?

I take a look at the ovens and the cooktops. At least they have gas burners. The grill is a quarter of the size it should be. I pull out my phone and start taking pictures and jotting down notes.

How in the world has anyone been cooking in this kitchen?

I sigh.

“Is it that bad?” Hannah asks.

I look at her, but don't say anything. My dad always says, *If you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all.* I've always taken those words to heart.

Reality hits me like a splash of cold water in the face. I'm creating a restaurant from the ground up. *It's my dream, yes, but right now it feels more like a nightmare.* “Be careful what you wish for, right?” I murmur.

“I'm sorry, what?” Hannah asks.

“Nothing.” I tamp down a rush of anxiety. *I can do this.*

“Gabrielle, please say something.” Hannah looks worried. “Whatever you need, just say the word and we’ll get it. Tell us how much of a budget you need to renovate the kitchen. We want it to be modern and efficient, so you tell us what you need for equipment, new appliances, food. There’s a commercial kitchen supply company in Denver. They have a design staff, and they’ll do all of the installations.”

I give Hannah an encouraging smile to keep her from freaking out. “I’ll take some measurements and sketch out a design.”

It’s a good thing we saved the kitchen for last. If I’d seen the state it’s in before I saw all the beautifully renovated spaces, I might have headed right back to the airport. The kitchen is a hot mess. There’s no other way to describe it. I’ve never seen such old and outdated appliances.

“We thought you’d like to have a say in the updates,” Hannah says. She gives me an apologetic smile. “The truth is, Killian and I know nothing about kitchens. We don’t know what kind of equipment you’ll need or how much staff. We were hoping you could figure that part out.”

I nod, but don’t say anything. Right now, I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed. But I tell myself I’ve got this. I’ve been training

to run my own restaurant for the past six years. I have the skills and the knowledge. I can do this. I know I can.

I nod toward the two older ladies dressed in what looks like cafeteria uniform dresses and white aprons—what I remember the cafeteria staff wearing when I was in elementary school over two decades ago. They both have short, curly silver hair covered with netting and blue eyes. I'd guess them to be in their late sixties or early seventies.

“That’s Nelle and Betty,” Hannah says. “They’re sisters. They very kindly offered to help with feeding the guests until we hired a restaurant manager. We’re grateful to have their help.”

Hannah introduces us, and the sisters give me a warm welcome.

“Betty and I worked in the local elementary school cafeteria for forty years,” Nelle says. “We’re both retired, so it’s nice being useful again.”

“From what I’ve heard,” I say, “you’ve been doing a great job keeping folks fed. And I’d be really grateful if you’d stick around while I figure out what I’m doing.”

Betty nods. “Of course, honey. We’ll be glad to stay on as long as we’re needed. We don’t have anything else to do.”

“Speak for yourself,” Nelle says. “I have book club and bingo two nights a week—not at the same time, mind you.”

I nod. “Okay.” I push up my shirt sleeves. “I guess it’s time to get to work.” I glance across the counter separating the kitchen from the dining room and see that the breakfast rush seems to be coming to an end. There are a couple of guys sitting at a table, drinking coffee, and another guy is reading a newspaper. But that’s it.

“So,” I ask, “when can I expect the next influx of hungry guests?”

“Lunch is served from 11 to 2,” Betty says. She glances at a clock on the wall. “We have an hour to clean up after breakfast and start gettin’ the sandwiches made.”

“That’s not much time,” I say. “When’s dinner served?”

“From five to eight,” her sister adds.

“When John gets back,” Hannah says, “I’ll ask him to take you into town so you can visit the grocery store and the butcher shop.”

“John?” I ask. “Who’s John?”

Hannah gives me a funny look. “He picked you up at the airport.”

“Oh, you mean Burke?”

“Well, yes. Everyone calls him Burke, but his given name is John. He’s not much of a people person, but you probably already figured that out. He’s out on a trail ride right now with some guests. They should be back by one, and they’ll be hungry. Travis and Maya took a group of ten out hiking this morning. They’ll be back around the same time—also hungry. People tend to work up an appetite around here, especially when they’ve been outdoors. There’s another group of eight out for a wilderness camping trip, but we won’t see them back for another few days.”

“What do you think your guests would like to eat?”

Hannah shrugs. “They’re usually so hungry they don’t care, but I’d guess a varied menu. The obvious things like burgers and steaks. And comfort food, of course. Macaroni and cheese goes over really well, as does chicken and dumplings. Fried chicken, chicken tenders, pork tenderloin, pulled pork, country-fried steak. Sandwiches are always a hit at lunch time. We need to offer vegetarian options, as well as some vegan ones. We get all kinds of clientele from all over—

L.A., Seattle, Portland, Chicago, New York City, Atlanta, Miami—even from abroad. And for anyone who misses a meal time, we have self-serve items available twenty-four hours a day in the snack room you saw earlier.”

“I won’t have time to prepare anything for lunch, but if I can get to a grocery store this afternoon, I can have a homecooked meal ready for the dinner rush.”

Hannah reaches out to touch my arm. “Thank you, Gabrielle. Honestly, I was afraid when you saw what you had to work with you’d change your mind and return to Chicago.”

I chuckle. “I don’t back down easily from a challenge. This is what I’ve been working toward for years now—running my own kitchen. You’ll have to try harder than that to chase me off.”

“Thank you so much.” She looks utterly relieved. “If you’ll excuse me, I have some office work to attend to. If you need anything, just go to the front desk and ask Tammy or Kevin to track me or Killian down.”

“Will do.” I walk over to the buffet and pour myself a cup of coffee before I head into the kitchen. The first priority is for me to get better acquainted with Nelle and Betty. I’m sure they know more about this kitchen than anyone here.

“So, what’s the plan for lunch today?” I ask the ladies.

“Lunch today, and every day, is deli sandwiches,” Betty says. “And potato chips. For dessert, Nelle’s making brownies.”

“Can’t go wrong with those choices,” I say. “I’ll start with cleaning up the breakfast dishes. I’m hoping to go shopping this afternoon for groceries. I’ll plan to prepare something homecooked for dinner this evening.”

“That’ll be nice,” Nelle says. “I think folks are tired of eating canned soup.”

I stare at the counter piled high with dirty dishes, not to mention the pans soaking in the sink. “I’d better get on the dishes, while you two start on the sandwiches.”

* * *

The first two hours of the lunch rush are pretty quiet. But a little after one o’clock, just as I’m finishing up making some initial sketches for the kitchen renovation, I hear them before I see them. Eager, excited voices filter into the dining room from down the hallway. Four people walk into the restaurant, two men and two women. Wind-blown and a bit disheveled, they look like they had the time of their lives.

I greet them at the host podium. “Did you just get in from your ride?” I ask.

One of the women nods. “Yes, and now we’re starving.”

“You’ve come to the right place,” I tell them. “Follow me, and I’ll seat you.” That’s not hard to do as there’s hardly anyone in the restaurant at the moment, besides me, Nelle, Betty, and a few guests.

The two couples order two coffees and two Cokes. Two of them order the ham and cheese, one wants a BLT, and the other goes for a turkey and cheese sandwich. They all want chips and, of course, brownies.

While the ladies in the kitchen are filling their order, I bring a pitcher of ice water to the guests’ table. It’s funny, I never worked the front of the restaurant when I worked at Renaldo’s. I was always in the kitchen preparing dishes. But now that this is ostensibly *my* restaurant, I feel a sense of ownership and responsibility I’ve never experienced before. And I already like it.

Another swell of excited voices flows into the restaurant, and I go to greet the group of ten hikers and their two guides—a guy and a girl about my age, late twenties.

I push a few tables together to seat the group of twelve.

“You must be Gabrielle,” the girl says. She’s dressed in blue jeans, a hoodie, and a pair of very serviceable hiking boots. She appears Asian, although her accent is purely Midwest American. Her long black hair is pulled back in a ponytail. She’s petite and so gorgeous.

“Maya McKendrick,” she says as we shake hands. Her grip is firm and confident. She points across the room at the guy she came in with. “That’s Travis Hicks. We’re the climbers, but we also do hikes and overnight camping.”

Travis is maybe a few years older than Maya. He’s much taller, maybe six feet tall, with brown hair and a trim brown beard. He’s also dressed in blue jeans and hiking boots, along with a white T-shirt underneath a red-and-white plaid shirt.

“How was your hike?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Fine. We lost only two guests. I consider that a win.”

When my eyes go wide, she laughs. “We found them, of course,” she adds. “But it was touch and go for a while.” She rolls her eyes. “People don’t know how to follow directions anymore. How hard is it to *stay on the effing path?*”

I smile, already liking Maya. She reminds me of a good friend I left behind in Chicago.

As I'm the only one available to run the front of the restaurant, I work as quickly and efficiently as possible to take everyone's order and deliver meals and drinks. Once everyone is happily eating, I make my rounds with the pitcher of ice water and top off people's glasses.

Hannah and Killian pop in to grab a bite.

It's not until there's a lull in the lunch rush that I wonder where Burke is—John. He's got to be hungry, too. But then I remember Hannah telling me he's not much of a people person. Maybe he prefers not to eat in the restaurant.

Once everyone is done eating and leaves the restaurant, I pack up a carry-out lunch consisting of a BLT sandwich, a bag of chips, and a couple of brownies. I leave the kitchen in the very capable hands of Nelle and Betty, who are cleaning up after the lunch rush and looking ahead to the dinner plans, and head down to the front desk.

Tammy's on duty and currently looking at her phone. Her black hair is cut short, and she has a septum ring and an eyebrow piercing. "Hey, Tammy. Do you know where I can find John?"

“Who?”

“John. Burke?”

“Oh, him. Yeah. He’s either in the horse barn or at his cabin. The cabin’s just past the barn. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks.” I turn and head out the main doors. The barn and a huge fenced-in pasture are located across the gravel drive to my right.

As I approach the barn, I notice a group of horses grazing out in a field. I pause at the wooden fence a minute to study them. Then I move on to the barn. I find a side door that’s unlocked, so I let myself in. The interior of the barn is cool and smells like a mixture of sweet grain, the tang of horse sweat, and leather.

“John? Are you in here?”

I walk down the center aisle, glancing at the horses in the stalls on both sides of me. I do a quick headcount—there must be at least two dozen horses here. Most of these appear to be quarter horses. There are a few palominos, a bay, and one huge black horse at the end of the row. I know my horses. I used to collect horse figurines when I was kid, during my *I want a*

pony phase. Fortunately for my parents, I eventually outgrew that stage.

There's a light on in what I presume is the tack room. The door is ajar, and I hear faint country music coming from inside. I push open the door and poke my head inside. "John—oh, sorry." I quickly back out of the room and look away.

"Shit!" comes his muffled response, followed by a rustle of clothing.

"I'm so sorry," I say loud enough to be heard through the door. "I should have knocked."

I got a bit of an eyeful. It wasn't anything R-rated—he had his jeans on—but I got a good look at his bare chest as I caught him in the act of changing his shirt. I saw lots of skin, golden and tanned, and well-defined muscles. I couldn't miss the bold tattoos above his pecs, leading up to his broad shoulders. I also noticed a silver chain around his neck and a pair of dog tags. Former military, I'd guess.

But that's not all I noticed. His hat was off, and I finally got a really good look at his face—all of it. The left side of his face was badly burned at some point. His left hand is scarred, too. *The poor guy.* "I brought you some lunch. I figured you'd be hungry after your ride."

My cheeks are burning. As a redhead, I'm not good at hiding blushes.

The door swings open and John steps out. He has a different shirt on, and his cowboy hat is perched on his head once more, and there's a leather glove on his left hand. He subtly positions himself so that I see only the right side of his face.

I hand him the bag. "You didn't come to lunch."

He shakes his head. "I was busy."

"Well, I brought you something anyway."

"Thanks. Everyone calls me Burke, by the way."

"I noticed. Is it all right if I call you John? Calling you by your last name seems so impersonal."

He shrugs. "Suit yourself."

He's not a man of many words.

I point back toward the door I came in. "Well, I guess I'll leave you to your lunch then."

As I turn to walk away, he says, "Thanks for the food, Gabrielle." He adds my name as if it's an afterthought.

I glance back at him. "You're welcome, John."

As I walk back to the lodge, I can't help feeling sorry for him. Whatever happened, it must have been awful. I wonder if his leg was burned, too. That would explain the limp.

When I return to the lodge, I run into Hannah and Killian just as they are coming out the front doors.

"There you are," Killian says, waving me down. "Just the person I wanted to see. Would you like to go into town and meet Maggie Emerson? She owns the grocery store. You can check out the butcher's shop, too."

"And while you're at it," Hannah says, "pop into the diner to say hi to Jennie. She's an amazing baker. You might want some of her cakes and pies for the restaurant. And next to the diner is Ruth's Tavern. Stop in and see her if you have time. Jennie and Ruth, and of course Maggie, are good friends of mine. They're anxious to meet you."

"I would love to meet your friends," I say.

"I'll ask Burke to drive you into town," Killian says. "We have a spare Jeep for you to use, but it's in the shop at the moment getting brakes and tires. It should be ready for you in a few days." Killian points to a wooden bench outside the lodge doors. "Have a seat. I'll let Burke know you're ready. He'll pick you up here."

“Thanks.” As I take a seat, I find myself watching in the direction of the barn for a certain surly cowboy to appear.

Chapter 4 – John

My heart is still thudding somethin' fierce. I wasn't expecting *her*—I wasn't expecting anyone. I keep a spare change of clothes in the tack room so I can change after a hot ride without having to go to my cabin. I guess I should have closed the door, maybe even locked it.

I hate that she saw my scars. It's not that I'm ashamed of them. I just wish *she* hadn't seen them. I hate knowing she saw how disfigured I am.

Thanks to Nora's help, the horses that went out on the trail ride have all been taken care of, so I might as well head to my cabin to eat this lunch. I am hungry. It was awful nice of her to bring me something to eat. I can't remember the last time somebody did that for me.

I exit out the back of the barn and walk across the yard to the cabin I call home. It's a one-and-a-half story log cabin, nothing fancy. The downstairs is one open room with a sitting area, a wood stove, and a kitchen. A bathroom, too. Upstairs is a bedroom and another bathroom. When I hired on here, Hannah and Killian gave me the choice of this cabin or one of the renovated staff apartments. I chose the cabin, hands down.

The less I have to do with people, the better. Plus I'm closer to the horses. I'll hear if there's any trouble in the night.

I climb the wooden steps up to the front porch and let myself into the cabin. It's sparsely furnished, but perfectly comfortable, and it's enough for me. I've even got a TV and Internet. I set the bag of food on the dining table, then head to the fridge to grab a cold bottle of Coke. I plant myself on a chair and open the bag. It's the usual lunch fare—a sandwich, chips, and brownies. The brownies are still warm, and I eat one of them first. I have a sweet tooth, and I'm a sucker for dessert.

Next, I annihilate the sandwich, washing it down with gulps of ice-cold Coke. It's not bad for a sandwich, really, but I'm curious to find out what will be on offer after Gabrielle has a hand in developing a full menu. I don't want to get too excited, but I'm looking forward to having some hot, homecooked meals.

About the time I'm done eating, there's a knock at my door. "Come in."

The door swings open, and Killian steps inside. "Did you get something to eat?"

I nod. “Gabrielle brought me some lunch since I didn’t make it to the dining room.”

“Really?” Killian raises a brow. “That was nice of her. Speaking of Gabrielle, I was wondering if you’d take her into town and introduce her to Maggie. Show her where the butcher’s shop is and introduce her to Jennie and Ruth.”

“Me?”

He nods. “Yeah, you. Why not?”

“Why not Hannah? Or Maya or Travis?”

“Well, because they’re all busy. Besides, she’s already met you. She doesn’t really know anyone else. She’ll also be wantin’ to go to the kitchen supply store in Denver early next week so she can order new appliances for the kitchen. I’d like you to drive her.”

“Me?”

Killian gives me an odd look. “Yes, you. Have you got a problem with it?”

“No. I just thought Maya or—”

“Maya and Travis are booked solid all week. You’re the only one with any free time, so I’d appreciate it if you’d show Gabrielle around. Introduce her to Maggie and the other ladies

in town. We need to make a good impression, Burke. We want her to like it here so she'll stay. Bryce is a far cry from Chicago, if you know what I mean.”

Sighing, I nod. “Fine. I just figured if you wanted to make a good impression on her, you'd ask someone else.”

Grinning, Killian shakes his head. “Thanks for helpin' out.” He points toward the door. “I've got to get back.” He pauses on the threshold. “Oh, she's ready, by the way. Gabrielle. She's just waitin' on you. I left her sitting on one of the benches outside the lodge.”

I shoot to my feet. “Why didn't you say so before now?” I grab a napkin and wipe my mouth. “I don't want to keep her waiting.”

I run upstairs to grab a five-minute shower and brush my teeth. When I come back down, Killian is gone.

“I can't believe he left her waiting out there,” I mutter as I grab my keys, wallet, and phone and head over to the lodge.

I spot Gabrielle right where Killian said she'd be—sittin' outside the lodge. It's not hard to spot her from a distance, not with her distinctive red hair. Well, it's sort of a soft red, almost orange really. She's got freckles, too, the color of cinnamon.

Damn, she's pretty. She's probably the prettiest girl I've ever met.

When she spots me approaching, she stands and smiles, waving at me. She changed her clothes since I picked her up this morning at the airport, and her hair is pulled back into a single braid. I swear she looks even younger with her hair like that.

Too young for the likes of me.

"Thanks for agreeing to show me around town," she says. She seems genuinely excited at the prospect.

I tip the brim of my hat. "My pleasure."

Her smile widens, and the corners of her eyes crinkle. I stare at those crystal-clear green pools, pristine like the water up at Pine Lake. My chest tightens.

I make a mental note to ream Killian's ass for makin' me do this.

I point to my truck, which is parked a few feet away.

"Ready to go?"

"You bet." She's practically bouncing on her toes. "Lead the way."

Once we're in the truck and heading toward town, I remember my manners. "Thanks for bringin' me some lunch. It was really good."

She grins wryly. "It'll do in a pinch. I can't wait to establish a proper menu. You'll have lots of choices then."

"Besides cold sandwiches and canned soup?"

She grins. "Yes."

"Such as?"

"Well, steaks and burgers, meatloaf, fried chicken, pot roast—"

"Pot roast? Really?"

"Yes. Salmon, some pasta dishes—that's my specialty. You should try my Bolognese sauce. It's epic. My Alfredo is good, too. And I make an outstanding lasagna."

"That's a lot of dishes."

"That's only the half of it. It's doable once the kitchen is upgraded and I have an adequate staffing level. But that's assuming I can source the ingredients I need."

It's just a ten-minute drive to Bryce. I slow down as we approach what passes for a downtown here.

“I’m afraid it’s not much,” I admit as I drive slowly past the shops. “Just these three blocks.”

Her gaze is glued to the businesses we pass.

“There’s Emerson’s Grocery Store. They have good produce and fresh seafood. The butcher’s shop is two blocks that way.”

“What about the farmers market?”

“That’s held in the church parking lot on Wednesdays and Saturdays, nine to four.”

“So, there’s one tomorrow?” She looks at me with a hopeful glint in her eye.

“I don’t suppose you’d want to go.”

“I’d love to. Killian told me he has a Jeep I can drive, but I guess it’s in the shop right now for maintenance. I’ll need a ride.”

I sigh. I know what I’ll be doin’ tomorrow. “I have a trail ride scheduled for tomorrow afternoon, but I’ve got some free time in the morning. I’ll take you.”

“Thank you! It’s a date.” She grins. “Well, you know what I mean.”

“I do.” I park in front of Emerson’s and shut off the engine. “We might as well start here. Hopefully Maggie’s in today. She and her husband take turns manning the store.”

We get out of the truck and walk inside. Immediately, I spot Maggie behind the sales counter ringing up a sale. “Hey, Maggie,” I say when she’s free. “This is Gabrielle Hunter, the new—”

Maggie comes tearing around the sales counter the instant she hears Gabrielle’s name. “Oh, my God, you’re actually here!” Gabrielle holds her hand out to shake, but Maggie’s havin’ none of that. She pulls Gabrielle in for a hug. “I’m so glad to finally meet you. Hannah’s been talking about nothing else for the past month. I feel like I already know you.” She laughs. “Hannah’s so excited to finally get the restaurant off the ground. You are a godsend, that’s for sure.”

“I’m excited to be here,” Gabrielle says.

“So, what brings you in today?” Maggie asks.

Gabrielle nods to me. “John offered to give me a tour of town and introduce me to folks. And while I’m here, I’d like to pick up some ingredients for dinner tonight.”

“*John?*” Maggie grins at me.

“Apparently, Gabrielle’s offended by the idea of calling me Burke.” But the truth is, I really don’t mind what Gabrielle calls me. She can call me anything she likes. I scan the store looking for Maggie’s husband. “Is Owen around?”

“He’s at home doing daddy duty.” To Gabrielle, she says, “We have a two-month-old daughter, Claire.”

The door opens and Maggie’s 18-year-old son, Ryan, walks in. “Hey, Mom. Owen said you needed help unpacking some deliveries.”

Maggie points to the back of the store. “Boxes are in the storeroom. Thanks, honey. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem,” the kid says as he shuffles off to the back of the building. He tosses me a wave. “Hey, Burke.”

“Hey, Ryan,” I say.

“So, what can I help you with?” Maggie asks Gabrielle.

“I’ll be building a menu for the restaurant, and what I can make depends a lot on what ingredients I can source. I’m hoping to purchase locally, and preferably organic.”

“I can help you with a lot of that. With the amount of food you’ll be buying, I can give you a decent discount.” Maggie

motions for Gabrielle to follow her. “Come on, I’ll show you the produce department.”

I point toward the back of the store. “While you ladies talk vegetables, I’ll lend Ryan a hand with the boxes.” Making my escape, I head for the storage room. “Need some help?” I ask Ryan.

The kid nods. “Sure. How about opening up these boxes so I can unload them?”

I pull a pocketknife out of my back jeans pocket and start slicing open boxes.

“So, who’s the hot redhead?” Ryan asks, trying to sound nonchalant as he unpacks a box of toilet paper.

I freeze, the knife embedded in the top seam of a box. “Watch it, kid. She’s *Ms.* Hunter to you. She works for Hannah and Killian, so unless you want them breathin’ down your neck, I’d mind my manners if I were you. And as far as you’re concerned, don’t call her *hot* or *the redhead*. It’s disrespectful.”

“I didn’t mean anything rude by it,” Ryan says a bit sullenly. “I just meant she’s pretty.”

“She’s also too old for you, so forget it.”

Ryan scoffs as he stacks packages of toilet paper onto a cart. “Age is just a number. Besides, I think older girls are hot—I mean attractive. I’m not an ageist. How old do you think she is? Like twenty?”

Now it’s my turn to scoff. “Try closer to twenty-eight or twenty-nine. Like I said, she’s too old for you.”

“That old, huh?” Ryan gives me a calculated look. “Then that means she’s too *young* for *you*.”

I stand there speechless as Ryan rolls the cart of toilet paper out into the store. My mouth falls open, but I haven’t got a comeback to save my life, not that it would do me any good since the kid’s already out of earshot. Am I being so obvious that a teenager can see right through me?

I’m not—she’s not—oh, hell.

Chapter 5 – Gabrielle

“All this is organic and local?” I’m pointing at bins of fresh berries. I’m impressed that a lot of the produce here is grown locally, and much of it is organic. “If I give you an order for a week’s worth of food at the beginning of the week, do you think you can fill it?”

“It shouldn’t be a problem. And if there’s anything in particular you’re looking for, just give me a couple days’ notice, and I can probably source it for you. I know all the ranchers and growers around here. They’re more than happy to accommodate special orders. Especially when they know there’s a new restaurant in town.”

“This is fantastic, Maggie. Thank you.”

Maggie’s son comes out of the storage room pushing a cart filled with a mountain of toilet paper packages. He rolls the cart right up to us. “You’re Gabrielle, right?” he asks.

“Yes. And you’re Ryan? Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Maggie says. “I didn’t properly introduce you two. Gabrielle, this is my oldest son, Ryan. Ryan, Gabrielle is the new restaurant manager at the lodge.”

“Nice to meet you, Gabrielle,” Ryan says. He offers me his hand.

John comes out of the storage room as we’re shaking hands. When he shakes his head at us, I feel like I’m missing out on something.

While I’m here, I pick up some ingredients for a quick meal I can make this evening—fettuccine Alfredo with grilled chicken. Besides the chicken and the pasta, I grab parmesan, butter, heavy cream, and fresh garlic to make garlic bread. I buy out Maggie’s entire stock of French bread. She kindly offers to keep my perishable groceries in a refrigerated case until we’re ready to return to the lodge.

John joins us at the sales counter as Maggie rings up my purchase.

“Here you can use my card,” John says, handing Maggie a credit card. “It’s for the business. I’ll remind Killian to give you one, too.”

John picks up my sack of nonperishable groceries and carries them out to the truck, where he sets them in a large plastic tub in the bed. He points to our right. “This way to the butcher’s.”

We walk two blocks to Ed's Meat Shoppe, passing a dry cleaner, a realtor's office, a thrift shop, and an antiques shop. It looks like they've got a little bit of everything here.

When we reach the butcher's shop, John opens the door for me. "Ryan Emerson is a senior in high school," he says tersely. "Just thought you should know."

"Okay." I'm taken aback by his comment, not sure why he'd feel the need to tell me what grade Ryan is in. Unless—*oh, my God. No way.* He couldn't possibly think I'd have any romantic interest in a teenager.

A man standing behind the tall glass counter smiles at us. "Hi, there. I'm Ed." He's wearing a white apron over his street clothes. "Welcome. You must be the new chef at the lodge. Have a look around. See what I've got in the cases. If there's anything in particular you're looking for, just let me know and I'll see if I can get it for you."

"Thanks, Ed." I give him a smile before I start perusing the inventory.

While I'm looking around, John and Ed get into a conversation about fly fishing, all of which goes right over my head.

After I've looked at everything on display, I return to the two men. "I'm hoping I can send you a weekly order for fresh meat for the restaurant."

He nods. "Absolutely. I'll be happy to have your business. I work with all the local farmers, so if there's something particular you want, just let me know, and I'll get it."

"Thanks. I'm primarily interested in organic fed and pasture raised. Can I find that around here?"

"Sure you can. Local, free range, grass fed, grass finished—not a problem."

Ed hands me his business card, and I tuck it into my purse. I've made two important connections in town so far. Things are looking good.

After we say our goodbyes to Ed, John and I head back outside.

"What's next?" I ask.

"I'm supposed to introduce you to Jennie and Ruth. They're both real good friends of Hannah and Maggie. I know Hannah would like you to meet them. You know, sisterhood and all that."

It's just two blocks back the way we came to the diner and the tavern. Conveniently, they're located next to each other in the center of downtown, right next to Maggie's grocery store. When we arrive at the diner, John opens the door for me, and I step inside. Immediately I'm in heaven. It smells incredible in here.

It's three in the afternoon, so there's not a huge crowd. It looks like we're between the lunch and dinner rush.

"Hiya, Burke!" calls a pretty brunette from behind the counter. She smiles at John, and then her curious gaze drifts over to me. She's in the middle of refilling a customer's coffee cup. "Hold on. I'll be right with you guys."

The woman comes around from behind the counter. She's wearing a pink-and-white striped apron over her blue jeans and a floral top. She smiles at me like we're long-lost friends. "Gabrielle."

I nod. "Yes." I expect her to shake hands, but no.

She pulls me in for a hug. "I'm Jennie Lopez," she says. "Any friend of Hannah's is a friend of mine." After she releases me, she asks John, "How's everything out at the lodge?"

He nods. “Just fine. All guests were accounted for at lunch.”

Jennie laughs. “I should hope so.” She looks at me. “The joke around town is that if Hannah and Killian lose any of their guests in the mountains, they can send their own search and rescue team out to look for them.” She winks at me. “Sounds like a conflict of interest to me.”

Jennie returns to the other side of the counter. “How about some coffee and pie? It’s on the house. Or a donut? I’ve still got a few left over from this morning.”

I sit on a counter stool covered in sparkly red vinyl. “Do you make them yourself?”

She nods. “The donuts? The pies? Cakes? I sure do.” She nods to a three-tier glass display case. On the bottom shelf is a plate holding several iced donuts. The other two shelves hold slices of pie and cake on dessert plates. “Baking is my passion.”

“I’ll have some of that,” John says, pointing to a slice of what looks like coconut cream pie.

Jennie opens the display case, pulls out the plate, and hands it to John. Then she hands him a set of silverware rolled

up in a white paper napkin. “How about you, Gabrielle?” she asks.

“Sure. I’ll take a slice, too.”

“Coconut cream, apple, or cherry? I’m fresh out of the peanut butter. That one’s always a big hit, but it’s gone by the end of lunch.”

“I’ll have the coconut, if you don’t mind.” She hands me my pie, and I take a bite. “*Ohmygod.*” I moan as I savor my first bite. “This is so good.”

I can hear John chuckling.

Jennie pours us each a cup of coffee. “Cream and sugar are on the counter.”

“Will you sell me some of your baked goods?” I ask.

“Why reinvent the wheel, right? I’d love to buy some for the lodge.”

“Sure, I’d be happy to bake for you. Just give me a few days’ notice, and I’ll bake extra.” She pulls a business card out of her apron pocket. “Here’s my number. Just text me your orders. I can bake pies, cookies, cakes, whatever you want.”

“You need to try her carrot cake,” John says. “It’s wicked good.”

After we finish our pie and coffee and thank Jennie for her generous hospitality, we head next door to the tavern.

“Tell Ruthie I said *hi*,” Jennie says as we walk out the door.

This time of day, there aren’t many people in the bar.

“Hey, Teddy,” John says to the young man mopping the wood floor. “Is Ruth in?”

The kid turns toward the back of the bar and yells, “Ruth! Burke and some lady are here to see you.”

“Gee, thanks,” John says to the boy. “I could have done that.”

The boy shrugs as he continues mopping.

A set of half doors behind the bar swings open, and out walks a stunning woman with a single long braid of silky black hair. Her skin is burnished a deep golden hue with hints of auburn. Her eyes are as black as obsidian. Clearly, she’s Native American.

“You must be Gabrielle,” she says to me in a low, sultry voice. Like Jennie, she doesn’t stand on ceremony. She pulls me into a brief hug. When she releases me, she looks me

directly in the eye and says, “Welcome to Bryce. We’re glad you’re here.”

I feel the sincerity behind her words. “Thank you.”

“Can I get you two something to drink?” Ruth asks. “It’s a bit early, but who cares? It’s five o’clock somewhere, right?”

“Not for me, thanks,” John says as he pats his stomach.

I laugh. “Can I take a rain check? I just had a slice of pie and some coffee next door. I’m stuffed.”

Ruth nods. “Any time. And I certainly understand. I wouldn’t pass up an opportunity to have a slice of one of Jennie’s pies.” She gestures back toward the bar. “If you don’t mind, I’ve got some beer mugs to dry.”

John and I sit on barstools while Ruth takes her place behind the counter and gets to work. There’s a TV on in the back corner of the bar playing a baseball game, but the volume is off.

“So,” Ruth says to me. “You left the big city to come out west to the mountains. What do you think so far?”

“It’s beautiful out here. And from what I’ve seen of the lodge, it’s incredible. I haven’t seen much of the mountains yet, mostly just forest.”

Ruth nods to John. “You heard her, Burke. Take her sightseeing up in the mountains.” She looks at me. “Do you ride?”

“Horses, no.” Laughing, I shake my head. “Only in my childhood fantasies.”

Ruth gives John an enigmatic smile. “Then you’ll have to teach her how to ride, Burke.”

“You know, I think I’ll take you up on that beer after all, if you don’t mind,” he says. “Tap.”

“Sure thing, cowboy.” Ruth fills a glass and hands it to him.

Ruth and I chat, and she invites me to come with Hannah to the next GNO—girls’ night out.

After he finishes his beer, John checks the time. “I guess we’d better get you back to the restaurant so you can make your dishes in time for supper.”

We thank Ruth and head back out to the truck.

As we’re walking back to the truck, I cross to his left side. Now I have an unrestricted view of the left side of his face. Even shaded as it is by the brim of his hat, I can easily make out the tight, puckered skin that covers his cheek and jaw.

Parts of his beard are missing on that side of his face. I imagine the hair follicles were destroyed. Whatever happened to him, it only affected his left side. When he catches me looking at his face, he frowns.

Without a word, he unlocks my door first, then walks around to the driver's side. He still looks unhappy when he climbs up into the driver's seat. Without a word, he starts the engine and backs out of the parking space into the road.

Would it be wrong of me to ask what happened to him? I don't know the proper etiquette in a situation like this. Would that be rude? I'm curious about him, and I want to know more, but I don't want to offend him or make him uncomfortable.

"Are you okay to drive?" I ask, instead of what I really want to ask—*what happened to you?*

He side-eyes me. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You drank a beer."

He chuckles. "It was just one. I assure you, I'm fine to drive."

"Okay. I was just asking. Thanks for the tour and for introducing me to your friends."

He nods. “No problem. And they’re Hannah’s friends, not mine.”

“I don’t know about that. They seemed to like you well enough. I’ll be placing some orders soon with Maggie and Jennie. When they’re ready, would you mind driving me into town to pick them up? Assuming the Jeep isn’t available yet.”

“Sure,” he says, sounding more than a little reluctant. “I’ll check on the Jeep. See if I can do anything to hurry it up.” He points down the road. “It’s at Micah’s Auto Repair, which is half a mile down the road.”

“Thanks.” Unfortunately, I can’t help feeling like he’s only too eager to be rid of me.

We’re back at the lodge in no time. John parks near the front doors, and I hop out. He meets me at the back of the truck and retrieves my grocery bags.

“Do you need help carrying those in?” he asks.

“No, I’ve got it. Thanks. And thanks for the ride.”

He nods. “No problem. I guess I’ll see you in the mornin’ if you still want a ride to the farmers market.”

Oh, right. I’d forgotten about that. I’m surprised he even brought it up. “I do, thanks. If you don’t mind taking me.”

He shakes his head. "I don't mind."

I watch as he walks toward the barn. His limp is more pronounced now.

"What happened to you, John Burke?" I murmur to myself.

Chapter 6 – John

I'm restless when I step into the barn. After I see to the horses, I decide to clean all the tack. *All of it*. Because that'll take me *hours* and I need somethin' to do. Somethin' besides fixating on the *hot redhead*.

I knew I was in trouble when I wanted to flatten Ryan Emerson for calling Gabrielle hot. I was jealous and angry at a teenager when I had no right to be. First of all, it's a free country, and he's allowed to think what he wants. And secondly, it's none of my damn business what Ryan—or any other guy for that matter—thinks of Gabrielle. As long as they're respectful of her, of course. I'd never stand for any disrespect.

But that's where it ends. She's none of my business. Not one damn bit.

I shouldn't have had that beer at Ruth's, because now I want another one. And then another. Or maybe something stronger. I remember what it felt like to drink myself into oblivion. God knows I did that often enough when I got out of rehab, once my burns had started to heal.

But burns like these—no matter how many reconstruction surgeries I had, the evidence remains, visible to anyone with eyesight.

And now I've got Gabrielle looking at my scars. I'm sure she wonders what the hell happened to me.

I shake myself mentally. "Stop whining."

No more alcohol.

Clean the damn tack.

Then clean it again.

Then muck all these stalls and lay down fresh straw. Change out the water buckets in the stalls, then change the water in the troughs. Maybe if there's time before dark, I'll saddle Zeus and ride up to the Murray Trailhead—just to inspect the path. I'm takin' a group up that way next week. We had a lot of rain earlier in the week, so I should make sure none of the trail has been washed out. Yeah, that's what I'll do. I'll take Zeus out.

Six-thirty p.m. rolls around, and I'm starving. I've been working hard nonstop since getting back from town, and now my stomach is eating a hole in itself. That slice of pie at

Jennie's didn't hold me for long. I should go to the lodge for dinner, but I don't want to face Gabrielle.

Most women I meet avoid my gaze. Hell, they avoid looking at me altogether. But not Gabrielle. She *looks*. Sometimes she stares. And the unsettling thing is, it doesn't seem to be out of morbid curiosity or disgust. No, she looks at me like a woman looks at a man she thinks she might be interested in. And that scares the shit out of me because, honestly, I'd give my left nut for her to be interested in me.

As I'm mucking one of the stalls, I hear a brisk knock and turn to see Killian standing behind me.

"How's it goin'?" he asks.

"Fine. Just muckin' some stalls."

"Gabrielle made fettuccine Alfredo with grilled chicken for dinner tonight."

"So I heard."

"Word's gettin' around fast, so you'd better get in there before it's all gone."

The temptation is great, but mostly because I want to see the chef again. "Thanks, but I'll grab something in my cabin. I

was thinking of taking Zeus up the Murray trail a bit, to make sure none of it's washed out."

"Seriously, Burke, it's fettuccine Alfredo. She made garlic bread, too."

"That's okay. I'm good." My stomach proves otherwise when it lets out a deep growl. Hopefully Killian didn't hear that.

"How was the trip into town?" he asks.

"Fine."

"Gabrielle met Maggie? And Jennie and Ruth?"

"Yep. And Ed, too. Oh, and Ryan Emerson. Let's not forget Ryan."

Killian gives me an odd look. "Ryan Emerson?" he asks, obviously confused.

"Don't ask."

"Gabrielle mentioned you're driving her to the farmers market in the morning."

I shrug. "Somebody has to. Did Micah say when he'd be done with the Jeep?"

"He said Monday at the earliest, maybe Tuesday. Why?"

“She needs her own damn set of wheels, that’s why. So I don’t have to be her personal chauffeur.” Those words came out a bit harsher than I’d intended.

“You don’t want to drive her?” Killian frowns. “All right. I’ll do it.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll do it.”

“Good. And don’t forget about driving her into Denver to the kitchen supply store. I don’t want her makin’ that trip alone. Not until she knows her way around the area.”

“I said I would.” I lean my shovel against the stall wall, probably harder than was necessary. “Killian, is there somethin’ you need? Because I’m busy *working* here.”

“No, dat’s it.” His Cajun accent slips through. “I was just checkin’ on ya.” He crosses his arms over his chest and gets that mulish expression I’m so familiar with. The one he wears when he’s arguin’ with Hannah. “Go get you some of dat fettuccini, Burke. It’s not a suggestion. It’s an order.”

Yep, his Cajun is comin’ through loud and clear. He’s riled up.

“Fine!” I stalk past him as I head for the exit.

Killian follows me out of the barn and across the parking lot to the front entrance of the lodge.

When I stop at the doors, he stops too. “I don’t need an escort to dinner,” I say.

“I’m hungry, too. I thought I’d eat with you. Hannah and I were tied up all evenin’ with the accountant, so I haven’t eaten yet.”

“All right, fine.”

We walk inside and head straight for the restaurant. As we get close, the hum of chatter fills the air. It sounds like the restaurant is doing a good bit of business this evening.

Tammy’s on duty at the host podium. “Just you two handsome fellas?”

“Yes,” I say, making a point of not biting her head off. What I want to say is, *Do you see any other people with us?* But I don’t. Because that would be rude. And I don’t want to be rude in Gabrielle’s restaurant—she might hear me.

“Just us,” Killian says, giving Tammy a friendly smile.

“Come with me, guys,” she says, and she leads us to a corner table near the French doors that lead out onto the deck,

where there are lots of picnic tables for those wanting to dine outside.

“Aren’t you going to take your hat off?” Killian asks as we take our seats.

I shake my head, but don’t say anything.

“Things are looking up,” Killian observes. “Pasta tonight. And who knows what she’ll make next. Gabrielle said she’s going to get some of Jennie’s pies.”

“That’s right, I am,” Gabrielle says as she walks up to our table. “Why reinvent the wheel, right? I’m a chef, not a baker.” She bites back a grin. “Hello, gentlemen,” she says in a cool, professional voice. “I’m Gabrielle. I’ll be your server tonight.”

“You sure are a multitasker,” Killian says. “Both chef and server. I’ll have the fettuccini. Please tell me there’s some left.”

When Gabrielle smiles, her entire face lights up. Her soft pink lips curve up, revealing little dimples in the corners.

“You’re in luck,” she says. “Do you want grilled chicken with that, steamed broccoli, and garlic bread?”

“Please, God, yes,” Killian says.

Then she turns to me. “And you, sir? What can I get you?”

I bite back a smile. I like this playful side of her. “You had time to make all that just since we got back from town?”

She nods. “Pasta and grilled chicken don’t take long.”

“I’ll have the same as Killian, thanks.”

“What can I get you guys to drink?” she asks.

“I’ll have a Coke,” Killian says.

She watches me expectantly, waiting for my answer. I’m tempted to ask for a beer, but I know I’d better not. During my rehabilitation period, I got in trouble relying too much on alcohol to get me through the rough patches. Now I’m afraid it might be a slippery slope for me, and I can’t risk it. It’s one thing to *want* a drink from time to time, but when I think I *need* one—that’s scares me. “I’ll have the same.”

Gabrielle brings our Cokes out right away. And fortunately, we don’t have to wait long for our dinners, which is good because my stomach is turning on itself.

I take a bite of the pasta Alfredo and moan. It’s incredible. The chicken is tender and grilled to perfection. The garlic bread is warm and crusty.

Killian takes a bite of his food and groans in appreciation. “Oh, man. I’m lookin’ forward to seeing her new menu. Hiring

her is the best decision we ever made.”

I take another bite of pasta. “No argument there.”

Near the end of our meal, Gabrielle returns to tell us about the dessert options: blackberry cobbler with vanilla ice cream and brownies.

We both opt for the cobbler.

When I’m nearly done with dessert, I glance over at the podium to see Gabrielle standing behind there, and a man standing on the other side, facing her. He’s tall, slender, and tan, with blond hair parted on the side. He looks like money. He looks like a man used to getting whatever he wants. I recognize him as a guest, but he’s never gone out on a trail ride. I think he’s here for the fishing.

He says something to Gabrielle, and she laughs. Then she says something, and he laughs. He says something else, and she smiles politely as she shakes her head. When he reaches out to touch her, she steps back abruptly. Her smile quickly fades, and again she shakes her head, this time with more determination.

“Who’s that?” I ask Killian, pointing to the podium.

Killian follows the direction of my finger. “That’s Tom Anderson, an investment banker from L.A. He’s here for the fly fishing.”

“He’s bothering Gabrielle.”

Killian stills as he watches them. “How can you tell? She looks fine.”

“She’s not.”

When Anderson reaches for Gabrielle’s hand and she pulls it back behind her, I shoot to my feet. “I told you.”

And then I’m across the dining room in two seconds flat, stepping close beside Gabrielle behind the podium. When she tosses me a relieved glance, I know my instincts were right. “Can I help you?” I ask the man.

He narrows steely gray eyes on me. “No. I was talking to the lady. Do you mind?”

“Yeah, I mind.” I check the clock on the wall. It’s ten ‘til eight. “Dinner’s over. We were just leaving.”

“*We?*” The guy stares at me in disbelief. “She’s leaving with *you?*” He sneers at me. “I don’t believe that for a second, pal.” His gaze zeroes in on my face. “In fact, I’d bet against it.”

When I take a step toward him, Gabrielle grabs my right arm and pulls me back. “I need to grab a few things from the kitchen, John. Would you mind helping me?”

“Of course not,” I say, gloating at Anderson as he scowls at us, then walks away. I turn to her and notice her cheeks are flushed. “What did he say to you?”

She shakes her head. “It’s not worth mentioning. I do need to grab a few things from the kitchen and take them upstairs to my apartment. Do you mind walking me up?”

“Nah, I don’t mind.”

Before she can take a step, a familiar face appears. Sheriff Nelson is dressed in his uniform, hat on his head, gun in his hip holster.

He walks right up to us and tips his hat. “Hey, Burke. How’s it going?”

I nod in return. “Fine, sheriff.” Nelson looks pointedly at Gabrielle, reminding me of my manners. “Sheriff, this is Gabrielle Hunter. She’s the new kitchen manager here at the lodge.”

Nelson tips his hat to her. “So I heard from Ruth this afternoon. Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Don’t call her that,” I say. “She doesn’t like it.”

“Sorry.” Nelson grins at her. “Nice to meet you, *Gabrielle.*”

She returns his smile. “It’s my pleasure, sheriff.”

“Please, call me Chris,” he says.

Great. She’s on a first name basis already with the town’s golden boy. I clear my throat in an attempt to redirect his attention away from Gabrielle. They’re about the same age—late twenties—and Nelson is a damn good-looking man with his thick blond hair and blue eyes. He’s also single. And as far as I know, he likes girls. “So, what brings you here, sheriff?” The sooner he leaves, the better.

Nelson’s grin widens. “I heard there was fettuccini Alfredo tonight. Am I too late?”

Chapter 7 – Gabrielle

Apparently, word travels fast in Bryce, Colorado, especially when a homecooked meal is involved. “I believe there’s plenty more pasta available. Have a seat, and I’ll get you some.” I grab a menu and lead the sheriff to a table for four in the center of the room.

He sits, then takes off his hat and sets it on the chair catty-corner to his. Then he runs his fingers through his shock of thick blond hair.

Wow. Bryce, Colorado seems to have no shortage of handsome men.

“What can I get you to drink?” I ask.

“I’ll take a Coke if you have one. I’d rather have a beer, but as you can see,” he points to the shiny gold badge pinned to his shirt, “I’m on duty. Just thought I’d stop by and take a dinner break. I heard the new chef arrived this morning. You didn’t waste any time gettin’ to work, did you?”

“Well, there are a lot of hungry people here at the lodge.” I gesture toward the kitchen. “I’ll get your food right out to you.”

I glance back at John. “Just a second. Let me get the sheriff his food, and then we can go.”

I head into the kitchen, where Betty and Nelle are starting to clean up from the dinner rush. “Please tell me there’s more of the Alfredo left. I promised some to the sheriff.”

Betty laughs. “Yes, there is.” She points to a covered pan on the stove. “Certainly enough for one person, maybe two.”

I dish up a heaping portion of pasta along with slices of grilled chicken and garlic bread. I guess it can’t hurt to get on the sheriff’s good side from the get-go. When I return to the dining room, I find John waiting, standing by the host podium, watching me. After I set the food in front of the sheriff, I go get his soft drink. When I return, he’s already made a good dent in the food.

“This is fantastic,” he says, pausing to wipe his mouth on a napkin. “Really good.”

“I’m glad you like it. Do you think you’ll save room for dessert? This evening we’ve got blackberry cobbler a la mode and brownies.”

His blue eyes widen, making him appear even younger. “Wow, that’s going to be hard to choose. Can I have both?”

I laugh. “Of course. I’ll go ahead and get your desserts now, as I’m getting ready to take off. I still have so much yet to do this evening.”

He nods. “I imagine so. Hannah and Killian are lucky to have you. I’ve heard a lot about the restaurant where you worked in Chicago—some fancy five-star Italian place. I can’t wait to see what you do with this place. Jennie’s Diner is fantastic, of course, but it’s nice to have another option.”

After I bring him his desserts, he offers me his credit card. “That’s okay,” I say. “It’s on the house.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’m happy to pay, honestly.”

“It’s Law Enforcement Appreciation Day,” I say, making that up on the fly.

“Then I guess it’s my lucky day for *two* reasons,” he says.

And then he winks at me.

John coughs to clear his throat, as a reminder he’s waiting for me. “We should go, Gabrielle,” he says.

“Right. Enjoy your meal, sheriff. It was a pleasure meeting you. If you need anything else, just pop your head into the kitchen. Betty and Nelle can help you.”

John and I finally leave the restaurant and take the stairs up to the apartments on the second floor. I unlock my door, and John follows me inside.

“I guess the pasta was a big hit tonight,” I say as I switch on the living room light. I cross to the kitchen and turn that light on as well. I feel a bit self-conscious now that it’s just the two of us in my apartment. “I hope to develop the first draft of a full menu this weekend so I can run it by Hannah and Killian.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine with whatever you come up with.”

“Thanks, John.” He’s standing there pretty stiffly, with his hat still on. “Would you like to sit and relax? Can I get you something cold to drink?” Suddenly, I’m curious to find out if he’ll take his hat off.

He shakes his head. “Thanks, but I should get back to the barn and check on the horses before it gets any later.” He heads for the door but pauses when he gets there. “So, are we still on for the farmers market in the morning?”

“Yes, if you don’t mind driving me.”

“Sure. Then Monday I’ll drive you to Denver to the kitchen supply center.”

“That would be fantastic. The sooner I can order the new appliances, the sooner the kitchen will be renovated.”

He reaches up with his right hand to grip the top of his cowboy hat. For a brief moment, I think he might take it off, but no, he tips his hat. *Such a gentleman.*

His left hand is in his front jeans pocket, out of sight.

John, what happened to you?

But I don’t ask. If he wanted me to know, he’d tell me himself.

“Goodnight, Gabrielle,” he says as he turns the door knob behind him.

“Goodnight, John.”

After the door closes behind him, I’m left staring at an empty room. I haven’t even been here twenty-four hours yet, and already so much has happened.

* * *

I take a quick shower and wash my hair. Dressed in my pajamas—knit shorts and a tank top—I let my hair hang loose and dry on its own. To kill time, I unpack my luggage and

hang up my clothes. I organize my undergarments in the dresser drawers. I didn't bring much with me. Besides my clothes, I brought my laptop, my tablet, some books, and my collection of family photo albums.

It's nine-thirty when there's a quiet knock on my door. I get up from the sofa and check the peephole. It's Hannah. "Hey," I say when I open the door.

She peers into the apartment. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

I laugh. "Like what?"

She shrugs. "Oh, nothing. Can I come in for a few minutes? If it's not too late?"

"Of course." I swing the door open, and Hannah comes in carrying a bottle of red wine.

She hands it to me. "It's a little housewarming gift."

"Thank you." I happily take it and put it on the kitchen counter. "Where's Killian?"

"He's working on the generator with Toby, our head maintenance guy. So, how do you like the apartment? If there's anything you want to change, no problem. If you want

to bring in your own furniture, or replace anything, we can put this furniture in storage.”

“No, it’s great. I love everything in here. Do you and Killian live here in the lodge?”

“No. We have a log cabin about half a mile up the road in a small clearing.” Hannah sits in the recliner. “I just wanted to touch base with you, see how everything went today. I know it’s a lot to take in at once. I heard through the grapevine that word got out about the fettuccine Alfredo.”

I laugh. “Apparently. Even the sheriff showed up.”

“You met Chris. Good. He’s a great guy. He and Killian have become good friends. And you met Maggie and Jennie and Ruth?”

“Yes. They seem really nice.”

“They’re awesome. We get together pretty regularly at Maggie’s house for dinner. I hope you’ll join us.”

“I’d love that.”

“And how about Burke? How did that go?”

“Great. John seems like a really nice guy.”

Hannah smiles incredulously. “He lets you call him *John*?”

“Yes. Is that strange?”

“I should say so. No one calls him *John*. It’s Burke, or you risk getting your teeth knocked out.”

“Really?”

Hannah nods. “Really.”

“I accidentally walked in on him in the barn as he was changing his shirt after returning from the trail ride. His hat was off, and I saw his face. He uses his hat as a shield. And I noticed he limps.”

Hannah’s smile fades. “Yeah. He never talks about it. He was in the Army, a Ranger, and was deployed in Afghanistan until he got a medical discharge. I don’t know all the details, but there was an explosion, and his face and hand were burned. He also got a lot of shrapnel in his left leg, which is why he limps. That’s all I know.”

“I’m sorry he was hurt.”

“Word of advice—don’t ever tell him that. He hates pity. He’d just as soon everyone ignore his scars.”

“Got it.”

There's another knock on the door.

"That would be Killian," Hannah says.

"Come in!" I call.

The door opens and Killian comes in. His gaze goes right to Hannah. "Ready, babe?"

She stands. "Yes." Then she gives me a hug. "I'm so glad you're here. Have I mentioned that yet?"

I laugh. "A few people have."

"I heard you're going to the farmers market tomorrow," Killian says.

"Yes. I want to check out what I can get locally."

"And Burke's driving you?" Killian asks, confirming.

I nod. I'm looking forward to spending more time with John. There's something about him—whether it's the wounded warrior thing or the sexy cowboy thing, I don't know. But it's something.

After Hannah and Killian take off, I get ready for bed, finish drying my hair, and braid it for sleeping. I climb into bed with my tablet and read until my eyelids are too heavy to keep open.

After turning off the bedside lamp, I stretch out between the cool sheets and sigh. This move to Colorado feels good. This place feels good. And I've already met so many people—Betty and Nelle, Maggie, Jennie, Ruth, the sheriff. And, of course, John.

I feel a pang of sadness when I think of all the loved ones I left behind in Chicago. My friends, my parents.

Yawning, I roll onto my side and wrap my arms around the spare pillow. I hope things will be different here in Colorado. Back home, I was so busy at the restaurant—trying to outdo everyone else—I had no time for a life. I routinely worked twelve-hour days. I'm hoping life is a bit slower in Bryce. I'm hoping to find time to have a life, to have time for friends. Maybe even have time to date.

I set the alarm on my phone for six. That'll give me time to get ready and help out in the kitchen before the breakfast rush begins and before John and I leave for the farmers market.

The last thought in my head before I drift off to sleep is the expression on John's face when I walked in on him this afternoon in the barn.

I know shame when I see it. He seems like such a strong, confident person, and knowing that he's ashamed of his injuries—his scars—breaks my heart.

Chapter 8 – John

My stomach is in knots when I enter the lodge. It's eight a.m., and I'm right on time to pick up Gabrielle. I stop at the front desk. "Do you know where Gabrielle is?"

Kevin doesn't even bother to look up from the crossword puzzle he's doing. He just points down the hall. "In the restaurant. She said you'd be coming by. She said you should stop in and have breakfast before you guys head out. She made pancakes this morning."

"Pancakes?" Lately the breakfast buffet has been the same thing—cold cereal, scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, and toast. *But pancakes?* "Thanks."

On the way to the restaurant, I pass by the guest lounge where Maya and Travis are going over the ground rules with a group they're takin' rock climbing today.

"When I tell you to stop, you stop," Maya says. She points at a young man with long bangs in his face. "I'm specifically talking to *you*, Harry. If I have to rescue your ass one more time, I'm banning you. Got it?"

The one named Harry glares at her, while Travis flattens his lips to keep from laughing. Man, Travis has the patience of a saint.

I shake my head as I pass on by. Maya is a pistol, that's for sure; but she sure knows her stuff. So does Travis. But he's content to stand back and let her run the show. The two of them are in charge of the climbing excursions, but they're also critical members of the search and rescue team.

When I walk into the restaurant, I find a crowded dining room filled with chatty clientele. I spot Hannah and Killian seated at a window table, eating breakfast. Gabrielle is moving efficiently through the dining room, stopping to chat with guests and refilling coffee cups. She smiles and laughs and generally makes her customers feel welcome. She's a natural—a natural beauty as well as a natural when it comes to interacting with folks. She makes it look easy. I wish I could say the same—about the folks, I mean. I'm more comfortable with horses.

She hasn't noticed me yet, so I stand off to the side, out of the way, and simply enjoy watching her work. She's wearing a pair of khaki trousers and a short-sleeve white polo shirt. Her beautiful fiery-red hair hangs down the center of her back in a

single braid. I yearn to reach out and touch that braid, hold it in the palm of my hand to see if it's as heavy as I imagine. But as pretty as the braid is, her hair would be even prettier hanging loose.

When she laughs at something a guest says, her cheeks turn pink. Her cinnamon-colored freckles stand out like tiny specks on her creamy skin. Those green eyes are alight, crinkling in amusement.

A male guest waves her over to his table, and she goes to refill his coffee cup. He says something to her, and she shakes her head. Then he reaches out and encircles her wrist, and she steps back, pulling out of his reach. Son-of-a-bitch, it's that Anderson guy who was hitting on her last night right here in the restaurant.

I'm about to march right over there and put him in his place when Gabrielle walks away, heading to the kitchen.

I pause in my tracks, and that's when I notice Killian watching me, a curious expression on his face.

The aroma of hot food finally registers, and I obey my stomach's command and walk over to grab a plate and some silverware. I pile a plate with scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage links, and toast. Sure enough, there's a serving tray piled high

with pancakes as big as dinner plates. Protein first. I'll come back later for the pancakes.

I grab an available table and take my first bite.

"Good morning," Gabrielle says, her voice light as she appears at my side. "Would you like some coffee?" She's holding a coffee pot poised over the empty cup on my table.

"Mornin'," I say, sounding like a bear with a thorn stuck in its paw. "And yes to the coffee. Please."

She fills my mug. "Sugar and cream are on the table. Aren't you going to have pancakes?"

I nod. "I'm goin' back for more after I eat this."

"Excellent. There's plain butter up there, but there's also cinnamon-sugar butter, which I strongly recommend." She winks at me.

"Have you eaten?" The question just pops out.

"No," she admits. "I've been running nonstop since I got here. I did grab a piece of toast earlier."

"We'll be doin' a lot of walking at the farmers market. You should eat a decent breakfast before we go." I nod to the empty chair across from mine. "You might as well join me, if you have time."

“How can I resist?” she asks, clearly teasing me. “I’ll go grab a plate.”

Gabrielle goes to the buffet and makes herself a plate, grabs a cup of coffee, and joins me. I watch her fingers as she spreads butter on her toast, then some strawberry preserves.

She takes a neat bite and smiles. “Mm. You can’t beat good ol’ toast with butter and jam.”

I find myself staring at her mouth as she chews. I like the way she chews. Kind of dainty and feminine. I find myself staring at her lips.

Tammy stops at our table and grins at me. “Can I get you folks anything from the buffet? More coffee?”

“Not me,” I say. “I’m good.”

Gabrielle politely covers her mouth as she swallows a bite of food and smiles. She shakes her head.

“She’s good,” I say.

“You guys got plans this morning?” Tammy asks.

Gabrielle takes a sip of her coffee. “We’re going to the farmers market.”

“Together?” Tammy asks. She eyes me curiously.

“Really?”

“Yes.” I don’t see what the big deal is. It’s just a farmers market. It’s not like we’re going out for a movie and dinner. It’s not a *date*. It’s a supply run.

“Well, have fun.” With a chuckle, Tammy moves on.

I scan the room and notice there are more than a few eyeballs directed our way. People are staring at us. “People act like they’ve never seen me eat with someone,” I mutter.

“I’m sorry, what?” Gabrielle asks.

“Nothing.” I shake myself mentally.

After we finish eating, Gabrielle runs upstairs to her apartment to get her purse. I pull the truck up to the front entrance to wait for her. I should be bored out of my mind by the idea of going to a farmers market, but I’m not. I’m happy to spend time with Gabrielle.

I’m sitting behind the wheel waiting for her when Killian walks up to my driver’s door and knocks on my window. I roll it down.

“You headin’ out?” he asks.

“Yeah. I’m taking Gabrielle to the farmers market.”

He winks at me. “Don’t have too much fun.”

I don’t see the humor. “I’m just driving her.”

Gabrielle comes out the front doors, jogs over to the truck, and climbs up into the front passenger seat. “Hi, Killian,” she says. Her cheeks are pink, and she’s a bit breathless. She hurried.

Killian pats my door. “Have fun, you two.”

I put the truck in reverse and back out of the parking space. “Why does everyone keep saying that?”

Gabrielle smiles and shrugs. “They’re just being friendly, I guess.”

I notice she changed clothes. Earlier, she was wearing khakis and a polo shirt, but now she’s got on a cream-colored floral dress, a white lacy sweater, and sandals. The braid is gone, and her hair is hanging loose in soft curls past her shoulders. She’s wearing large gold hoop earrings, and I think she even put on a bit of eye make-up and lip gloss. She looks—wow. Suddenly, I feel very underdressed.

“You look nice,” I say, and immediately I feel stupid for saying it. She always looks nice.

“Thanks.” She turns to face me. “You look nice, too.”

I look down at myself and scowl. I'm dressed like I always am—in blue jeans, a plaid flannel shirt, boots, and a battered old cowboy hat. Still, her comment makes me smile. “All right, let's go visit the farmers.”

She laughs at that, and I find my grin widening. She's easy to talk to, easy to be with. Easy to amuse.

Once we're on the road, I ask, “So, you're from Chicago? Were you born there?”

She turns to face me. “Yep. Born and raised.”

“Got any siblings?”

“No, It's just me. I'm an only child.”

“What about your parents?” I ask.

“They're from Chicago, too. They're both retired now and living in Naperville—it's a suburb west of Chicago. Not too far away. My dad was a pediatrician, and my mom was a math professor at the University of Chicago.”

I like hearing her talk, so I keep the questions coming.

“Medicine and math, huh? And you became a chef? How did that happen?”

“My parents were so busy with their careers that they'd get home late each evening. My maternal grandmother, Mary,

lived with us then. Honestly, she helped raise me. She let me help her cook dinner every evening. Eventually, I begged her to teach me how to cook, and in the process I fell in love with it. I loved knowing I was helping provide something important for the people I loved.”

She beams, clearly proud of herself. “When I graduated from high school, I went to culinary school. After that, I worked in a couple of small restaurants before I landed a coveted sous-chef position at Renaldo’s.”

“That’s your fancy five-star restaurant?”

She smiles. “Yes.”

“How long did you work there?”

“Six years.”

“Why’d you leave?” I want to keep the conversation going. I love how her eyes light up when she talks about cooking.

Her smile falls. “I loved working there. My boss, Peter, was fantastic. But I could read the writing on the wall. There were too many chefs ahead of me in the hierarchy. I didn’t see much of a path to rise up in the ranks. It’s always been my

dream to run my own kitchen, so when Hannah offered me the job, I couldn't turn it down."

"Makes sense," I say. "Lucky for us."

"What about you?" she asks. "What's your story?"

"Not much to say really. I spent twelve years in the Army, as a Ranger. Then, due to circumstances beyond my control, I was discharged—honorably, mind you." I raise my left hand. "Medical discharge. After doing rehab at Walter Reed Hospital, I came back here to Bryce. It's where I grew up. I returned to my first love—horses. My mother raises horses. I stayed with my folks for a good while, working with the animals again.

When Hannah and Killian decided to open the lodge, they offered me the job of managing the stables and taking guests out on trail rides. I jumped at the chance."

"Can I ask why you were discharged?" Her voice has softened.

My heart starts hammering, and I hear a ringing in my ears. This is not something I like to talk about—ever. Not with anyone. When I don't answer, she just sits there patiently,

alternately watching the scenery and me. She's waiting for an answer. It seems rude not to give her one. "I was injured."

"I'm so sorry."

I shrug. "It was a long time ago. It's fine. I'm fine."

"I take it you were burned?"

I swallow past the lump in my throat. I try so damn hard to forget. "Yeah. You saw my face and my hand in the barn."

"Yes."

"It was an IED—an improvised explosive device. I was driving a supply truck when we hit it. I didn't even see it. Between the burns and the shrapnel in my leg, I needed lots of rehab, and I could no longer do my job."

She sits there quietly, still facing me. There's so much sadness in her eyes, and I can almost feel the waves of sympathy rolling off her. *Pity.*

"Like I said, I'm fine." My tone is sharper than I had intended. "I don't need anyone's pity."

Her brow furrows. "I don't pity you, John," she says quietly. But she shifts her position so that she's facing forward.

"I'm just sorry for what you've been through."

That's the end of our conversation. She stares out the front windshield or her passenger's window, apparently watching the scenery.

I could kick myself for being an ass. She was just tryin' to be nice, to make conversation.

The rest of the trip passes in silence until we arrive at the church where the market is held. The parking lot is full, so I end up parking on the grass. The market is set up on the lawn behind the church—scores of tents and temporary stalls, not to mention a snack bar. The playground is filled with boisterous kids.

I follow Gabrielle into the fray.

“This is amazing,” she says as she glances around at the stalls.

There's everything imaginable here—fruits and vegetables, fresh-baked bread and other baked goods, local honey, meats, fresh cut flowers, potted plants, yarn, jewelry, quilts, clothing, farming equipment, too.

She grabs one of the plastic grocery baskets stacked all over the place.

“Here, I’ll carry that for you,” I say as I take it from her. I figure I should make myself useful. The smile she gives me in return makes my chest flush with heat.

“Thank you, John.”

I realize I like hearing her use my first name. She’s the only one who does. Everyone else calls me Burke—the guys, co-workers, guests.

Gabrielle stops to talk to each of the stall owners. She introduces herself and finds out what farms grow what. She’s good at this—at meeting people and making connections. That’s something I suck at.

She buys some potatoes and carrots and onions, and into the basket they go.

“I thought I’d make a pot roast for dinner this evening,” she says.

My ears perk up. “Pot roast?”

“Yes, I thought something hearty and comforting would be a good choice.”

Does a bear shit in the woods? “Um, yeah,” I say.

“Definitely.”

“We’ll have to make a stop at Ed’s on our way back to the lodge so I can pick up some roasts.”

“Not a problem.” *Hell, no, it’s not a problem. I’ll drive her to the moon and back for pot roast.*

She picks up a bunch of fresh-cut flowers. “These’ll look nice on the tables. I spotted some small crystal vases in the storage room. I wonder if we have any candles.”

As we meander through the market, Gabrielle checks out all the stalls and everything the sellers have to offer. Eventually, we end up near the snack bar, drawn to the sweet smell of funnel cake.

“I haven’t had funnel cake since I was a kid,” she says. “My parents used to take me to the county fair every summer and having one was the highlight of the trip.”

Of course, we end up buying funnel cake because who doesn’t love funnel cake? We share, each of us taking turns pulling off a piece to eat.

Gabrielle grins as she points at my face.

“What?” I ask.

“There’s powdered sugar on your mustache.”

I attempt to brush it off, but she just laughs and lifts her hand.

“May I?” she asks.

May I touch you? My heart slams against my ribs at just the thought. “Sure.”

Gently, she brushes powdered sugar off my mustache. “There, that’s better.”

“Hey, Gabrielle!”

We turn to find Chris Nelson coming up behind us. He’s wearing blue jeans, a sweatshirt, and a pair of shiny black leather boots. Clearly, he’s off duty.

Gabrielle waves at him. “Hi, Chris.”

He reaches us, a bit breathless, and runs his fingers through his hair. “Imagine meeting you here.” He peers into the basket I’m holding. “Potatoes and carrots? Making something special?”

“Yes,” Gabrielle says. “Pot roast is on the menu this evening.”

Chris’s blue eyes widen. “Really? I think I’ll have to stop in for that.”

Chris hangs out with us for the rest of the time we're at the market. I have no right to be annoyed, but I am. I have no doubt he's interested in Gabrielle. And why shouldn't he be? She's amazing. I should be happy for the both of them.

The sheriff ends up carrying some additional purchases for her, and I follow along like an aimless pack mule.

"I guess we should be going now," Gabrielle says to me as she checks the time. "We've still got to stop at the butcher's before we return to the lodge. And I should help with the lunch crowd."

Chris walks with us back to my truck and deposits the items he carried for her in the back. I wish I could hate the guy, but I can't.

"Thanks, Chris," she tells him.

Chris nods. "My pleasure, Gabrielle." His gaze is locked on hers. "I guess I'll see you around, then."

Gabrielle nods. "Don't be a stranger. Remember—pot roast tonight."

She gives him a smile, and I can't tell if it's a friendly smile or a come-hither smile. If it were up to Chris, I think he'd want it to be the latter kind.

Chris leaves and we climb into the truck.

“That was amazing,” Gabrielle says, sighing as she leans back in her seat. She laughs as she wiggles her feet. “My feet are killing me.”

“You probably should have worn sneakers instead of those sandals. They don’t offer much support.”

“I know.” She laughs. “But they sure do look good.”

True.

On the drive home, we stop at Ed’s, and Gabrielle buys several roasts for dinner tonight. Then we return to the lodge, and I help her carry everything to the kitchen.

It’s close to lunch time.

“Do you want to stay for lunch?” she asks me.

My pulse picks up, and I want to say *yes* so badly. But I can’t. “Thanks, but no. I’m taking some folks out on a trail ride this afternoon. I have work to do beforehand.”

Her smile falls. “Oh. Okay. Maybe I’ll see you at dinner then.”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

As I walk out the lodge doors, I'm still processing the fact she seemed disappointed that I couldn't stay. It's been a long time since anyone cared whether I showed up for something or not.

Chapter 9 – Gabrielle

As soon as I'm back in the kitchen, I start on the pot roast. That's going to take a while. I sear the roasts, transfer them to Dutch ovens, add the broth, seasonings, and prepped potatoes and carrots, and then pop them into the ovens.

"You know what would go well with the pot roast?" I ask Hannah, who watched me get the meal started.

"What?"

"My granny's famous apple crisp, served warm with vanilla ice cream and a browned butter caramel sauce drizzled over top."

"Oh, wow," she says. "Can you do that? Is there time?"

"Yeah, there's still time. The problem is I don't have all the ingredients I'd need, namely Granny Smith apples, brown sugar, and oats. We still have plenty of vanilla ice cream, so we're good there. Everything else—like sugar and butter—I have."

"I'll drive you to Maggie's if you want," Hannah says. She gives me a hopeful look. "Just say the word."

"Okay, I'll grab my purse."

It's a quick drive to town. We park outside the grocery store and walk inside. Maggie's standing behind the counter, and across from her is a man holding a tiny baby. A little baby girl, from the looks of it. She's wrapped securely in a pale pink blanket.

"Hey, Maggie!" Hannah says. "Owen!"

I presume that's Maggie's husband. Wow. If he is, Maggie is one lucky lady. This guy is all kinds of hot, from the way his jeans hug his ass to his broad shoulders nicely filling out a red-and-black plaid flannel shirt. Do all the guys wear flannel shirts around here? It's a good look. His brown hair is long and tied up in a man-bun.

Hannah makes a beeline for the baby and peers down at her. "Oh, my God, you guys. She's so precious."

"Honey, this is Gabrielle," Maggie says to the man, who's cuddling the baby against his broad chest.

He turns to me. "Hey, nice to meet you. Welcome to Bryce."

"What brings you two in?" Maggie asks us.

"Granny Smith apples," I say. "Plus brown sugar and old-fashioned rolled oats."

Nodding, Maggie comes around the counter, holding up her index finger. “Sounds like someone’s making apple crisp. I’ve got everything you need. Just give me a second.”

“Gabrielle is making apple crisp and serving it a la mode with vanilla ice cream and a caramel sauce drizzled over top. And that’s just the dessert. She’s also making pot roast for supper tonight.”

Owen gazes across the store at Maggie, who’s currently in the produce department bagging up some apples. “Hey, honey, do we have plans for dinner?”

Maggie laughs. “Do you suddenly have a hankering for pot roast?”

“You bet I do,” Owen says.

“Yeah, you guys should come tonight,” Hannah says.
“Bring the kids.”

“Looks like we’ll be there,” Maggie says as she brings the items I need to the counter.

Hannah pulls out a credit card and hands it to Maggie.
“Remind me to get you your own company credit card,” she tells me.

After checking out, Hannah and I return to the lodge. I get started right away on tonight's dessert. I have enough apples to make three crisps. I just hope that'll be enough. Somehow I'm afraid it won't be.

While the roast and veggies are cooking slowly to perfection, I take some measurements in the kitchen and sketch my ideas for the upgrades that need to be made.

We open our doors for dinner at five. There's already a line. I man the host podium and seat guests while Tammy takes orders. We have a steady stream of diners coming in. And then, around six, we get an unexpected rush. Apparently, word got out about the pot roast. Not only do we have lodge guests dining with us tonight, but some folks from town show up as well, including the sheriff.

"I came for the pot roast," Chris says when he finally reaches the podium. "Please tell me there's some left."

"You're in luck. There's plenty more," I say.

"I couldn't pass up pot roast." He takes off his sheriff's hat. "Have you eaten supper?"

"No, not yet. I've been running nonstop since we opened. I haven't had a chance."

“Can you take a break and join me for dinner?”

His far from casual question catches me off guard. Surely he’s not asking me to have dinner with him ... not as in a date.

“Come on,” he says. “You’ve got to eat sometime, right?”

“Well, yes.” And I am getting rather hungry.

“Then join me.” He nods to a corner table that’s out of the way of the main foot traffic. “There’s a quiet table. We can relax and have a nice dinner.”

“Okay, but I don’t have long.” I motion to the table in question. “Why don’t you have a seat while I go get our dinners?”

“Perfect,” he says.

I bring out the *PLEASE SEAT YOURSELF* sign so we can keep the line moving.

This isn’t a date, I remind myself as I head for the kitchen. We’re just two people sharing a table. He didn’t actually ask me out. The sheriff seems like a great guy, and he’s very good-looking, but if he did ask me out, I’d have to say no. It’s not that I’m uninterested in him—it’s just that I’m more interested in someone else. I wouldn’t want to muddy the water while

I'm hoping for a chance to get to know a certain someone else better.

I return to our table with a tray laden with two plates of pot roast, a basket of warm dinner rolls, and two side salads. "What would you like to drink?"

He smiles. "I'll stick with a soft drink since I'm still on duty. But you have whatever you want."

I fetch Cokes for both of us, along with some fresh butter.

"So, what did you think of the farmers market?" he asks me as we both dig in to the pot roast. He takes his first bite. "Gabrielle, this is fantastic."

"Thanks. As for the market, it was quite impressive. I definitely think I'll be a regular customer."

"Good. I'm glad. How are you liking Bryce? I realize you've hardly been here long enough to form an opinion."

"I like what I see so far. Everyone's been very friendly. And it's nice that I already have friends here."

"Right. Hannah and Killian. You knew them from Chicago, didn't you?"

"Yes. And I met Maggie and Jennie and Ruth yesterday. I hope to add them to my friends list as well. And John, of

course. He's been a huge help to me."

"Ah, yes, Burke. He's an interesting character, isn't he? Speak of the devil, here he is now."

I turn to spot John standing at the host podium. Despite the *PLEASE SEAT YOURSELF* sign I posted at the podium, he doesn't seem inclined to do so. Instead, he's looking our way, his expression flat. "Excuse me," I say to Chris. I jump up and walk to the podium. "Hi. Want some dinner?"

John shakes his head. "No. I'm—uh, looking for Killian."

"I'm sorry, but I haven't seen him. Would you like to eat something? The pot roast turned out really well. And there's warm apple crisp with caramel sauce for dessert. Are you sure you don't want to stay?" I nod toward the table I'm sharing with Chris. "You're welcome to join us. We have plenty of room."

John glances over at Chris and frowns. "No thanks. I'm not hungry." Then he meets my gaze once more. "I should go." He turns to leave.

"John, wait!"

He pauses, glancing back at me. "You should return to your table, Gabrielle. Your food's gettin' cold." And then he

walks out the door without a backward glance.

As I watch him walk away, I feel an odd hollowness in my gut. I feel guilty, like I just hurt him. Or betrayed him. But that's impossible. We hardly know each other. And we don't have a relationship—not that kind anyway. Not that I wouldn't be interested, because I think I would. But we're not there yet. So, why do I feel so guilty that he saw me eating with Chris? We're not on a date. We're just two people sharing a table at dinner. *Crap.*

I glance over at Chris, who's waving me back to our table. I return and glance down at my half-eaten meal. My appetite is gone. "I'd better get back to work. Poor Tammy is doing it all. Thanks for stopping in, Chris. Don't forget to save room for dessert. I'll have Tammy bring you some."

Oddly enough, he stands as I make ready to leave. "It was great seeing you, Gabrielle. The meal is fantastic. Thank you. I—I was wondering if I could take you out sometime. Anywhere you want to go. There are some great restaurants in Estes Park. Have you been there?"

My skin tightens, and I feel a chill as I swallow against a sudden knot in my throat. "Chris." *Why didn't I see this coming?* Suddenly, I feel a bit queasy. I'm never any good at

turning someone down. “Thanks for the offer. That’s very kind of you, but I’m not—I mean—I just moved here. I’m focusing on my new job, and I don’t really have time to date. But thanks anyway.” I turn to leave, then turn back. “Have a nice night.”

When I return to the podium, my pulse is racing. I feel terrible for turning Chris down. He really seems like a wonderful guy.

Fortunately, I’m distracted when Maggie Ramsey and her family walk in. She’s accompanied by her sexy lumberjack of a husband and two handsome teenage boys. The little baby girl’s asleep in a car seat hooked over Owen’s arm.

I shove away my guilt over Chris and my concerns about John and greet them with a warm smile. “I’m glad you made it.”

“So am I,” Owen says. “It smells amazing.”

* * *

Sunday morning, I help out in the restaurant by serving customers while Tammy acts as host. Nelle and Betty do an excellent job keeping the buffet replenished.

After the breakfast rush, I take care of cleaning up the kitchen and doing the dishes so the ladies can take a much-deserved break before the lunch rush. We need to increase staffing soon. It's too much to expect those two older ladies, me, and Tammy, who occasionally volunteers, to keep a restaurant this size running smoothly.

After I finish cleaning up the kitchen and dining room, I finish my design sketches and take the last of the measurements. I think I'll be prepared tomorrow when I visit the kitchen supply store.

I hope John hasn't changed his mind about driving me to Denver. I still don't have the Jeep yet, but even if I did, I'd much prefer to go to Denver with him than make the drive by myself.

Speaking of John, I haven't seen him since yesterday evening when he came into the restaurant and then abruptly left. He didn't come in for breakfast this morning.

Last night, I was able to save some of the pot roast and apple crisp for him. I pack up a to-go lunch, along with some rolls and butter, and go in search of him. I try the barn first, and luck out finding him cleaning one of the stalls.

“Hi, John.”

He looks up from his work and nods.

“I missed you at breakfast.” I’m standing outside the stall where he’s working.

It looks like he stripped down to a short-sleeve T-shirt. I notice a long-sleeve flannel shirt draped over the stall door. It’s the first time I’ve seen him dressed in short sleeves. His arms—wow. Those biceps are a work of art. I’ve always been a sucker for muscular arms. In romance books, they call it *arm porn*. I smile. I can see the appeal.

He continues shoveling straw, not bothering to look at me. “I ate in my cabin.”

I hold up the carry-out sack I brought. “I saved you some dinner and dessert from last night. I thought you might like to have it for lunch.”

He finally stops shoveling and straightens, one hand on the handle of the shovel, the other wiping his forehead. “How’d it go last night?”

“Dinner? Great. The pot roast was a big hit.”

“I don’t mean dinner. I mean your date.”

“My—” I frown. “I didn’t have a date last night.”

“I saw you eatin’ with Chris. Just the two of you.”

“Oh. That wasn’t a date. He just stopped in for dinner, and he asked if I wanted to join him.”

“Looked like a date to me.”

“Well, it wasn’t. It was just two people eating dinner at the same table.”

He gives me an incredulous look. “You do know he’s sweet on you, right? You’d have to be blind not to see it.”

I feel a guilty flush cross my cheeks. “He did sort of ask me out.”

“Of course he did. And I don’t blame him one bit. I wouldn’t blame you, either, for wantin’ to date him. He’s a great guy, Gabrielle. He’s got loads of integrity. Folks around here rely on him. He’s a sheriff, for crying out loud—a real life hero.”

“I’m sure he is a great guy, but I said no.”

“Why in the world would you say no to him? Women jump at the chance to go out with the sheriff.”

“I’m new to town. I—” I’m at a loss for words because I can’t very well say, *I’m not interested in dating the sheriff because there’s this other guy I’m interested in. A surly, grumpy cowboy.*

“He’s a good-lookin’ guy, Gabrielle. Even I can admit that.”

I’m thinking, *Fine. Then you date him.*

I feel like I’m walking on eggshells here. We’re talking in circles, and I don’t feel like I can come right out and say what I want to. “I need to focus on my new job. That’s my priority. Not dating. So, do you want the pot roast or not?”

He nods. “Yeah. I want it. Thanks.” He nods toward a wooden bench lining the corridor. “You can set it down over there.”

“It really should go in a refrigerator if you’re not going to eat it now. Do you have access to a microwave?”

He nods. “There’s one here in the tack room.” He leans the shovel against the wall.

I step into the stall and hand him the sack. “Here you go.”

He takes it from me. “Thanks.”

I step back then, to leave. “Are you still driving me to Denver in the morning?”

“Of course I am. I said I would.”

“Thanks.”

When I turn to leave, he says, “Gabrielle, wait!”

“Yes?”

He opens his mouth to speak, hesitates, then closes it. I can almost see the wheels turning in his head as he debates what he wants to say. I wait patiently.

“I’m taking a group of women from L.A. out on a trail ride in a couple of days. Would you like to join us? I know you said you used to want a pony. I thought you might like to go with us.”

I’m so tempted to say yes, but the pragmatic side of me says no. “I’ve never even been on a horse before. I wouldn’t know the first thing.”

“I can teach you. Would you like a riding lesson? I’ve got time now. How about it? If you like, I’ll saddle Odin up for you. He’s my most dependable, most gentle horse. They’re all great, mind you, but Odin is special. I save him for kids and people who are anxious about riding. I’m not saying you’re anxious, of course. I just know you’ll have a good experience riding him. If you want to.”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard John say so much at one time. Warmth spreads through my chest. “I’d love to. But what

about your lunch?”

“Can you give me thirty, forty minutes to eat and change?”

He pulls on his T-shirt, wafting it. “I’m a hot, sweaty mess right now, not fit for company. I need a shower.”

“That’s fine.” I glance down at my dress and sandals. “I’ll run back to my apartment and change into jeans and sneakers. That’s probably more appropriate attire for riding.”

“Jeans, yes,” he says. “But not sneakers. Have you got boots? Something with a proper heel?”

I nod. “I think I have something that will work.” I hurry back to the lodge and race through the lobby and head for the stairs.

Kevin’s on the phone. He waves at me, covers the mouthpiece, and asks, “Where’s the fire?”

Smiling, I wave to him as I take the stairs up to my apartment. It’s just a riding lesson, but I’m reeling with excitement. Not so much about the prospect of riding a horse, but rather spending more time with John. It’s not a date, of course. I know that. I guess I could say he’s doing me a professional courtesy by teaching me how to ride. Maybe it’s his way of thanking me for bringing him lunch.

As I enter my apartment, I remind myself not to get too excited. It's just a riding lesson. It's not like he asked me out on a date.

I freshen up in the bathroom, brushing my teeth and hair. I probably should put my hair up in a ponytail for convenience's sake, but I decide to leave it down. I change into a pair of blue jeans, a T-shirt, and put on a pair of brown leather ankle boots. They have a heel.

By the time I return to the barn, it's been forty-five minutes. John is saddling a huge brown Quarter Horse with a black mane and tail. "The pot roast was fantastic, by the way," he says when he spots me. He sounds like he's in a much better mood than he was earlier. "The dessert, too. Thanks for bringing it."

"My pleasure."

John pats the horse's thick neck. "This is Odin."

The big horse's halter is secured by two ropes that stretch across the aisle and are secured to metal rings embedded in the barn walls. When the horse spots me, he lifts his head and whinnies softly, blowing air out of his nostrils.

I watch as John throws a blanket over the horse's back.

"He likes you."

"How can you tell?" I take a hesitant step forward, although I'm still at least ten feet away from the horse. "Hi, Odin."

John smiles. "Have you ever been around a horse before?"

"No, never."

"Okay. You can come closer," he says. "Approach him slowly and talk gently. Let him get used to your scent and the sound of your voice. Let him know you're a friend."

"Hi, Odin." I slowly move closer. "I'd like to be friends if that's all right with you."

"I don't think he'll mind." Another grin from John. "Offer him your hand, palm side down, loose and relaxed. Let him smell you."

I'm shaking but determined to go through with this. When my hand is within range, Odin nudges it gently with his muzzle. "His nose is so soft."

"It is. Keep talking to him. After he gets a chance to learn your scent, you can slowly raise your hand and give him a little scratch on his forehead. He'll like that."

I do as instructed in spite of the butterflies in my belly.
“You’re my first, Odin. Would you mind letting me ride you?”

John coughs, practically choking on a laugh. “I’m sure he’ll be happy to.”

Once Odin is saddled, John slips a bridle over his head and leads him outside, where he loops the reins over a pole.

“Now, you always mount a horse on his left side,” he says, guiding me to the correct spot. “Grab hold of the reins and horn with your left hand and grab the back of the saddle with your right. I’ll give you a lift up. Just swing your right leg over the horse and sit on the saddle. Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” I say.

I do as John instructed, and he effortlessly lifts me into the air and sits me down on the saddle.

“Put your feet in the stirrups,” he says. He adjusts them and positions my feet just so. “Keep your heels down. Now, hold the reins lightly in your fingers. Don’t tug. Don’t pull. Be gentle on the reins.”

I glance down at the ground, surprised by how far away it is. I didn’t expect that. “Odin sure is tall.”

“He’s sixteen hands. That’s pretty tall for a horse. But don’t worry. He’s a gentle giant. He’ll take good care of you as long as you take good care of him.” John takes the reins from me. “I’ll lead you around the paddock a few times so you can get used to the feel of him moving beneath you. Just hold onto the horn.” He points to the handle on the saddle. “Yeah, this thing here.”

John leads Odin around the paddock, and I hold onto the horn with a death grip. Heights make me dizzy.

“How’re you doin’?” he asks as we take another turn around the paddock.

My pulse is through the roof. “Okay.”

He chuckles. “That didn’t sound very convincing. Do you want to take the reins?”

I laugh nervously. “Do I have to?”

“No, you don’t,” he says, gazing up at me with an earnest expression. “I’d be happy to lead you around the paddock as long as you like.”

When our gazes lock, my chest tightens. I’m thinking, Why won’t *you* ask me out?

Odin whinnies softly.

“See?” John says. “Odin agrees. We are at your service.”

After a few more minutes, I decide to put my big girl panties on and take the reins. John walks a few feet ahead of us in a big circle around the enclosed area, and Odin follows him dutifully.

By now, I’m used to the rocking motion of the horse, used to sitting up so high off the ground. “This isn’t so bad.”

John glances up at me. “So, do you think you’ll be up to taking your first trail ride Tuesday? It’s a pretty easy trip—about three hours up to Pine Lake. We’ll do a little easy hiking around the lake and eat packed lunches. Then we’ll ride back down to the lodge. It’s sort of an all-day thing, but it shouldn’t be too taxing. What do you say?”

I hesitate, wanting to say yes, but not sure I’m up for such a long ride. “I’ll give it some thought.”

He nods and pats my leg. “Of course. I hope you’ll come with us.”

Chapter 10 – John

Monday morning, I meet up with Gabrielle in the restaurant. While she's helping out with breakfast, I grab a quick bite and a cup of coffee. "Have you eaten?" I ask her. "It's a long drive. You should eat first."

"I've eaten," she assures me. "I'll be ready to go in just a sec. I just need to grab my purse."

As we head out to my truck, I say, "You sure look nice."

Gabrielle's dressed up in a black skirt, a white silky top, and a cream-colored jacket. Her hair is up in some type of complicated bun, and she's wearing those gold hoop earrings again.

"Very professional," I add.

She looks pleased by the compliment. "Thanks," she says as I help her up into the truck cab. She lays a slim black leather purse with a long gold chain strap on her lap. "I want the sales person to pay attention to me. They won't if I look like I don't have a big enough budget to work with."

"I see." *Not really. But damn, she looks amazing.* How can she look like a fresh-faced goddess and a polished career

woman at the same time?

It's an hour-long drive to Denver. We chat the entire time about everything from the lodge to horses to Gabrielle's life back in Chicago.

"Do you miss it?" I ask. "Chicago? And your friends?"

She nods. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't. But I'm also really enjoying the lodge and meeting new people. I'm excited about the restaurant. It's a blank slate, and I get to shape what it turns into."

We arrive at our destination and cross the parking lot as we head for the entrance. As I stare up at a huge warehouse building, I realize we're here for more than just pots and pans. "So, what's on your shopping list?"

"Pretty much everything," she says. "I need to bring that kitchen into the twenty-first century."

I rush forward to open the door for Gabrielle.

I shouldn't be surprised, but the moment we enter the place, we're swarmed by two salesmen, both vying for her attention. I wonder if they work on commission or if they're just waiting on her because she's pretty.

Another man, dressed in a suit and tie, shows up and shoos the first two away. “I’m Kyle, the sales manager here. How can I assist you today, Ms—”

“Hunter.” She pulls a small notebook out of her purse. “I’m renovating a restaurant, and I need pretty much everything.”

Kyle’s dark eyes widen. “I can help you with that, of course. Where do you want to start?”

She reads from her list. “Industrial sinks with sprayers, dishwashers, refrigerators—both for the kitchen and for customer self-serve—a glass top display freezer, a bakery case, stainless steel food prep station, four gas ranges, three griddles, four deep fryers, two commercial ovens, mixers, and meat slicers.” She grins. “I warned you—it’s a long list.”

The sales manager’s eyes are round as saucers, and I imagine he’s calculating his commission. “It sounds like you’re starting from the ground up,” he says.

Gabrielle nods. “Pretty much.”

He gestures for us to follow him. “Let’s get started, then.”

I follow Gabrielle through the showroom as Kyle shows her the appliances she’s looking for. Of course she doesn’t

need me, but I don't want to leave her alone. "Kyle, do you work on commission?" I ask.

Sheepishly, he nods.

As he makes note of everything she picks out, I'm thinkin' he's gonna make bank on today's transaction. Based on these prices, he'll probably pocket enough to buy himself a new car. It's his lucky day.

As I follow them, I listen to her talk. She clearly knows what she wants for the kitchen. She's assertive and confident, and I can't help but be impressed.

By the time we've been at it for a couple of hours, my left leg aches something awful. Standing around on these hard concrete floors isn't doing it any good. I try to stretch my leg muscles when Gabrielle's not looking.

Finally, she says she has everything she needs. We return to Kyle's desk, and he writes up the order. When he reads her the total, I about crap my pants. *Damn.*

Gabrielle writes him a check for the deposit. The balance will be paid upon delivery and installation.

"Outfitting a restaurant sure is expensive," I say as we exit the building.

“It sure is,” she says. “I’m just glad it’s not my money. Hannah’s brother, Shane, is funding the renovations, and well, he has very deep pockets.”

Once we’re on the road, I realize I’m starving. And if I’m hungry, Gabrielle probably is, too. “How about we stop for lunch?” I ask. “There are plenty of nice restaurants in Denver. I thought you might like to try one.”

She grins at me. “I’d love to. Did you have anything particular in mind?”

“Not really. Since you’re new here, why don’t you choose?”

She pulls out her phone and starts searching the reviews for local restaurants. “How about tacos? I could really go for some good tacos. I found a promising place nearby. It’s just fifteen minutes away.”

“Sounds good,” I say. “I can always eat tacos.”

She calls up GPS directions. Fifteen minutes later, I pull into the parking lot of what looks like a real dive.

Gabrielle frowns as she studies the exterior of the building. Then she glances down at her phone and reads one of the reviews aloud. “Don’t be deceived by the crappy

appearance of the place. It may look rundown, but the food is guaranteed epic. And, they offer a ton of local craft beers. Five stars all the way.”

Just as she says that, a group of six guys walk into the restaurant. “Good enough for me,” I say as I shut off the engine. It looks like we’re staying.

My leg protests angrily when I step out of the truck, and I have to grit my teeth. Maybe I can sneak in some over-the-counter pain pills along with my lunch. I refuse to take the prescription stuff.

We arrived at the perfect time—just after the lunch rush—so we’re seated pretty quickly at a table for two next to a window.

A server brings us a basket of warm tortilla chips and a bowl of fresh, homemade salsa. “Do you folks know what you want?” the young man asks. When he catches a glimpse of my face, he does an obvious double-take. Gabrielle must have noticed, too, because I see her wince.

I turn my head slightly so the kid can’t see the left side of my face.

An awkward silence follows as we order our food—two taco platters and two Cokes.

“Why don’t you take off your hat?” Gabrielle asks as our server walks away. “You have nothing to hide.”

Is she nuts? “I don’t need folks starin’ at me like I’m a freak from a horror movie.”

“You’re not a freak,” she says, clearly offended by the thought. “You’re actually a very handsome man.” She picks up a chip and dips it in the salsa. “Very.”

“Are you blind?”

She chuckles. “No. I’m a woman, and we know these things. You should trust me. You’re a very attractive man, John.”

I find myself grinning as I reach for a tortilla chip. When she’s distracted by a baby crying two tables over, I pop a pain pill.

“Does your leg hurt?” she asks. “I noticed you were limping earlier.”

I nod. “From all that walking on concrete.” I stretch my leg out beneath the table and wince at the tightness. Despite the added pain, I run the heel of my palm up and down my

thigh, pressing firmly into the sore tissue. “I haven’t been stretching enough lately.”

“You should have told me you were in pain. I could have cut the trip short.”

I grab another chip. “No, it’s all right.” I can feel her gaze on me.

“You don’t have to be a tough guy, you know,” she says. “My dad was forced to retire from medicine after he had a stroke. He was in a wheelchair shortly after that. I know it’s not the same thing, but I understand.”

I look away, avoiding her gaze. “I don’t need your pity, Gabrielle.”

“It’s not pity,” she says. “I care about you—your discomfort. Have you tried massage? It helped my dad a lot.”

I shake my head, but before I can answer, our server brings us our food, putting a quick end to an uncomfortable conversation.

The food is indeed epic, just as the reviewer claimed. The soft tacos are flavorful, as are the refried beans and the rice.

Our server stops by to hand me the check. “I’ll take that whenever you’re ready,” he says. “No rush.”

Gabrielle leans forward and holds out her hand after our server walks away. “I’ll buy lunch. It’s my way of saying thank you for driving me all the way out here.”

I reach into my back pocket for my wallet. “Thanks, but I’ve got it.”

She sits back in her chair and frowns. “I really wish you’d let me pay.”

I meet her very determined gaze. “The man should pay.”

“This isn’t a date,” she says.

“No, it’s not. But still—”

“You’re not being sexist, are you?” She sounds serious, but I see amusement in her eyes.

“No, it’s just—the man pays. That’s all.”

“Fine,” she says. She finishes her soft drink. “The next one’s on me.”

The next what? I wonder. The next meal? “This isn’t a date, Gabrielle.”

Her smile falters. “I didn’t mean to imply it was.”

After I pay, we head out to the truck. She’s unusually quiet on the drive back.

When we arrive, I pull up to the front doors of the lodge. She reaches for her door handle.

I reach out in her direction, stopping short of touching her. “Gabrielle, wait.”

She pauses. “Yes?”

“I’m sorry if I was an ass earlier. I spend most of my time with horses or the guys. I’m not used to being around women. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

She stares at me for a moment, as if considering my words. As if she’s weighing my apology. I think she finds it lacking.

“Thanks for driving me to Denver.” Her voice is coolly neutral. “I appreciate it.”

I withdraw my hand as she steps down from the truck, closes her door, and walks away. “It was my pleasure, sweetheart,” I murmur, but she’s well out of hearing range.

She’s been here only a few days, and already my life is more complicated. And I can’t even pinpoint why. It’s not like I have a snowball’s chance in hell with her. My mind knows that. But for some reason, my heart hasn’t caught up. The

voice-over in my head won't shut up. *Forget it, Burke. This isn't a Disney movie, where the beauty falls for the beast.*

Just as I'm about to pull away, the sheriff's car pulls up beside me.

Chris gets out of his cruiser. "Hey, Burke."

When he steps up to my door, I lower the window. "Chris. How's it going?"

"Fine," he says.

He's in uniform. "Is there a problem?"

"Nah. I just thought I'd stop in for a quick bite to eat before I have to get back to work." He glances toward the big doors. "Was that Gabrielle I just saw gettin' out of your truck?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"Nothing. I just wondered—" He cuts himself off.

"I drove her to Denver on a supply run. That's all."

Chris nods. "Good. Okay, good." He checks his watch, and then he looks to the door. "I'd better get in there and grab some food before it's all gone." He takes a couple of steps toward the entrance, then stops and looks back at me. "Hey, if

you don't mind me asking, is there anything going on between you and Gabrielle? Anything I should know about?"

I shake my head. "Nope. Nothing at all."

"Good." He nods again. "I just wanted to ask, you know—to be sure. I wouldn't want to step on anyone's toes." And then he jogs up to the entrance and disappears inside the building.

No. There's nothing going on. Nothing at all.

I catch myself rubbing the center of my aching chest. I've never felt like this before. I've never wanted someone like I want Gabrielle.

Chris Nelson is Prince Charming. Why would Gabrielle be interested in the beast when she can have the prince?

Chapter 11 – Gabrielle

“So, how’d it go in Denver?” Hannah asks from behind the check-in desk. She looks hopeful. “Did you find everything you needed?”

“I did.” I hand her the itemized invoice. “I wrote a check for the deposit today. The balance will be due when they deliver and install everything.”

Her eyes widen a bit when she sees the final price, but she doesn’t balk. She knew how much this would likely cost. Instead, she nods. “Excellent. Did they say when they’d deliver everything?”

“In two weeks. That’s not bad.”

“Let me know if you need help with any prep work before then. We can all chip in and lend a hand. You don’t have to do it all alone.”

“Thank you—”

“Ladies, hello!”

We both look toward the sound of an eager male voice.

“Sheriff!” Hannah says. “What brings you here? I hope you’re not here to arrest someone.” She winks at me.

Chris chuckles. “Not a chance. I just thought I’d pop in for dinner.” He meets my gaze directly. “Hi, Gabrielle. It’s good to see you again. Burke told me about your trip to Denver. I hope it went well.”

I nod. “It did. We’re getting a brand new commercial kitchen installed in a couple of weeks.”

“Glad to hear it.” He points down the hall. “I’d better grab some food before it’s all gone. Any chance there’s some of that apple crisp left?”

“I’m afraid not,” I tell him. “I’ll have to get more apples.”

“You should.” He takes a few steps, then pauses and looks back. “Have you had dinner yet, Gabrielle?”

I have to give him credit for his tenacity. “I haven’t. But John and I ate a late lunch in Denver, and I’m stuffed. I’ll probably skip dinner altogether.”

He nods. “Well, then, I guess I’ll see you later.” He tips the brim of his uniform hat. “Ladies.”

Hannah gives him a little wave. “See you later, Chris.” She watches him until he disappears from sight. “He’s been coming around here an awful lot lately.”

“Who has?” Killian asks as he comes out of the back office holding a stack of papers.

“Chris,” she says. “He was here yesterday, and he’s here again today.”

“I can tell you exactly why he keeps comin’ here,” Killian says, nodding at me. “He’s taken a fancy to our new kitchen manager.”

I laugh. “Oh, I sincerely doubt that.” I try to sound shocked at the idea.

Killian shows the papers in his hand to Hannah. “Where are we keeping the invoices for horse feed?”

“I made a folder in the filing cabinet. It’s listed under ‘feed.’”

“Thanks,” he says. He glances at the paper in his hand. “Man, horses eat a lot.” After planting a kiss on the side of Hannah’s head, he returns to the office.

“So,” Hannah says once we’re alone again. “How’d it go with Burke?”

Immediately, my mood takes a nosedive. I shrug. “Fine, why?”

“Just asking.”

“Everything was perfectly fine. And it wasn’t a *date*, in case you were wondering.” I can’t help the bitterness in my tone. “He made *sure* I knew that.”

Hannah looks surprised. “What are you talking about?”

“I tried to pay for lunch—to thank him for driving me—and apparently that hurt his masculine feelings.” I lower my voice to mimic his. “*The man pays.*”

“Oh.” Hannah looks as confused as I feel. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, so am I. I was just trying to be nice to the guy, and he got all bent out of shape over it.” I blow out a frustrated breath and shake my head. “Men. I’ll never understand them.”

“Well, forget about that. Hey, I wanted to ask you—do you want to come to girls’ night out tonight? It’ll be me, Maggie, Jennie, Ruth, and Maya. You should join us. We’ll have some drinks—well, except for Maggie, who’s nursing—and maybe play some pool.”

A girls’ night out sounds like the perfect antidote to the frustration I’m feeling after how my afternoon with John ended. “I’d love to. Thanks for the invite.”

“Let’s plan to leave after the dinner clean-up. Around nine?”

“Sounds perfect.”

I leave Hannah and head to the restaurant. On my way, I spot Maya relaxing in the lounge, staring at her phone. I think she’s reading. “Hey,” I say, waving. She must have recently returned from an outing because she’s still wearing her hiking boots.

She waves back. “Hey, girl. How’d it go in Denver? I heard you bought a new kitchen.”

“I did. And it went well, for the most part.”

“What does that mean?” she asks.

“Nothing. Never mind. It’s not important.”

“Are you coming to GNO tonight?” Maya asks.

“Yes. I’m looking forward to it.” I gesture toward the restaurant. “Have you eaten?”

“Not yet. I’m waiting on Hicks. We just got in from a hike, and he’s still getting dolled up.”

Speak of the devil, Travis appears. His dark brown hair is damp, so I presume he recently got out of the shower.

Maya gets to her feet and motions for Travis to follow her. “Come on, pal. I’m starving.”

“You didn’t have to wait for me, Maya,” he says as he falls into step behind her.

“I know,” Maya says. The rest of her reply is muffled as they’ve turned the corner to the hallway that leads to the restaurant.

I follow after them and take over manning the host podium from Tammy. It looks like she’s helping out in the restaurant this evening, which explains why Hannah was manning the check-in desk. “Thanks, Tammy. I’ll take it from here.”

“Great. I’ll be at the front desk if you need me.” And then she practically skips out of the restaurant on her way back to the lobby.

A group of three women walk into the restaurant, dressed in jeans and tight T-shirts with very low necklines, all looking a bit disheveled. They’re laughing about something, practically giggling like school girls even though it’s been years since they were in anything resembling a school. I’d put them in their mid-thirties.

“How many?” I ask. “Three of you?”

The one in front, a tall striking blonde, nods. “Yes, thanks.”

“Were you out hiking?” I ask, trying to make small talk.

“No,” the blonde says. “We just had riding lessons.”

“Horseback riding?” I’m confused because John was with me all afternoon.

“Yes,” says a petite brunette. She laughs as she rubs her backside. “God, my ass is sore.”

“I know who can make it feel better,” the blonde says.

All three women laugh, as if they’re sharing an inside joke.

“Who did you have riding lessons with?” I ask, still confused. “John—Burke wasn’t here this afternoon.”

“With his assistant,” the brunette says. “Norma? Nora? Something like that.”

“Nora,” the blonde says. “We were having lessons today in preparation for our trail ride with Burke tomorrow. It’s just the three of us and that sexy cowboy. We have him all to ourselves.” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“I’ll need more than one day with the cowboy,” the brunette says, and again the women laugh.

“Ew, you can have him,” the third woman says. Her light brown hair is cut in a wedge. She rolls her eyes. “Have you seen his face?” She shudders. “No thanks. He looks like Freddy Krueger.”

For a moment, I freeze, and my skin tightens all over. I want to wring that woman’s neck. How dare she talk about John that way? How dare she talk about *any* disfigured person that way? It’s mean and hateful and—

“Excuse me, but would you mind seating us now?” the blonde asks. “It’s getting late, and we’re starving.”

“Of course.” Mentally, I shake myself. I don’t think Hannah would appreciate me ripping these women new ones in front of the other guests. But inwardly, that’s exactly what I want to do.

I lead them to a corner table.

Two of them order the dinner special for tonight—Betty made chicken and dumplings—and the third one orders a Cobb salad. All three order glasses of white wine.

As I head to the kitchen to prepare their orders, that woman’s hateful words reverberate in my head. I’m so tempted to dump her Cobb salad into her lap.

For the rest of the dinner period, I'm fuming over the way she described John.

I return to their table once more to ask if they need anything.

"Well, I still think he's hot," the blonde says. It appears they're still discussing John.

The brunette takes a sip of her wine. "Brittany, you'd do anyone wearing a cowboy hat, admit it."

The blonde—Brittany—laughs. "That is true, Krista."

"You can both have him," says the light-brown pixie cut. "I'll take the big Cajun. He's sex on a stick."

The brunette—the one apparently named Krista—says, "Shut up, Andrea! I already said I have dibs on *him*."

"No, you said you had dibs on the sheriff." Andrea points across the dining room to where Chris is seated.

Krista laughs. "He's cute, but he's too young for me. I'm no cougar."

Amidst the fresh laughter, I have a hard time getting their attention. "Is there anything else I can get you?" The sooner I get away, the better, before I say something I might regret later.

“I think we’re good,” Brittany says.

“So, you’re going on a trail ride tomorrow?” I’m just clarifying. “With Burke?”

“Yes,” Krista says. “We’re riding up to some lake, where we’ll stop and have lunch. Then we ride back.”

“What time do you leave?” I ask.

“We’re supposed to meet at the barn at eight o’clock,” Brittany says.

At the end of the dinner period, I run outside and across the parking lot to the big red barn across the way. Sure enough, John is there, standing at the pasture fence, watching the horses nibbling on grass.

“I’ve decided to take you up on the offer to tag along on tomorrow’s trail ride.”

He nods. “Great. Meet here at eight, dressed for riding.”

“Okay. I’ll be here.”

As I walk back to the lodge, to help with the kitchen clean-up, I’m wondering if I’ve lost my mind. I’ve only had the one riding lesson, and now I’m going to spend *hours* on a horse riding up into the mountains. I don’t know what possessed me to do such a reckless thing. I guess it was because I was pissed

off after hearing those women talk about John like he's a sex object or criticizing his scars. I thought he should have a friend on the ride. And I do, at least, consider myself his friend.

This afternoon, he made it clear we weren't on a *date*, but he never said we couldn't be friends.

Chapter 12 – Gabrielle

I send Nelle and Betty home after a long shift and finish the kitchen clean-up myself. After a long, and at times frustrating, day I should be exhausted, but I'm not. I've gotten my second wind, and I'm excited about going out with Hannah tonight. I'm all for a girls' night out.

After finishing up in the restaurant, I head up to my apartment to freshen up and change.

Hannah texts me, telling me to meet her out front. She's parked in her reserved spot near the lodge entrance. I run out and climb into the front passenger seat of her Jeep.

"We're just waiting on Maya," she says.

Killian is standing at her open driver's door window, his hands casually gripping her car door. "How long do you think you'll be?" he asks Hannah as he flexes his fingers.

"I'm not sure," she says. "We'll have to play it by ear. I guess it depends on the others."

"You won't be out past midnight, will ya?" he asks.

"I doubt it," she says.

I swear, Killian looks like he's pouting. I'm trying to keep a straight face, but it's hard.

"Why don't you invite some of the guys to the lodge to play poker tonight?" she suggests. "I'm sure you could get Owen and Burke to play. Probably Travis and Micah, too."

Maya comes through the lodge doors and heads straight for the Jeep. She opens the rear door on the driver's side and climbs in behind Hannah's seat. "Sorry about that. I got waylaid in the lobby by a guest asking questions about tomorrow's climb."

I turn in my seat to face Maya. "So, you're a rock climber? I'd love to hear more about it."

"Have you climbed before?" she asks.

I laugh. "I don't think the kiddie rock wall at my rec center back home counts as rock climbing."

"It's a start. You should join us one day. Travis and I teach climbing. We'd love to have you." Maya glances at Killian, who's still talking to Hannah. She leans forward and pries Killian's hand off the door frame. "We gotta go, pal. Don't worry, you'll see her again."

Killian takes a step back and lets his hands fall to his sides. He nods to Hannah. “Have fun. Call me if you need anything.”

Hannah waves to him. “You have fun, too.” Then she starts the engine and backs out of the parking spot, turns, and heads down the lane toward the main road.

Maya leans back in her seat and sighs dramatically. “My God, he is such a baby.”

I notice Hannah is smiling.

“I think it’s sweet,” I say. “Obviously, he’s going to miss her.”

“Those two are attached at the hip,” Maya says, rolling her eyes. She pats Hannah’s shoulder. “It’s good for you to have some away time from the Cajun. It’s good for him, too.” Maya redirects her attention to me. “So, Gabrielle. What’s your relationship status?”

“Nonexistent,” I say with a chuckle.

“Ooh, Hannah!” Maya leans forward eagerly. “We should set her up with Micah.”

Hannah glances at Maya in the rearview mirror. “Put your seatbelt on.”

“Fine,” Maya grumbles as she buckles her belt.

“Who’s Micah?” I ask.

“Have you met Ruth yet, as in Ruth’s Tavern?” Maya asks.

“Yes.”

“Micah is her younger brother. He runs the auto repair shop in town. He’s a former military helicopter pilot. He even has his own chopper. He helps us out when we need air support during rescues. In fact, Hannah, didn’t Micah pull you out of the Eagle Ridge valley during that blizzard?”

I remember hearing about this. “Wasn’t that when Killian led a search and rescue mission to find her?”

Maya nods. “Yep. Killian, Maggie, and Owen were all there. Micah took Hannah down off that mountain in his chopper, but the others had to hike out.” She laughs. “I guess it worked out well for everyone. Hannah got a boyfriend out of the ordeal, and Maggie got a husband and a baby. Be careful, Gabrielle. If you go missing around here, you’ll end up married and pregnant.”

“What about you?” I ask Maya.

She scowls at me. “Me, married and pregnant? Oh, hell no! Besides, I don’t need to be rescued. I can rescue myself.”

“No, I mean are you seeing someone?” It seems like she and Travis are together every time I see them. They work together. They eat together. “Are you and Travis—”

She cuts me off. “Oh, God, no. We’re coworkers and climbing partners, that’s it.”

“Oh, sorry. I just assumed—I mean, he seems like a really nice guy.”

“Oh, he is. I’m just not interested in having some guy thinking he can tell me what to do.” Maya gazes pointedly at the back of Hannah’s head. “That would drive me nuts.”

I notice Hannah hasn’t said a word during this entire conversation, but she still has a smile on her face. I’m guessing thoughts of Killian are the reason.

It doesn’t take us long to reach downtown Bryce, if you can call it that. Hannah parks in front of the tavern, and we all climb out of the Jeep. Inside, the bar is bustling, and there’s a pretty good chatter of voices. Ruth’s standing behind the bar. When she catches our attention, she points across the room at a large wooden table where Maggie and Jennie are already seated.

I follow Hannah and Maya through the small crowd, and we take our seats with the others.

Ruth joins us a moment later, dropping off a large tray holding a frosty pitcher of beer, five empty mugs, and a Coke. “Help yourselves, ladies. I’ll be right back to join you.”

Hannah, Maya, and I take the three seats opposite Maggie and Jennie. I’m seated across from Maggie.

“So, Gabrielle,” Maggie says, “how do you like our fair little town so far?”

“I like it a lot,” I say. I have to speak up to be heard over the dull roar of voices and the music coming from the jukebox.

Jennie hands Maggie the Coke, and then she picks up the pitcher of beer and starts pouring. “Would you like beer, Gabrielle? Or something else?”

“Beer is fine,” I say. “Thanks.”

Ruth returns to the table with another tray, this one laden with appetizers. It looks like she brought one of everything on the menu—wings, fried pickles, cheese sticks with marinara for dipping, loaded potato skins, nachos, and pretzel bites with cheese sauce for dipping. “Dig in, ladies,” she says. “There’s plenty more where this came from.”

“How’s Claire doing?” Hannah asks as she reaches for a pretzel bite.

“Great,” Maggie says. “She’s already sleeping through the night, thank God. I was not doing well on only four hours of sleep a night.”

“How is Owen handling fatherhood?” she asks.

Maggie grabs a mozzarella cheese stick. “Like a trooper. He was born to be a daddy.”

“I’ll bet,” Maya says with a snort.

Maggie blushes. “Let’s not go there, okay?”

While they all catch each other up on what’s going on in their lives, I sit back and listen. The only one I know here is Hannah, and honestly, I don’t know her that well. We met only a few times back in Chicago when she attended McIntyre family events—weddings and baby showers. I was at those events because one of my best friends, Beth, married into the McIntyre family. That sort of made me an honorary member.

It’s nice they’re welcoming me into their group here. I assume that’s Hannah’s doing.

“Eat something, Gabrielle,” Jennie says to me, motioning to the tray of appetizers.

A shouting match at one of the pool tables breaks out, and Ruth hollers, “Mark Mitchell, you settle your ass down right now, or I swear I’ll kick you to the curb.”

The argument quickly dissipates, and I’m impressed with Ruth’s command of the situation.

Ruth shakes her head. “Idiots.”

Maya leans close to me. “They’re scared shitless of Ruth. She has a reputation around here.”

I’m not sure what kind of reputation Maya is referring to, but sure enough the two guys who were arguing have made up and are back to playing pool.

The conversation continues.

A blond guy wearing a red plaid shirt walks up behind Maya. “Hey, Maya. Wanna dance?”

“Get lost, Tony,” she says, not even bothering to look at him.

“Who’s your new friend?” the guy asks. “Care to introduce me?”

I glance up and realize he’s looking at me.

“Forget it, Tony,” Maya says, still not bothering to look at him. She takes a long swig of her beer. “The girl has standards, and you don’t meet them.”

Ruth makes a shooing motion. “Move along, Tony. You’re barkin’ up the wrong tree.”

Once he’s gone, Maya says to me, “Be prepared to get hit on a lot, Gabrielle. This is a small town, and there are way more single guys than girls living around here. They get overly excited when fresh meat rolls into town. They’re like sharks at a feeding frenzy. If only half-a-dozen guys hit on you tonight, consider yourself lucky. I’ll let you know which ones to avoid. Like Tony. He’s after only one thing.”

The night proceeds. Someone from the bar brings us another pitcher of beer, and later someone brings us another tray of appetizers. The beer is good, as is the food. I’m not very familiar with country music, but I do recognize some popular songs that I know and like.

Over the next hour, three more guys come up to Maya and ask her to dance. She says no to the first two, but she says yes to the last guy—someone named Kent. “I’ll be back,” she says, rolling her eyes at me. “It won’t kill me to dance one dance.”

Jennie dances several times, with a different guy each time. Ruth turns down several offers. No one asks Maggie or Hannah—I guess everyone knows they're already taken, and therefore off limits.

Even I get a couple of offers, which I politely decline. It's not that I don't want to dance, or that I'm against meeting someone. It's just—well, I keep thinking about John. I almost wish he were here. Maybe after a couple of beers, I'd get up the courage to ask *him* to dance. But then I wonder if dancing would hurt his leg. If it did, I'd be just as happy to sit it out with him.

“You're not dancing?” Ruth asks me when I turn down a third offer.

I shake my head. “I had a long day. I'm tired.”

“Suit yourself,” she says.

It's almost eleven-thirty, and we've been here a little over two hours.

Hannah catches me yawning. “We should think about getting back,” she says to the group at large. “Tomorrow morning will be here before we know it.”

As soon as we say our goodbyes, Owen appears out of nowhere, walks up behind Maggie, and puts his hands on her shoulders. He leans down to kiss the top of her head. “Ready, babe?”

“Yes,” she replies, looking up to smile at him. This time, he leans down and kisses her on the mouth.

“Hi, Gabrielle,” Owen says. “I’m glad to see you came out with the ladies. Welcome to the club.”

“How’s Claire?” Maggie asks as she rises from her chair.

“She was sound asleep when I left her with the boys.”

“My sons, Ryan and Brendan,” Maggie explains. “You met Ryan the other day at my store. Brendan is sixteen. They’re both wonderful big brothers to their baby sister.”

Owen takes Maggie’s hand. “Come on, Jennie,” he says. “We’ll give you a ride home.”

As Owen walks Maggie and Jennie out the back door, Hannah, Maya, and I thank Ruth for her generous hospitality. We leave by the front door, where Hannah is parked.

“Where does Ruth live?” I ask.

“She has a cabin a little ways out of town,” Hannah says, “but she also keeps an apartment over the tavern. She often

crashes up there.”

It’s a short drive back to the lodge. When Hannah parks in her reserved spot near the front entrance, we climb out and head toward the double set of glass doors.

Killian comes out to greet us. “Have a good time?” he asks Hannah as he pulls her into his arms. He gives her a tight squeeze and kisses her forehead.

“We had a great time,” she says. “Ruth plied us with food *and* alcohol.”

For a split second, I experience a pang of envy. Clearly, Killian dotes on Hannah. Just as Owen seems to dote on his wife. I’ve never had a relationship like that. Honestly, I was always too busy working at Renaldo’s to date much. My job—my career—always came first. But this time around, I’m hoping to find a healthier balance in my life.

The doors open and out walks John. His limp is a bit more pronounced than usual—he must be tired. “Night, ladies,” he says, tipping the brim of his hat.

“Goodnight, ya’ll,” Maya says as she trudges inside the building. “I’m hitting the hay. Got an early morning group to take out.”

Hannah and Killian climb into the Jeep and drive around the building to the lane that leads to their log cabin up the way.

“Did you have a good time?” John asks me.

We’re the only two left.

“I did. Hannah’s friends are nice, very welcoming.”

He nods. “Glad to hear it.” He motions in the direction of his cabin. “It’s late.”

I nod. “Yeah, me too. I’m so tired I’ll probably be asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow.”

John lingers a moment, then he nods toward the doors. “I’ll wait until you’re inside.”

The lodge doors are only twenty feet away from where we’re standing. The lobby is fully lit, and I can see two staff members working behind the counter, and a third person vacuuming the entryway. There is absolutely zero risk to me as I make my way inside the building.

“Thanks, John,” I say. I can feel my lips curving up of their own volition. John’s the kind of man who would dote on his partner. He’d make sure she got home safely. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

He nods. “Goodnight, Gabrielle.”

I'm grinning ear to ear all the way to my apartment. I let myself in, grab a bottle of water, and get ready for bed.

As I'm lying in my comfy bed, feeling sleep fast approaching, I wonder if a cowboy like John Burke could ever be interested in a city girl.

Chapter 13 – John

After taking a hot shower and swallowing some more over-the-counter pain pills, I climb into bed and stare at the ceiling. I can't sleep, and it's not because my leg is still throbbing like a bitch. I tried not to let Gabrielle see me limping today—both in Denver and here at the lodge this evening—but I'm sure she did. There's no way in hell she could have missed that.

I hate to show any kind of weakness in front of anyone, but especially in front of Gabrielle. I wish she could see me as I was before the explosion that ruined my military career and nearly destroyed me. I wish I was still the man I used to be.

After lying here for an hour, I get up, put my clothes back on, and my boots, and head to the barn. It's dark and cool inside the barn at night. It's my own private sanctuary. I walk down the corridor between the stalls and check each of the horses. They're all sleeping comfortably. I end up in the tack room, where I put away some of the equipment that Nora cleaned right before she left for the day.

Finally, my body is dragging from physical exhaustion, so I lie down on the old leather sofa and close my eyes.

Gabrielle's coming with us on the ride tomorrow, but honestly, I'm not sure how I feel about it. I'm trying hard to keep my distance from her, at least emotionally, and I keep failing. It'll be a lot harder if we're spending another day together. Of course there will be three guests with us—three socialites from L.A. I'm sure I'll be so busy tryin' to wrangle them that I won't have time to think about Gabrielle.

* * *

I'm up early the next morning, just after dawn. After I fill my thermos with coffee and grab a bite to eat, I get the horses ready while Nora runs up to the restaurant to pick up five packed lunches and water bottles for our trip.

“Good morning.”

I turn to see Gabrielle standing just five feet away. She's dressed for the occasion—blue jeans, a T-shirt, a hoodie wrapped around her waist, and boots. “What's in your pack?” I ask. She's got a small backpack strapped over her shoulders.

“The basics. A couple of water bottles, some protein bars, bug spray, and a small first-aid kit. And my phone, of course.”

“Your phone won't work where we're going.”

“Then how do we call for help if there's an accident?”

“I have a sat phone.”

“A what?”

“A satellite phone. I can call the lodge if there’s a problem.”

She looks relieved. “Oh, good.”

Finally, I’ve got all five horses saddled and ready to go.

Gabrielle smiles when she spots Odin standing at the end of the line. “Good morning, Odin.”

Odin shakes his head and whinnies softly.

“You’ll take it easy on me, won’t you?” she asks as she makes her way down to him.

I follow her. “You aren’t nervous, are you?”

“No, of course not.” She glances at Odin. “It’s just that Odin’s at the back of the line, and you’ll be way up at the front. You won’t be beside me.”

Hearing her say those words makes my chest tighten, and for a moment I consider rearranging the order of the horses and putting Gabrielle right behind me. But no. This is the best order. Odin’s my most dependable horse. I know Gabrielle will

be perfectly safe with him. “You have nothing to worry about. He’s a seasoned professional.”

Gabrielle speaks softly to Odin as she approaches his left side. When she reaches his head, she extends her hand and lets him nuzzle it. *Lucky horse*. After he’s sniffed her a bit, she strokes his forelock. He blows air out of his nostrils—a horse’s greeting—and leans into her touch.

I don’t blame him. If she touched me like that, I’d want to get closer, too.

Nora returns then with a backpack, which she sets on a wooden bench near the barn door. “Here you go, boss. Five lunches, plus water bottles.”

“Thanks, Nora.”

The three women scheduled for the ride today arrive at the barn.

“Good morning, Burke,” the tall blonde says with a smile.

I nod. “Ma’am. Good morning, ladies. This is Gabrielle,” I say, planning to introduce them to each other.

“Oh, we’ve met,” the blonde says coolly. “We’re practically old friends.”

I look to Gabrielle for more information.

“In the restaurant yesterday evening. At dinner.”

“I see. Okay. That’s good. You all know each other.” I check over everyone’s attire and footwear. Everything looks in order.

I go over the safety rules with the group, and then Nora and I help them all mount their horses.

“I’ve got this,” I tell Nora when she approaches Gabrielle. “I’ll help her.” I step up beside Gabrielle. “Ready? Just like you did the other day.”

She nods. “It’s now or never, right?” She grabs the reins and the horn in her left hand and the back of the saddle in her right. She slips her left foot into the stirrup, and I help her up. She swings her right leg over the saddle and settles into her seat.

“Good job,” I tell her.

She takes the reins in both hands.

“Easy on the reins, remember? Odin knows what to do. Just let him do it, okay. Sit back and relax.”

She nods. “Got it.”

“And Gabrielle, if you need anything, or you have any concerns, just call for me, all right?”

She looks down at me. “I’ll be okay.”

On impulse, I pat her thigh, then rest my hand on her leg for a moment. I’m still fighting the urge to move her up in the line so that she’s right behind me. “You’ll do great. Okay, ladies,” I say to the group. Let’s go.”

I slip the supply backpack on and mount Zeus. “Hold down the fort, Nora.”

Nora salutes. “Have fun, boss.”

I take the lead. The three guests fall in line after me, with Gabrielle in the rear. I glance back at her one more time before we leave, just to make sure she’s settled and comfortable.

“We should be back around three,” I tell Nora. “If we’re not back by five, and you haven’t heard from me, come look for us.”

“Got it,” Nora nods. “Break a leg.”

“Please don’t say that,” I tell her. It has always sounded like a bad omen to me.

* * *

Everyone’s pretty quiet on the ride up to Pine Lake. That’s fine with me, even preferable. The less talking, the better. Everyone’s keeping pace and following the rules.

I keep looking back to check on Gabrielle. I'm not worried about her—she's on Odin. I'd put my hundred-year-old grandma on Odin without a second thought. He's solid and reliable. If a rattler crossed paths in front of him, he'd step on it and Gabrielle would never even know what happened.

Still, I keep looking back to check on her. Every time I do, Brittany waves at me, and Krista winks. *These women are barking up the wrong tree.*

It's not that I don't like women. I do. A lot. I just keep to myself now. No one needs to sit across a breakfast table and stare at this face.

I'm not sayin' I've been a monk for the past decade. I haven't. I've had sex plenty of times. But it's always been quick and impersonal, and always in the dark. I can't stand the idea that some woman is starin' at my face.

"Hey, Burke!" Brittany yells loud enough to wake the dead. She certainly alerted every black bear and cougar within a ten-mile radius.

"Whoa." I pull up lightly on the reins and Zeus stops on a dime. I turn in the saddle and glance back at the tall blonde.
"Yes?"

She smiles sheepishly and cocks her head. “I need to use the ladies’ room.”

Her two friends snicker at that.

I notice Gabrielle rolling her eyes, which nearly makes me laugh out loud, but I manage to hold it in. “Okay.” I nod toward the trees to the south side of the trail. “Have at it.”

She gives me an exaggerated pout. “Can you help me down?”

“Sure.” I suppress a sigh because I know this is bullshit. Nora told me they have plenty of experience riding, and she confirmed they did really well on their lessons yesterday. They know how to mount and dismount a horse. Nevertheless, for the sake of expediency, I dismount and walk back to Brittany.

She holds her arms out to me, and I have no choice but to take hold of her waist and gently lower her to the ground. She grasps my shoulders and leans into me so that she practically slides down my body until her feet hit the ground.

I take hold of Loki’s reins and nod toward the trees. “You can go far enough into the woods for privacy, but not too far. You should still be able to see and hear us, even if we can’t see you. Got it?”

Krista chuckles. “Maybe you should go with her, Burke, so she doesn’t get eaten by a bear.”

“It’s not a bear she wants to eat her,” Andrea says.

All three women laugh.

I catch Gabrielle’s gaze, and again she rolls her eyes, then looks up to the sky and shakes her head.

“I think Brittany can manage her business on her own,” I say, nodding toward the trees. “Watch out for poison ivy.”

Brittany gives me a tight smile before she walks around the front of Loki and steps into the woods.

I drop Loki’s reins because I know he won’t go anywhere and walk down the line to check on everyone.

“You ladies doin’ okay?” I ask Krista and Andrea.

“I’m starving,” Krista says. “When do we get to eat?”

“When we reach Pine Lake,” I say. “How about you?” I ask Andrea. “You doin’ okay?”

She shrugs. “Other than having a sore butt, I’m fine.”

When I reach Gabrielle, I pat Odin’s back flank and gaze up at her. “How’re you doin’?”

She nods. “Fine. How much longer until we reach the lake?”

“We’re halfway there.” I stare up into her green eyes, which are framed by thick brown lashes. Her hair is secured in a single braid. Her cheeks are pink from the cooling air. The higher the elevation, the cooler the temperature.

Gabrielle unties her hoodie from around her waist and slips it on.

“You were smart to bring that,” I say. “It’ll be a bit chilly up at the lake.”

Andrea turns to look back at us. “Brittany’s been out there a while, Burke. Maybe you should go look for her. She has no sense of direction.”

“Yeah,” Krista says. “Seriously, Brittany could get lost in a paper bag. She got lost in a Neiman-Marcus changing room once. I kid you not.”

Both Krista and Andrea laugh. I glance at Gabrielle, who shakes her head.

I rest my hand on her thigh. “I’m glad you decided to come along.”

She gives me a small smile. “Me, too.”

Finally, Brittany comes traipsing out of the woods, frantically running her hands over her hair. “I think I walked through a spider web.” She makes a disgusted face. Suddenly, she pales. “There aren’t tarantulas in Colorado, are there? Please say no.”

“Actually there are,” I say. “But we really don’t see them in these parts. They’re mostly in the southern regions of the state.”

Her blue eyes are wide as saucers as she mounts Loki and picks up her reins. “I’m never getting off this horse again.”

I refrain from laughing at her. “Besides, they don’t make webs above ground—not the kind you’d walk through.”

The trail starts climbing now as we head up to a higher elevation. I can feel the change in the air.

“You’ll notice the landscape changing a bit,” I tell the group, “the higher the elevation. The trees will start to thin out a bit, and you’ll see more evergreens. You’ll also see more outcroppings of rock.”

“We don’t have to climb any rocks, do we?” Krista asks, sounding horrified.

I shake my head. “No. That’s a different outing entirely.”

Chapter 14 – Gabrielle

Sure enough, just as John said, the trees gradually thin out a bit, which allows us to see much farther than we could before. Outcroppings of jagged rocks jut up from the ground in all directions. In the distance, I can see much higher mountains with white, snowcapped peaks. The sky overhead is a beautiful clear blue. Large white clouds drift by overhead.

Just before eleven, we reach Pine Lake. This large, irregularly shaped body of water sits in a valley between two ridges.

We ride halfway around the lake and stop at an established camp site. Besides the spot having several picnic tables, it also offers us places to tie our horses.

“These are highlines,” John says to the group. “We’ll put three horses on this line, and the other two on that line over there.”

We each dismount and walk our horse to a rope stretched between two tall wooden poles. John demonstrates how to tie our horses’ leads to these silver swivel rings attached to the rope overhead. The horses are spaced quite a distance apart.

Immediately, the horses start happily nibbling on the grass at their feet.

After the horses are secured, we gather around one of the picnic tables for lunch. John opens the supply pack and pulls out a soft-sided cooler containing water bottles.

I'm parched, so I can't wait to drink something cold.

We all take a seat at the table as John hands out the packed lunches. Each lunch contains a sandwich, an apple, a bag of potato chips, and a brownie. I smile as I bite into my sandwich. This takes me back to my school days when my mom packed my lunch.

"I got the vegetarian sandwich," Brittany says, wrinkling her nose. "Here this one's for you." She trades with Andrea.

"God, whoever thought a turkey sandwich could taste this good?" Krista asks as she polishes off the first half of her sandwich.

They're just simple sandwiches—turkey, cheese, and mayo on whole wheat bread—but they taste divine. There's something about being out in the great outdoors and fresh air that tends to stimulate a person's appetite.

John and I end up seated on one side of the picnic table, opposite the other three. I take a long sip of cold water as I observe the women seated across from us. Obviously, they're good friends. They're very relaxed with each other, and they tend to laugh at a lot of inside jokes.

I suspect Brittany is crushing on John because Andrea and Krista keep elbowing her and smirking. I swear, it's like being in middle school all over again.

John makes a point of sitting on my left, and I don't think that was an accident. His hat is on, the brim pulled down a bit. I hate that he feels like he has to hide one side of his face. Despite his facial scars, he's still a handsome man. And I find his demeanor makes him even more attractive.

Besides, I've always been one who roots for the underdog.

After we finish our lunch, we pack up our trash, careful to leave nothing behind, then strike out on a hike around the lake.

Up close to the water, I can see how clear it is. The sandy lake bed, littered with smooth stones is clearly visible. Every now and then I see a flash of iridescent scales as a fish darts by. Schools of smaller fish swim closer to the bank, hiding in vegetation and under fallen tree limbs submerged in the water.

I try to shut out the voices of the three women who are regaling us with stories of shopping in L.A. They're walking ahead, followed by John. Because I'm in the rear, I notice John's limp is more pronounced than usual. His leg must be stiff from the three-hour ride.

At about the halfway point, a fox darts out from beneath some shrubs and makes a run for it. Brittany screams, flailing her arms as she stumbles backward. She bumps into Krista, who falls back onto her butt in the shallows. Andrea laughs her head off as Krista attempts to climb to her feet, sputtering in indignation.

"Oh, my God, I'm so sorry!" Brittany tells Krista.

Krista scowls as she struggles to stand. "Sure you are."

"Really, I am!" Brittany says. But then she starts laughing, too, undermining her attempt at an apology.

John offers Krista his hand and helps her to her feet.

"You okay?" he asks Krista.

Her jeans and sneakers are soaked. "Hardly! Do I look okay? I'm *wet!*"

"Did you bring a change of clothes, like I recommended?" John asks.

“No! I wasn’t planning on going swimming.” She gives her friends the stink eye, and that only makes them laugh harder.

I bite my lip to keep from joining in, but it’s hard not to because the look on Krista’s face is so comical. If looks could kill, Brittany would be a dead woman.

Brittany looks genuinely mortified. “Krista, I’m so sorry!”

“Oh, shut up!” Krista says.

We continue our hike, stopping now and then to peer into the lake. The water is pristine, so clear we can see all kinds of wildlife in the water—frogs, fish, geese, even turtles. When we encounter a snake slithering through the grass, the three L.A. women screech their heads off.

“Is it poisonous?” Andrea asks.

“No,” John says. “It’s just a grass snake. It’s harmless.”

“You’re sure?” she repeats, looking rather horrified.

John sighs heavily. “I’m sure.”

I do my best to ignore them. I’m more interested in enjoying the stunning scenery and the mountain peaks in the distance. I’m struck by how breathtaking it is out here. No wonder Hannah didn’t want to return to Chicago after

finishing her graduate studies. I don't blame her for wanting to stay.

When we complete our circuit around the lake, we each drink another water bottle to hydrate for the return trip. We also take turns peeing in the woods. I find that harder to do than expected. I'm sure it's a piece of cake for John. That thought makes me smile.

While we're waiting on Andrea to return from her potty break, I sit on the picnic table top and take a few minutes to enjoy the lake view. It's quiet up here—at least it is when the trio is silent. It's peaceful and relaxing. I'd like to come up here again sometime soon, but without all the commotion.

John comes to stand beside me. As usual, he positions himself so I can't see the left side of his face. The fact he feels the need to do that saddens me. I was hoping, because of our budding friendship, he would trust me by now. At least trust me enough to let down his guard and be himself, at least around me.

“So, what do you think?” he asks.

“About what?” His question catches me off guard. I'm thinking a lot of things at the moment—some I don't mind

telling him, and other things I want to keep to myself. Like how I spend way too much time thinking about him.

“For starters,” he says, “what do you think about horseback riding? It’s easier than you expected, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but I think that’s because your horses are really well trained.”

He nods. “They are. They’re very reliable. They have to be or we’d get our asses sued.”

I laugh. “Good point.”

“What do you think about the view?” He turns slightly to face me, so he can see my expression.

I gaze out at the mountains in the distance. “It’s breathtaking.”

He smiles, as if he’s relieved I feel that way. “It is.” Then he grins and lowers his voice. “And what do you think about the company?”

I know he’s referring to our lively trio, but that’s not how I want to interpret his question. “I like it a lot.”

He meets my gaze out of the corner of his eye, holding it for a long silent moment as if he’s trying to read between the lines.

I don't want any ambiguity or confusion, so I make my meaning clear. I lay my hand on his shoulder. "You're a great guide. I've enjoyed this trek far more than I thought I would, and it's because of you. Thanks for inviting me along." Then I climb off the picnic table. It's time to go.

Andrea comes trudging out of the trees. "Peeing outdoors is gross," she says. Her scowl sends her two friends into peals of laughter.

After we make sure camp is tidy, we mount our horses and start on the return journey. John leads the way, followed by the L.A. trio, and I take up the rear. I guess that's what I get for being the sensible one.

* * *

We're all tired and cranky—well, except for John—when we return to the barn around three o'clock, right on time. Nora is waiting for us. She and John start to unsaddle the horses so they can let them in the pasture to rest and cool down.

"I need a shower," Brittany says. "And a nap." She checks the time. "What's on the menu for dinner this evening, Gabrielle? Please say it's something good."

I do my best to hide the fact that my butt and thighs are killing me. I also desperately need a shower and a change of

clothes. Still, the food must go on.

Mentally, I tally the groceries I have on hand and how much time we have. It'll have to be something I can whip up pretty quickly. We still have plenty of chicken breasts, potatoes, and broccoli left. "Grilled chicken breasts with lemon dill sauce, garlic mashed potatoes, and steamed broccoli," I say, hoping that will meet with her approval.

"Hmph," she says, shrugging. "That sounds good."

The trio disappear into the lodge, presumably returning to their rooms to clean up and change for dinner. I plan to do the same before I head up to the restaurant and start cooking.

"Are you eating dinner in the restaurant?" I ask John as he turns toward the barn.

He pauses and looks back. "I thought I'd shower and grab a bite to eat in my cabin. Why?"

I realize if I want a chance with John, I'm going to have to make the first move. His natural inclination is to distance himself from people. To be alone. "I thought maybe we'd have dinner together."

He stares at me like I'm speaking a foreign language—one he doesn't understand. "You want to have dinner with me?"

He actually sounds shocked.

“It’s not a date or anything.” Grinning, I parrot back his words from yesterday. I shrug. “I just thought it would be nice to sit and relax over a good meal.”

His posture eases as he contemplates my suggestion. “Yeah, okay. I’ll come in for dinner. But I do need to take care of the horses first and then get myself cleaned up. Can I meet you at six?”

“That would be perfect.” It’ll give me time to make sure dinner is going well.

He doesn’t even crack a smile. “You did good on the trail today. It was nice having you along.” Then he disappears into the barn, leaving me speechless.

Will wonders never cease? John Burke just gave me a compliment.

* * *

John takes a sip of his black coffee. “Did you come along on the ride today to protect my virtue?”

“Guilty.” I grin. “You should have heard how those women were talking about you at dinner last night—like you were a piece of meat. They were calling dibs.”

He shakes his head. “I doubt any of them really want a piece of me.”

“Don’t sell yourself short.” I pop a piece of grilled chicken in my mouth and chew. *Mm*. The seasonings are spot on, if I do say so myself. Everything turned out well. The garlic mashed potatoes are flavorful, and the steamed broccoli is cooked to perfection.

We’re seated in the restaurant dining room enjoying tonight’s special. He’s drinking coffee, and I’m having a glass of white wine. The dining room is nearly full tonight, and the guests seem to be enjoying their meals.

Word is getting out that the restaurant is about to undergo a transformation. Once the new equipment is installed and the new menu implemented, I think we’ll see even more diners coming from town.

Brittany and her friends walk into the restaurant, dressed up like they’re going to a Hollywood premiere. Fortunately, Tammy seats them on the other side of the dining room. I’m tired, and I really don’t want to deal with their theatrics right now.

“Have you always been around horses?” I ask John. He’s such a mystery.

He nods. “Born and raised with them. My mom breeds horses—well, she’s retired now. But yeah, I grew up with them. Zeus is one of my mom’s horses. So is Loki. She specialized in Quarter Horses for show and trail. When I departed the military, I moved back to the family ranch while I was recuperating. Once I was able to start working again—here—I was able to bring some of my horses with me. I’ve known every horse in these stables since they were born.”

“Whose idea was it to name them after Norse gods?”

“That was my idea,” he says. “I was always fascinated by mythology as a kid. I wanted to be Thor. I used to carry a hammer around with me, pretending it was *Mjolnir*. I wanted to be a superhero. That’s why I joined the military—to protect people.”

I’m glad he brought up his military experience. “How long have you been out of the military?”

He frowns. “Going on ten years now.”

“How long have you worked here?”

“Since they opened the lodge six months ago. Before coming here, I worked on my parents’ ranch just tryin’ to

rebuild my strength and stamina. Caring for horses requires a lot of physical effort.”

“Hey, guys, how’s it going?” Killian approaches our table carrying a tray with two plates of food and two bottles of beer.

“Grabbing some dinner?” I ask.

Killian nods. “Hannah and I are camped out in the office tonight working on quarterly taxes. I just came up to grab some food. How was your ride today?”

“Good,” John says. “Everyone made it back in one piece.”

Killian laughs. “I’m glad to hear that.” Then he looks my way. “I heard you went too. Your first time?”

“Yep. It was a little terrifying at first. My horse—Odin—is really tall. But after a while, I was able to relax enough to enjoy the scenery. Pine Lake is stunning.”

Killian nods. “It is. Hannah and I like to camp up there. You should try it sometime, Gabrielle. Join one of the overnight camping excursions and rough it out in nature.”

I laugh. “I think a picnic and a hike around the lake was enough roughing it for me.”

“Spoken like a true city girl,” John says. He winks at Killian. “Baby steps. We’ll get her camping yet.”

“Hey, I did all right for myself today,” I say in my defense.
“At least I wasn’t the one who fell in the lake.”

Killian’s brow goes up. “Who fell into the lake?”

“Krista,” I say. I nod toward the trio, who are sipping wine from long-stemmed glasses. “The brunette.”

“Yikes,” Killian says. “I take it she wasn’t hurt.”

John shakes his head. “Just her pride.”

“Well, have a nice evening you two,” Killian says. “I’m heading back to the office.”

After we finish our dinners, we both have a brownie for dessert. I didn’t have time to prepare anything else. I really need to talk to Jennie about placing a regular order for pies.

When we’re done, John reaches into his back pocket for his wallet.

“That’s okay,” I say. “It’s on the house. That’s one of the perks of dining with the restaurant manager.”

He smiles. “Remind me to eat with you more often.”

I definitely could live with that.

My pulse starts racing when I realize now’s a perfect time to invite him back to my place. That’s how this works, right?

Invite the guy over for a nightcap and see where it goes.

“Would you like to come to my apartment? For a drink?”

His smile fades. “I—it’s getting late. I should get back to the barn and check on the horses.”

I glance out the window to see it’s still light outside. It’s only eight-thirty. “So, that’s a no?”

He studies me a moment, his eyes searching mine as if he’s working through a difficult problem. “I’ll walk you to your apartment, though. It’s the least I can do after you kept me company today.”

Part of me—my bruised ego—wants to tell him to never mind. But part of me is hopeful that I’m not imagining the connection I feel between us.

I try not to let my disappointment show. I like John. I more than like him. He’s the strong quiet type, that’s for sure, but he also exudes integrity. I find that very attractive. “Thanks,” I say, forcing a smile.

It’s not his fault if he’s not interested.

We leave the restaurant and head upstairs to the staff apartments.

I unlock my door. “Goodnight, John. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As I’m reaching for the doorknob, he says, “Gabrielle, wait.”

I pause, looking back at him.

“Maybe just one drink,” he says. He’s frowning, clearly not happy at the prospect of being alone with me in my apartment.

Letting him off the hook, I shake my head. “No, it’s okay. Just forget I asked. Have a good evening.”

When I open my door and step inside, he follows me in.

Chapter 15 – John

I don't know what possessed me to stay. I guess it's because I don't want the evening to end. I like Gabrielle. I like being around her. She's different from a lot of the women I know. She's straight-forward and to the point. She doesn't play games. She's not coy. She's not a flirt. She's the kind of woman who's worth taking a chance on.

For me, that means taking a big chance.

I haven't lowered my guard around a woman in a long time. And to be honest, I'm not sure I can do it now, not even with her. There's just so much at stake. I hate to admit it, even to myself, but my self-confidence has really taken a hit over the past few years. When I'm with a woman, I feel like I'm a freak. Someone to gawk at. Maybe this is my own insecurity talking. Maybe it's all in my head. But whatever the reason, it's different with Gabrielle. She treats me like I'm just any other man.

She makes me forget I'm damaged.

Gabrielle motions me in and shuts the door. "Come on in, then. I'm afraid I have only wine and beer to offer you. Or a

soft drink. I don't have any liquor. I'm still stocking my pantry."

"A soft drink would be great. Thanks." I think right now would be a really bad time for me to drink alcohol.

It smells good in here, faintly of fresh baked cookies. Maybe cinnamon or vanilla. I don't know if it's because she's been baking or if it's air freshener, but regardless, it smells nice.

She flips on a light switch just inside the door, and two lamps in the living room turn on. I watch her walk over to the kitchen, where she flips another couple of switches. A light comes on over the kitchen island, as well as overhead lights.

"They did a good job on your apartment," I say. "It's nice."

Gabrielle nods. "I love it. I wasn't expecting something this nice. Hannah's sister Sophie oversaw the decorating, so I shouldn't be surprised. She has great taste." She studies me a moment. "You can take your hat off, if you want to."

My heart slams into my ribs as my lungs seize up on me. No one's ever asked me to do that.

She gives me the tiniest of smiles. “Make yourself at home.”

I swallow hard past the lump in my throat. “I—” She stands there patiently, just waiting for me to decide what I’m going to do. She has no idea what she’s asking of me. Or, maybe she knows exactly what she’s asking. She’s asking me to let down my guard, to expose myself. To *trust* her. “I’ll have that hair.” As stupid as that sounds, it’s the only excuse I can think of not to take it off.

She shrugs. “That’s okay. I don’t mind.”

Still, she waits. I could say no. I could turn around and walk right out that door. I could do a dozen different things, and somehow I find myself really wanting to do the one thing she’s asking of me.

It’s terrifying. And yet, somehow I find myself reaching up to grip the crown of my cowboy hat and lift it off.

She holds out her hand. “I’ll hang it up for you.”

Standing stock still, like a wild animal caught in a trap, I hand her my hat.

She hangs it on a coat rack near the door, then returns to the kitchen. “I’ll grab our drinks.”

I can't believe I'm standing here without my hat on, my face fully exposed. She's looking right at me as if it's just another Tuesday, and she doesn't care that one side of my face looks like road rash. I swallow hard and find my voice. "On second thought, I'll have a beer." I'm going to need something stronger than a soft drink to get me through this. Whatever this is. I'm still not sure.

She opens the fridge and grabs two bottles of Fat Tire.

"I see you've been studying up on Colorado beers," I say.

Nodding, she hands me a bottle, then grabs a bottle opener from the silverware drawer. "Colorado has a vibrant culture of craft breweries." After popping the cap off her bottle, she holds the opener aloft. "Can I open yours?"

She's asking because my left hand—encased in a leather glove—is jammed into my front left pocket.

Shit. Now I'm backed into a corner. I can't pop the cap off my bottle using just one hand. "That's okay. I've got it." I withdraw my hand from my pocket and take hold of the bottle so I can pop off the cap with my right hand.

"Do you have limited use of your left hand?" She asks me that matter of factly, like she'd say, *the weather's sure nice*

today.

Suddenly, it feels real warm in here. “No.”

“I just wondered as you keep it covered and usually out of sight.”

“It works well enough, for the most part. It’s a bit stiff because of, well, the scar tissue makes it stiff. But I can use it fine.” *God, I can’t believe I’m telling her this.*

She nods, then she tips her head back and takes a swig of her drink, her slender neck arched. For some reason, watching her swallow is turning me on.

I’m such a perverted fuck. She deserves better.

“How are you liking Bryce?” I ask, hoping to change the subject to something safer. I hate talking about myself, and I especially hate talking about my injuries.

She sets her bottle down. “I like it here. To be honest, I wasn’t sure I would, but I do. I thought I’d miss the city, the hustle and bustle, the amenities, and maybe I will eventually, but right now I’m enjoying the pristine wilderness and the snow-covered mountain peaks in the distance.”

Our gazes lock, and for a moment I can’t breathe. Her green eyes are crystal-clear, like the pristine water in a crisp

mountain lake. I could stare into those eyes forever, searching for the secrets held in those deep pools.

She stares right back, not looking away, not bashful. Her gaze slowly skims across my face as she studies my features. There's no disgust there, no sense of horror or disappointment. She's just a woman—a beautiful woman—looking at a man.

I don't know what to make of it. Most of the women I've been with lately I picked up in a dark bar, and we were both a little bit drunk. And if I fucked someone, it was with the lights off. Neither one of us is drunk right now, or anything close to it, and yet she's watching me with something I can only describe as *interest*. I can't even let myself dare to think she could be interested in me.

Gabrielle picks up her bottle and peruses the label. "It's pretty good. I can see why it's so popular." She takes another sip. "I like the fruity notes behind the subtle taste of malt. It's very crisp, bright, and balanced." She nods as if in approval.

I laugh. "I can tell you're a chef. If someone asked me what I thought of the beer, I'd say *it's good*. I don't have a culinary vocabulary to tell you why I like it."

We're still in the kitchen, haven't moved from our spots. I don't want to move. I don't want this moment to end. Right

now, I can pretend that we're just a man and woman, getting to know each other, and there's no impediment between us.

She sets her bottle on the counter. I polish off the last of my beer and set my mine down too.

Suddenly, the air thickens, and my heart jackhammers in my chest. "I should go," I say, breaking the silence. "It's getting late."

The corners of her pretty lips turn down slightly. *She's disappointed.*

The knowledge hits me like a blow to the gut.

How can she want me? How can she want anything to do with me—even a one-night stand?

Gabrielle walks around the kitchen island and comes to stand directly in front of me. She's tall for a woman, so she hardly has to tilt her head up much to look me in the eye. "If you're sure you have to go," she says.

I nod. "I do." My pulse is racing. "I should."

"Or, you could stay a while longer."

"Gabrielle, I—" Again, I get lost in those eyes. I can't look away. "I don't—I can't—"

Her expression falls. “Can’t, or don’t want to? Just so I’m clear.”

“Is there a difference?”

She nods. “I think so, yes. A big difference. But either way, I guess you should go.” She takes a step back, giving me space.

“It’s not that I don’t *want* to.” *Damn it! I’m fucking this up before it even started.*

“Then what’s the problem?” she asks. “We’re both single, available, consenting adults.”

I feel my face heating. “*You* shouldn’t want to. That’s the problem.”

“Well, maybe I do.”

And then she shocks me senseless when she steps forward and presses her soft, warm lips to mine. When I suck in a startled breath, my lips part on their own, and she settles her gorgeous, delicious mouth against mine.

Suddenly, I’m in a freefall. I sink my right hand into her hair and grip the back of her head. With a rough and heated groan, my lips move against hers, drinking in her sigh, tasting

her sweetness, her incredible responsiveness. My mind is reeling, my heart thundering. *This is—she's—fuck!*

I pull back, nearly stumbling, and catch myself on the countertop.

Her beautiful eyes are wide and full of so much promise.

“I’m so sorry,” I mutter. I turn and head for the door, grabbing my hat on the way and shoving it hard onto my head. “I’m sorry, Gabrielle.” And then—like the coward I am—I’m out the door, practically slamming it shut behind me.

I fall against the wall as I try to catch my breath. Between kissing her and then bailing on her, I’m a wreck.

She kissed me.

She *wanted* to kiss me.

I feel like a freakin’ teenager with his first crush all over again.

Damn, I’m too old for this. Too old—and too damaged—to risk my heart over a pretty girl.

I make a beeline for the exit and stalk out into the cool night air. For a moment, I gaze out over the parking lot and the darkening skyline beyond. The sun is setting, casting long golden rays of light skimming over the tops of the trees.

She kissed me!

I never thought—hell, a guy like me has zero chance with a woman like Gabrielle.

I take a few steps toward the barn, then stop dead in my tracks. My body feels oddly alive. My nerves are buzzing.

She kissed me.

And like a damned fool, I walked away.

What the hell was I thinking?

And even more importantly, why aren't I halfway to my cabin already?

I turn back to face the lodge. She's in there, in her apartment. Probably pissed at me for walking out on her. Or maybe she's nursing hurt feelings.

Damn it. I'd never want to do anything to hurt her.

I'm halfway to the front entrance before I realize what I'm doing. But still, I keep walking. Maybe she'll accept my apology and give me another chance.

Maybe it's not too late.

Chapter 16 – Gabrielle

I'm not sure what just happened, but I feel oddly bereft. It was just a kiss, and yet he ran out like the hounds of hell were after him. Maybe they were. John Burke doesn't trust easily. I think he assumes the worst—that no one could want to be with him.

It's too bad he can't see himself the way I see him. He's a man with integrity. He's a quiet, confident man who takes his responsibilities seriously. He's kind to others. He's compassionate. And he's a very handsome man. I'm sorry he can't see that.

Sighing, I switch off the kitchen light. I think I'll hit the hay early tonight and read in bed. As I'm about to turn off the living room light, I hear a firm knock on my door.

It could be Hannah, or someone from the front desk. I glance through the peephole and am shocked to see John standing there, looking like he's about to face a firing squad.

My pulse speeds up as I wonder why he's come back. I don't want to get my hopes up that he's had a change of heart. Instead, I paste a neutral smile on my face and open the door.

“What brings you back so soon?” I ask, aiming to sound nonchalant. I glance around the room. “Did you forget something?”

“No. I—can I come in?”

I step back. “Sure.” I watch as he closes the door behind him. I need to try to fix this. “John, I want to apologize for my actions earlier. I shouldn’t have kissed you. It was presumptuous of me, and, well, I’m sorry.”

To my surprise, he removes his hat and hangs it on the coat rack. Nervously, he runs the fingers of his right hand through his hair. “Don’t apologize, please.”

“Okay.” Now I’m confused. “Then why—”

“I shouldn’t have walked out on you.” He sucks in a deep breath before meeting my gaze head on. “I came back to ask—I was hoping you’d give me another chance.” He rubs his left thigh with his left hand. “The truth is, I am attracted to you.” He chuckles. “Wow, that’s an understatement. But I never dreamed—” He stops and looks away.

I’m on pins and needles, practically holding my breath as I wait for him to finish that statement. “You never dreamed what?”

He meets my gaze once more, looking determined now.

“That you could want me.”

I’m shaken by his raw honesty. That couldn’t have been easy to admit. “Well, I do.”

“You hardly know me.”

“I know you’re a good man. And I know I’m attracted to you. Isn’t that a good start?”

His eyes widen at my confession, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Your scars don’t detract from your appearance, John. If anything, they’re a badge of courage. An indication of your strength and resilience.”

He chuckles nervously. “You get all that from some burn scars?”

“No, not from the scars.” I take a step toward him, reaching out to cup the right side of his face. I brush my thumb across his full lower lip, then along the upper edge of his trim beard.

When his eyes drift shut and he lets out a shaky breath, I know I’m right, at least about his character. This means

something to him. It's not just an opportunity for a quick fuck. It's more, so much more.

Taking a risk, I lift my free hand as if I'm going to cup the *left* side of his face, but I pause halfway, giving him a chance to pull away. "Can I touch your face?"

Even though his posture is tense, his gaze wary, he nods.

Gently, I press my fingers to his left cheek. The skin on that side of his face is slightly darker and tight. There are some ridges and indentations, some wrinkles and puckers.

He shudders when I gently brush my thumb over his cheek.

I pull my hand back. "Does that hurt?"

"No. It feels—weird. Many of the nerves in my face were damaged. Some of them have grown back, but not all. It's been a slow process."

I nod, understanding both his explanation and admiring the courage it must take for him to open up like this. To allow himself to be vulnerable. I have a feeling he doesn't do it often. "Would you like to sit down?"

"Yeah." He breathes a sigh of relief, as if he's off the hook for the moment.

I sit first, giving him the option on where he wants to sit. He can sit with me on the sofa, or he can take the chair and keep some distance between us.

To my surprise, he chooses the sofa, dropping down beside me. Our bodies are just inches apart.

“Have you been with someone since you were hurt?” I ask.

He nods. “A few times.” He gives me a self-recriminating look. “They were random hook-ups. Women I met in bars. They were drunk; I was drunk.” He pauses as if he’s deciding how much to reveal. “It didn’t go well.”

“Why not?” I hate asking, but I need to know if he has physical limitations I should be aware of.

He shrugs. “They were mostly curious, mostly gawkers. I think I was a pity fuck to them. Each time they walked out afterward without saying a word.”

I wince at the harshness of his words. “I’m so sorry.”

He turns to face me. “Gabrielle, I—you’re an amazing woman and I don’t deserve you. But for some crazy reason you seem to like me—”

I lean in and kiss him, pressing my lips to his. “Yes, I like you. A lot.” I reach for his left hand, squeezing it gently through the glove.

He closes his eyes, and again I’m afraid I’ve hurt him. I release his hand. “I’m sorry—”

“No!” His eyes pop back open. “I’m not used to being touched. It’ll take some gettin’ used to.”

“Do you feel comfortable taking your glove off?”

His jaw tightens, but nevertheless he nods. “All right.” After tugging it off, he lays it on the coffee table. First his hat, and now his glove. He’s removing his shields, one by one.

I reach for his scarred hand, holding it in both of mine. Like his face, the skin is tight and smooth, almost shiny in places. There are slight puckers and ridges on the back of his hand. Gently, I run the tip of my index finger across the back of it, following the contours. “It doesn’t hurt?”

“No, it’s fine. It feels strange, but I’m used to it by now.” He slips the fingers of his other hand into my hair and lets the strands of my hair run through his fingers. “It’s beautiful.” His gaze latches onto mine. “You’re beautiful. Not just physically, although that’s certainly true, but in here.” He taps my temple

and then my chest. “You’re smart and talented and kind. And above all, brave.”

“Brave? *Me?*”

“Sure. You rode a horse up into the mountains without a second thought.”

I laugh. “You’re giving me way too much credit. I was petrified. I’m just good at hiding it.”

He smiles. “Plus, you put up with the L.A. trio.” His expression sobers. “Gabrielle, I’ve wanted you since I spotted you in the airport. The moment I first saw you, I thought I was gazing upon an angel.”

I reach for his hand. “John, would you like to stay the night?”

He swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing before he finally nods. “Yeah, I would. I’d like that.”

“Me, too.”

He kisses me, only this time it’s different. It’s hotter and hungrier. His guard is down. He turns to me, sinking both of his hands into my hair and pulling me close to deepen the physical connection. His grip is strong, almost demanding, and my body responds, my nerve endings lighting up. It’s been a

while since I've been intimate with someone, but my body hasn't forgotten what to do. My pulse speeds up and my breasts tighten, my nipples puckering almost painfully. My belly clenches in delicious anticipation of what's to come.

Oh, crap. "Do you have a condom? I don't."

"Shit, no." He presses his forehead to mine. "Let me think. I have some in my cabin. I can run back there—no, wait. There are some downstairs in the men's restroom." He stands. "I'll be back in five minutes."

And then he's out the door, moving faster than I've ever seen him move. He didn't even bother to put on his hat or glove.

I smile, enjoying the sense of excitement I'm feeling. Then I jump up from the sofa and race to the bathroom to freshen up. Having spur-of-the-moment sex was not on today's Bingo card, so I need to get ready. I wash up quickly, and just as I finish brushing my teeth, I hear my apartment door close.

"Gabrielle?" He sounds almost hesitant, as if he's afraid I've changed my mind and run for the hills.

"Just a sec! I'm in the bathroom."

“Oh, okay.” He sounds relieved. “No problem. Take your time.”

When I return to the living room wearing only my top and underwear, his dark eyes widen. Then he skims the length of my bare legs, from my thighs to my toes. He’s breathing hard, and I realize he *hurried* to get back.

We both move forward as if gravity is drawing us together. I step into his embrace, loving the feel of his strong arms wrapping around me and holding me close.

I breathe in his scent, and my body starts to tingle all the way down to my toes. I like the way he smells—masculine and tantalizing. I detect a hint of soap and maybe a touch of cologne, but what I really like is his own scent.

I shiver. *This is really happening.*

I reach for his hand—it just happens to be his left hand—and lead him to my bedroom at the end of the hall. I flip the light switch, which turns on a lamp on the dresser.

He immediately switches it off. “Do you mind if we skip the lights?”

“No, I don’t mind.” I could kick myself for not realizing he’d feel more comfortable with the light off. “Can we leave

the door open?” The light in the living room is still on, casting the tiniest bit of illumination into the bedroom. At least enough that I can navigate the room without running into the bed and stubbing my toe.

“Sure, that’s fine.”

I sit on the bed and watch as he starts to unbutton his shirt. When he hesitates, I wonder if he’s having second thoughts. I don’t say anything. I wait patiently, letting him decide. Finally, he releases the last of the buttons and lets his shirt fall to the floor. Then he whips off his T-shirt, leaving his torso bare. He drops his arms to his sides and stands still as I look my fill.

He watches me study him, patient and resigned to reveal himself. On impulse, I pull my top off and toss it to the floor, too. Now I’m sitting on the bed in my underwear and bra—and they don’t even match.

His eyes lock onto my newly bared body, and my actions have the desired effect. He’s so preoccupied looking at *my* body that he’s not paying any attention to the fact I’m looking at *his*.

His fingers go to his belt buckle, and he pulls the leather strap free from his jeans. He unsnaps and unzips, then pushes his jeans down his long legs. Belatedly, he realizes he still has

his boots on. He laughs as he bends over to remove them, and his socks, before he can finally step out of his jeans.

He's wearing a pair of black boxer-briefs that lovingly hug his hips and the tops of his muscular thighs. Naturally, my gaze zeroes in on the package straining against his fly. The rather impressive package. My body starts throbbing in the most delicious way.

I'm captivated by the sight of his body—his ridged abs, muscular arms, and broad shoulders. He has striking tattoos that stretch from his pecs to his shoulders, as well as smaller ones on his sides. He's magnificent. Every inch of him is perfectly formed and hewn through hard physical work.

Now it's my turn. I reach behind me to unsnap my bra and let the garment slide off me. Of all my physical attributes, I'd have to say my breasts are my best feature. Gravity has been kind to them, and they're holding up quite well, if I do say so myself. My nipples are a dusky pink, and the mounds are sprinkled with faint freckles.

When he simply stares at me, I smile. "John?"

"What?" His gaze snaps back to mine. "Sorry. It's just—God, you're gorgeous."

I smile. “So are you.”

And then, I swear, he blushes. “Hardly.”

I rise from the bed and walk to him. My fingers slide beneath the waistband of his underwear. Slowly, I shimmy them down, past his hips and thighs, to the floor. I glance down at his erection. Now that he’s finally free, I can appreciate the true length and breadth of him. *Oh, my.*

I curl my fingers around him, gripping him firmly, and sink to my knees on the soft rug beneath us. I love the male body, and I love pleasuring my partner. I’m only too happy to —

“Oh, no.” John pulls me up onto my feet.

“I want to.”

He shakes his head. “Sweetheart, if your mouth so much as brushes against me, it’ll be over before it even started.” He laughs. “It’s been a long time for me. I’ll be lucky to last five minutes this first time.”

“A rain check, then?”

“Absolutely. Now come here.” He pulls me into his arms and dips his head to trail kisses across my shoulder. “You have freckles everywhere.”

I close my eyes and swallow a moan. His kisses feel amazing. “Don’t remind me.”

“They’re beautiful, Gabrielle.” He peppers my throat with more kisses—making me shiver—then my cheeks, the bridge of my nose, and my forehead. “They remind me of sprinkles.”

“That’s me—a giant pumpkin spice cupcake.”

He smiles down at me. “I love cupcakes.” When he effortlessly sweeps me off my feet, I squeal in surprise. He carries me to the bed and lays me down on the center of the mattress. He tugs my panties off and tosses them aside before climbing onto the bed.

“Condom!” I remind him.

He freezes. “Right.” After retrieving his jeans from the floor, he pulls a strip of three condom packets from the pocket and tosses them onto the nightstand.

“Three? Someone’s feeling awfully confident.”

He smiles as he kneels on the edge of the bed. “I just want to be prepared.” He braces his hands on either side of my head and leans down to kiss me. “You’re sure about this?”

When I feel his arms shaking, I reach up and brush his hair back. “I’m sure.”

Chapter 17 – John

I want to believe her when she says she's sure. God, I want to believe her. I'm desperate to believe her. And yet, prior experience has taught me to be wary. I've been with women who just wanted to taunt the bear, to lie down with the beast so they could tell their friends all about it later. I don't think my heart will survive another betrayal. I already swore off women once, and right now I'm breaking my own vow to never risk myself again.

But this is Gabrielle. In the short time I've known her, I've learned to trust her. She says what she thinks. She's honest. And I don't believe she's the type of woman who's just looking for a thrill.

She gazes up at me with a gentle, almost sad, smile on her face. "Don't overthink this, John."

Hearing her call me by my given name makes my chest ache. To the world, I'm *Burke*. It's a shield for me. A barrier between the outside world and my inner world. But she sees right through that, and she refuses to call me by my surname.

I decide then and there I'm going to trust her. What choice do I have? I either let down my guard and trust her, or I have

to walk away. And I've already walked away from her once. I don't want to do it again.

I gaze down and marvel at her beauty. Her gorgeous hair fans out across the white pillowcase. Her green eyes are like deep mountain pools, so clear I swear I can see into their depths. With my good hand, I cup one side of her face and brush my thumb gently across her cheek. Skin so soft, like warm silk.

She reaches for my left hand. "I want both of your hands on me."

Jesus. This woman gives no quarter. She's merciless. So I do as she says. I sit back on my haunches.

She takes both of my hands in hers and brings them to her chest. "Touch me."

When my palms settle on the soft, warm mounds of her breasts, my chest tightens, and my dick starts throbbing. I'm already hard as a rock, but apparently I can get harder.

I imagine I can feel her heart pounding beneath my hands. Her eyes are wide in anticipation. Her freckled cheeks are tinged with pink. *She's excited. She wants this. She wants me.*

Something snaps in me, like a dam breaking. All my guards are down, my defenses demolished. I throw caution to the wind and trust she won't let me crash and burn.

When my mouth covers hers, she grips my hair, clutching my skull and holding me close. There's strength in her grip. Determination. And I love that about her.

Our kiss grows heated as her hands start roaming, across my shoulders, down both of my arms. Her fingertips skate lightly over my skin, sending tingles coursing through me. When her hands settle at my waist, she pulls me closer and spreads her legs to create room for my hips.

She's gone from zero to sixty with hardly any warning. I haven't even made her come yet. That's one thing I'm good at. "Don't you want me to—"

"No. Not this time. I want to feel you inside me—now. I'm ready." She bucks her hips up against my groin.

Normally, I make sure the woman comes before I do. It's only right. And prudent, as I'm a big man *all over*. But Gabrielle seems too impatient for that right now. To be sure she really is ready, I reach between her legs and encounter pure hot silk. *Oh, yeah, she's ready.*

In case I'm not getting the picture, she reaches between us and takes hold of my erection, gripping me firmly.

With a chuckle, she says, "You'd better put that condom on right now while you still can."

I reach across the bed and grab the packets, tear one off, and rip it open with my teeth. I roll it on. "Done."

Gabrielle takes hold of me once more and guides me to her, lifting her hips as I sink inside.

Holy fuck! I feel like I'm bathing in liquid fire. The warmth and tightness are mind blowing.

When she gasps, I pause, afraid I've gone too fast. The last thing I want to do is hurt her.

"No, it's fine," she breathes. "Don't stop."

I do as she says, hoping to God she's on the level with me. Slowly, I press in, gritting my teeth at the exquisite pleasure of feeling her body slowly open for me, softening, and welcoming me in.

I blink rapidly when my eyes start burning, and it's not until she reaches up and brushes my cheeks that I realize I'm tearing up. *Damn it.* Can I be any more pathetic? Angrily, I swipe at my eyes.

She catches one of my hands and brings it to her lips to kiss it. When I realize it's my left hand she kissed, I fucking lose it.

I start thrusting, hard and fast, like I'm trying to outrun myself as well as my own fears and insecurities.

Gabrielle links our fingers and holds my hand to her chest. I brace myself with my other hand so I don't crush her.

There's a storm in me, fueled by long-seated anger and resentment and fear. It's been bottled up inside me for years, and now it's pouring out. I slam into her, thrusting harder and harder. The combination of heat from the friction of our bodies sliding together and her slick arousal feels exquisite.

Two minutes is all it takes, and then *bam!* I come in a blinding rush, arching my back and shouting loud enough to bring down the rafters. "*Shit!* I hope these walls are soundproofed."

She laughs softly as she runs her hands up and down my spine. "I do, too. Maya lives in the apartment next to me."

I slow my movements, dragging my cock through her silky wetness. Her flesh clings to me, as if it's not ready to release me. "You didn't come." I feel like an ass.

“Next time,” she says. She sounds confident there’s going to be a next time.

A wave of gratitude flows through me. Gratitude, relief—too many emotions to process.

I carefully withdraw, peel off the condom, and slip into the bathroom across the hall to dispose of it. I’m washing my hands when she joins me, wearing my flannel shirt. Even with the sleeves rolled up to her wrists, it hangs on her. The tails hang halfway to her knees. *Damn.*

Her hair is mussed, a little wild, and she looks fucking gorgeous. She gestures to my shirt. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Honey, you can wear anything of mine you want.”

Her answering smile is everything.

I return to bed, giving her a few moments of privacy in the bathroom. I hear the toilet flush, and then the water runs in the sink. A moment later, she climbs back into bed with me and cuddles close.

“It’s late,” I say reluctantly. “I should go.” But I don’t want to.

Gabrielle traces the outline of my tats with her fingertip. “Do you have to?”

I don't want to. “I have an early morning trail ride.”

“How early?”

“We’re meeting at the barn at eight.” I slip my arm around her and hold her close. “Hey, about tonight.”

She rests her hand on my chest, right over my heart, and snuggles closer. “Yes?”

“I—um—I’m sorry I didn’t last longer.”

She chuckles.

“It’s been a while for me, and I—um—I was excited. Normally, I’ve got pretty good stamina.”

“I’m sure you do,” she says.

“I’ve never gotten complaints.”

“I’m sure you haven’t.”

When I feel her shaking slightly, I realize she’s laughing silently. I roll her onto her back and loom over her, gazing down into those gorgeous eyes. “You’re laughing at me.”

The corners of her eyes crinkle with amusement. “Not *at* you,” she says as she brushes my hair out of my eyes. “*With* you.”

I lean down and touch my nose to hers. “Next time, I’ll rock your world. I’ll make you come a dozen times, guaranteed.”

She laughs. “I don’t think that’s even humanly possible.”

“Just watch me,” I say.

She leans up and kisses me. “I will certainly enjoy you trying.”

I kiss her then, a slow, languid kiss. Our lips meld together perfectly, our breaths mingle. Tonight’s been perfect, and for the first time in a very long time, I feel hopeful that I’ve found *the one*.

When I lie back down, Gabrielle reaches across my body for my left hand, links our fingers together, and rests them on my chest. One of her silky-smooth legs slips between mine. She instructs her phone to set an alarm for six-thirty.

And just like that, I fall asleep with a red-haired angel in my arms, one of her legs tucked between mine. My scarred hand is joined with her hand.

The last coherent thought I have before sleep takes me under is, *How in the world did this happen to me? And how will I recover when it ends?*

Chapter 18 – Gabrielle

The next morning is a bit surreal. John wakes up before my alarm clock goes off. After a quick trip to the bathroom, he dresses quickly in the dark. “I have to go home to shower and change.”

“Why don’t you come to the restaurant for breakfast?” I suggest as I watch him pull on his underwear and jeans. He threads his belt through the loops and fastens it. “We can eat together before you head out.”

He sits on the side of my bed and pulls on his socks and boots. “I’ll stop in. I have to pick up our lunches for today’s ride anyway. I’m sure I can spare a few minutes for breakfast.” After buttoning up his shirt and tucking it into his waistband, he leans down and kisses me. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

After I hear my apartment door close quietly, I lie awake in bed, reveling in the post-coital feelings that still linger in my body, even hours later. When I tighten my vaginal muscles, I feel a twinge of discomfort deep inside me, a reminder of what we did last night. It had been a while for me. My body is out of practice.

I roll over and wrap my arms around his pillow, drawing it close, hugging it to me and breathing in his scent. I came here to Bryce for a new job, a new life, and I think I've found a whole lot more.

My phone alarm goes off, putting an end to my daydreaming about a tall, dark-haired cowboy. I shower and dress quickly so I can head downstairs to the restaurant. I don't want to miss my chance to eat breakfast with John.

It's ten after seven by the time I make it to the restaurant. Already some guests are seated and enjoying their breakfasts—probably many of John's trail ride participants. I pop into the kitchen, where Nelle and Betty are busy resupplying the breakfast buffet. "Good morning, ladies. How's it going?"

Betty wipes her hand on a white dish towel. "It's goin' just fine. You sure look pretty today. Is there a special occasion?"

"No, nothing special. I just felt like wearing a dress today." I glance down at my outfit. Yeah, I may have dressed up just a bit today. "I've got to head out to the dining room and seat customers, but after the breakfast period, I'll do the clean-up. You two can take off until lunch."

I return to the dining room to find Hannah chatting with some guests. When she spots me, she excuses herself and

comes to join me at the podium.

“Good morning, boss,” I say, feeling extra chipper this morning. I keep glancing toward the door hoping to see John come in.

“You’re in a good mood,” she says.

I shrug. “It’s a beautiful day, full of potential.”

Her eyes narrow on me. “You look especially nice this morning. In fact, you’re practically glowing.” She grins. “Is there a reason?”

“No. Just wanted to look professional, that’s all.” My face is heating up, giving me away. I hear voices behind me and glance back to spot John standing just inside the doors to the dining room. He’s deep in conversation with Killian, but when he catches my eye, he gives me a small smile.

A moment later, Killian joins us. He puts his arm around Hannah and pulls her close and kisses her temple. “I’m going to grab some chow. You want to join me, babe?”

“Sure,” Hannah says. “You go get your food and find us a table. I’ll be along in a sec.”

When I glance back to see if John’s finally alone, I find him talking with the sheriff. *Oh, great.* At this rate, I’ll never

get him alone.

“Um, Gabrielle?” Hannah asks.

I turn back to her. “Yes?”

She’s staring over my shoulder. “Don’t look now, but I think you have an admirer.”

“Oh, really?” I try to act nonchalant, as if I don’t have a clue as to what she’s talking about, but it’s hard.

Hannah nods. “Ever since you arrived, he’s been coming in to the restaurant more and more often. He never used to come here to eat, and now he’s becoming a regular fixture.”

I try not to smile, but I know I’m failing horribly. I’m dying to tell her about John, but it’s too soon.

Hannah’s brow wrinkles suspiciously. “Is there something going on I should know about?”

I press my lips together, but it’s hard to stay quiet.

“Oh, my God, there is, isn’t there?” she says. “Are you guys seeing each other?”

I don’t want to reveal too much, because we haven’t discussed our relationship status yet, and I know John’s a very private person. He may not be ready to go public. And to be

fair, we only had sex once. It's not like we're going steady. I don't want to read too much into last night. "Maybe," I say, biting my lip to keep from saying more.

"I had no idea!" She grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze. "This is fantastic. He's such a great guy. I know he's quiet, and he keeps to himself a lot, but you couldn't ask for a better partner."

"Gabrielle!"

I turn to see Betty waving at me from the kitchen. "Can you come look at something, please?"

"I'll be right there!" I'm grateful for the interruption. If we discuss this any longer, I'm afraid I'll give something away. I glance back at John, who's finally alone. He's organizing the box lunches for his trail ride guests. I'll be quick, and then we can have breakfast together before he has to leave.

As soon as I walk away, Hannah crosses the room to talk to John.

In the kitchen, Betty hands me a box of strawberries. "Look at these," she says, frowning. "I think they're past their use-by date. What do you think? Should we use them or not?"

I peer into the box and find a lot of bruised and mushy berries. “I’m afraid you’re right. Where did these come from?”

“I picked them up at the farmers market yesterday. I swear they looked fine then, but now I don’t think we can use them. I was going to make strawberry shortcake for dessert tonight.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll stop by Emerson’s later today and see if I can pick up some more. It’ll be fine.”

Now that Betty’s issue is resolved, I return to the dining room to have breakfast with John, but he’s nowhere to be seen. He’s gone, and so are the box lunches.

I walk over to the table where Hannah and Killian are having breakfast. “Did John leave?”

She finishes chewing a bite of food and swallows. “You just missed him. Why? Do you need him for something?”

“No, it’s just that—oh, well. I’ll catch him later. Thanks. Enjoy your breakfast.”

I leave the restaurant and walk down the stairs to the front desk, where Tammy and Kevin are working. “Did John come this way?”

Nodding, Tammy points toward the main doors. “He flew out of here like a bat out of hell. He didn’t even reply when I

told him to have a nice day.”

“Thanks, Tammy.” I jog through the foyer and out the doors, hoping to catch him. It’s only seven-thirty. There’s still time for us to have a quick breakfast together before he has to meet up with his guests.

I glance across the parking lot and spot Nora saddling the horses for today’s ride. I rush over there. “Have you seen John?” I ask, breathless.

Nora points at the barn. “He’s getting the supply packs ready.”

“Thanks.”

As I take a step toward the barn, she says, “I wouldn’t go in there if I were you. He’s fit to be tied. He about bit my head off just now for saying *good morning*.”

I frown. “I just saw him a few minutes ago, and he seemed fine. What’s he upset about?”

Nora shrugs. “He didn’t say.”

When I step inside the barn, I hear a loud thud, followed by a gruff curse and then some indistinct muttering. I follow the sound until I find John in the tack room, shoving supplies

into a large canvas bag. “Hey, I just missed you at the restaurant. I thought we were going to have breakfast.”

When he looks at me, I almost don't recognize him. His expression is tense, his jaw muscles tight. His face is flushed. He looks angry—no, he's furious.

Suddenly, there's a knot in my stomach, and my heart starts hammering. Did I misread what happened between us last night and this morning? My heart starts pounding. Is he having second thoughts? Regrets? “John? What's wrong?”

He shoves a length of coiled rope into one of the packs. “*What's wrong?*” he bellows, looking incredulous. “You have the gall to ask me *what's wrong?*”

I take a step back. “Obviously, something's wrong.”

“I'll tell you what's wrong.” When he stalks toward me, I back up until my back hits the wall. He keeps coming until he's right in my face, glaring down at me. I never realized just how much taller he is.

His teeth are gritted when he grinds out a question that knocks the wind right out of me. “What kind of woman fucks one guy when she's dating another? Huh? Tell me that.”

My face chills. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you and Chris.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Don’t act stupid. Hannah told me.”

“Told you what?”

“That you two are dating. I should have realized last night was too good to be true. What was it, Gabrielle? A pity fuck? Or morbid curiosity on your part? Let me guess—the beauty wanted to sleep with the beast?”

My mind races as I try to make sense of what he’s saying. How in the world did we go from waking up together in my bed to *this*? Then it dawns on me. Hannah, asking me about an admirer. I assumed she meant John, but what if she was thinking of the sheriff? Chris was there, too, this morning.

“Did you talk to Hannah just now? In the restaurant.”

His jaws clench tightly, and when he refuses to answer me, I know I’m right.

And then I start laughing. I can’t help it. And my laughter pisses him off even more.

“Why the fuck are you laughing? Do you think this is funny? I’m sorry, but I don’t.”

“No!” I stop to catch my breath. “It’s not one bit funny.” I try to stop smiling, but it’s impossible. “This is all one big misunderstanding. You see, Hannah thought I was talking about *Chris*, but I was talking about *you*.” I shake my head. “I swear, sometimes my life is like a bad romcom.”

His brow furrows. “What are you talking about?”

“Hannah asked me if I knew I had an admirer, and I thought she was referring to *you*, but I think she meant Chris. She asked me if we were dating, and I said *yes*. Dating *you*, that is. Not Chris. It was just a stupid misunderstanding.”

“We’re dating?” He looks truly gobsmacked.

Hell, yes, we are. At least I hope so. “Aren’t we?”

He stands there staring at me like I’m off my rocker.

Now I’m starting to get mad. “Do you really think I go around sleeping with random guys just for the fun of it? Is that what last night was to you? Just another hook-up? A fun way to blow off steam? Do you honestly think I would sleep with you if I was dating another man?”

“*We’re dating?*” he repeats, sounding utterly dumbfounded.

And right there, my anger dissipates. He finds it incredible that I might want to date him. “Yeah, we are.” *There, I said it.* “I mean, if you want to.”

He stares at me for the longest time before he finally cups my face, so very gently. The fingers of his right hand slide into my hair. “I’ve known since you arrived that Chris has a thing for you. Why do you think he keeps coming to the restaurant? It’s to see *you*. Before you came, he always ate in town at Jennie’s Diner. Then you show up, and *bam!* He becomes a regular fixture around here. So when Hannah told me you two were dating, it made perfect sense. And why wouldn’t you want to date him? He’s closer to your age. He’s good-looking. Hell, he’s a great guy. Everyone likes him. You *should* want to date him. If you asked him out, he’d jump at the chance to say yes.”

I cover his hands with mine. “You’re a great guy, too, John. And you happen to be the one I want. Not Chris. Not anyone else. *You.*”

His dark eyes bore into mine, searching for the truth. He seems half afraid of what he’ll find. “It feels too good to be true. Guys like me don’t get girls like you.”

“Maybe I don’t want a blond-haired, blue-eyed sheriff. Maybe I want a dark-haired, dark-eyed cowboy.” And then I pull his face to mine and kiss him.

We jump apart when Nora clears her throat. “The horses are ready, and you’ve got an impatient crowd waiting outside.”

John looks at Nora. “Thanks. I’ll be right out.” Then he turns back to me and nods. “Just so we’re clear, yes, we’re dating.”

“Congratulations,” Nora says, rolling her eyes. “Now, can we get a move on? Folks outside are getting restless.”

I help John carry the supply packs out to the yard. As he loads them onto a horse, Nora helps the guests mount theirs.

“You could come with us,” John says to me.

“Thanks, but I have a meeting later this morning to present my menu to Hannah and Killian. How about a rain check? How about dinner when you get back?”

“I’d love that,” he says. Then he pulls me close and kisses me right in front of a rapt audience. “We’re dating,” he says to the onlookers, as if we need to explain ourselves.

* * *

When I'm done cleaning up the kitchen and dining room after the breakfast rush, I grab a cup of coffee, head up to my apartment to grab a copy of my proposed menu, and join Hannah and Killian in their office behind the front desk.

"Sorry I'm late," I say as I rush into their office. They're seated together on a brown leather sofa.

"You're not late," Killian says. "You're right on time."

"Here's a copy of my proposed menu," I say as I hand them each a printed copy. "I opted for an eclectic mix of different cuisines since we'll be getting guests from all over. I tried to include something for everyone—everything from pasta to Mexican to American. Popular items, as well as beloved comfort foods. Some vegetarian options, as well as vegan."

They both take a few minutes to read over the menu. There are separate offerings for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, along with sections for appetizers, sides, and desserts. I even included a wine and beer list. "I think we should highlight Colorado brews."

"This is impressive," Hannah says when she finishes reading. She looks at Killian. "What do you think, babe?"

Killian laughs. “When can we eat?”

“Just as soon as the new kitchen gets installed,” I say. “It won’t be long. I’ll implement the full menu once we have all the appliances in place.”

“What about staffing levels?” Hannah asks. “Have you given that some thought?”

I nod. “I spoke to Betty and Nelle, and they both said they want to stay on. Apparently, retirement isn’t everything it was cracked up to be—those are Nelle’s words. Betty agreed. I think they like being needed. As for additional staffing, I’d like to have two additional full-time cooks, a dishwasher, and someone to do food prep. I’d like two hosts and three servers. With this level of staffing, we should be able to cover all shifts.” I look at them in anticipation, hoping I’m not asking for too much.

Hannah and Killian look at each other, saying nothing. It’s like they’re reading each other’s mind.

“I think we can manage that,” Hannah says. “In addition to the guests here at the lodge, it looks like we’ll get a steady stream of customers from Bryce. We should be able to support that level of staffing.”

“We should have a grand opening event,” Killian says.

“Make it a big deal. We can invite people from town.”

“Wonderful,” I say, feeling truly giddy. “I can’t wait to see it all come together.”

Chapter 19 – John

It's a long, uneventful day by the time we return to the barn. I tell the guests they'd better high tail it to the restaurant so they can eat before it closes. Nora sticks around to help me take care of the horses.

When the horses are all out to pasture, Nora says, "Go. Get cleaned up, and then go find your girlfriend." She chuckles. "You know you want to."

"You don't mind?" There's still a lot of work to be done—cleaning the tack and putting it away, and later bringing the horses in to their stalls to eat their grain.

"Go," she says, nodding toward the door.

"Thanks, Nora."

She shoos me away. "Hey, Burke?"

I pause. "Yes?"

"She's way too good for you, but you deserve to be happy."

"Gee, thanks."

I head out the back door and race up the hill to my cabin. Upstairs, I grab a quick shower and change into jeans and a plaid shirt and go downstairs. I'm grabbing a much-needed drink of water in the kitchen when I hear a knock at my door.

I glance out the peephole and am both surprised and pleased to see Gabrielle standing there holding a tray with two covered plates.

"Hi," I say as soon as I have the door open. I step back. "Come in."

She steps inside. "I brought us some dinner. I thought we could eat here in your cabin if you don't mind."

I take the heavy tray from her and set it on my dining table. I lift one of the covers to see filet mignon, tiny red potatoes in melted butter, and something that looks like long, skinny broccoli with small tops. "Fancy. Hey, is that supposed to be broccoli?"

She smiles. "No. It's broccolini, a hybrid of broccoli and *gai lan*, also known as Chinese kale. Try it."

I pick one up and take a bite. "Mm. That's good."

"They're roasted with garlic. Everything tastes good when it's roasted with garlic."

I return the rest of broccolini to my plate and wipe my hands on a napkin. “My compliments to the chef,” I say as I pull her into my arms.

She laughs. “You haven’t even tried the steak yet.”

“If you had anything to do with it, I know it’ll be good. Where’d you get the meat?”

“Oh, good news. Killian gave me the keys to the spare Jeep today. I went into town to buy groceries from Maggie and the filets from Ed. And speaking of food, I presented my menu to Hannah and Killian this morning. They liked it. They also approved my staffing requests. Killian suggested we have a grand opening when the renovations are complete. They’ll invite everyone in town.”

“Of course, they liked your plans. They’re lucky to have you, Gabrielle. I hope you realize that.” I head for the fridge. “What would you like to drink? I have water, beer, wine, and soft drinks.”

“White or red?”

“Red. Would you like a glass? It’s not anything fancy. I bought it at the gas station in town.”

She nods. “Red wine would be a nice complement to the meal.”

“Coming right up.” I grab a wine glass from the cupboard. “Do you mind if I have a soft drink?”

“Of course not.”

“Well, as we’re having a fancy dinner, I wasn’t sure.”

“You can do whatever you want,” she says.

I grin. “If that’s the case, then let’s skip dinner altogether. I’m hungry, yes, but not necessarily for food.”

She laughs. “I think we can have both. I’m sure you’re starved after a long day’s ride. I think you should eat first.”

My stomach growls, proving her right.

“See? I told you. You slept over at my place last night. If you want, I can sleep over at yours tonight.” She looks almost hesitant, as if she’s not sure what I’ll say. Maybe she thinks she’s being presumptuous—she’s not.

I pull out a chair for her at the table. “I would love that.”

Halfway through dinner, I get an idea. “I have the next two days off. Would you be interested in riding up to Pine Lake

with me for an overnight camping trip? Just the two of us. We can pitch a tent and sleep lakeside.”

Her eyes widen momentarily.

I can tell I took her by surprise. “What’s wrong? Is that too much roughing it for you? If you don’t want to—”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just—I’ve never camped before. I don’t know how to do it.”

I smile. “That’s fine. I know what to do.”

“You said ride up. You mean, on horseback?”

“It’s either we ride or we hike. There’s no way to get a vehicle up there—not even a four-wheeler. Our only other option would be to sweet-talk Micah into flying us up there on his chopper.”

She seems to be considering. “I can ride Odin?”

The hopeful expression on her face makes me smile.

“Honey, as far as I’m concerned, Odin’s yours, anytime you want him.”

She cuts a small piece of her filet and pops it into her mouth. “Then let’s go camping.” She cuts a tiny potato in half and eats it. “We’ll be sleeping in the wilderness, under the

stars where wolves, mountain lions, and bears live. What could possibly go wrong?"

* * *

After dinner, we clear the table and load the dishwasher. I glance out the kitchen window and see that night is falling quickly. "Would you like to sit out on the porch? It's pretty peaceful this time of the evening."

"Sure." She pours herself a second glass of wine, and we go out to sit on the porch swing.

The sun is setting, and the sky is already a dark blue. The insects are out in full force, serenading us with their incessant chatter. The temperature has dropped a good ten degrees in the past hour, and it's a bit chilly.

When Gabrielle shivers, I draw her close and put my arm across her shoulders.

"You should bring a jacket with you when you're out in the evening. The temps here in the mountains can drop quickly. Do you want me to grab you a jacket?"

She leans her head against my shoulder. "That's okay. Your body is radiating heat like a furnace. I'll be all right." She pushes off with her foot, setting the swing in motion.

I rub lazy circles on her right arm. She smells good—like vanilla, maybe? Or frosting. “Why do you smell like cupcakes?”

She laughs. “I made cupcakes this afternoon for dessert. I would have brought you one, but they were all gone by the time I packed up our dinners.”

The swing sways gently forward and back, and our feet push in unison on the porch boards to keep it moving.

“I’m sorry for the way I acted this morning,” I say. I figure I might as well get that out there. “I was a real jerk. I worried about it all day.”

“It’s okay. It was just a misunderstanding. Hannah thought I was talking about Chris, when I was really talking about you.” She tilts her face up to look at me. “I have no interest in the sheriff, you know. Just so we’re clear on that.”

A ton of weight lifts off my chest. “I have no interest in him either.”

She laughs, as I hoped she would.

I twirl a length of her hair around my index finger. “I want you to know, I don’t usually react like that. It was a bit of a

shock, especially after last night. When I left your bed this morning, I thought there might be something between us.”

“Oh, there’s something,” she says. She links our fingers together, then brings my hand to her mouth to kiss it. “I felt the same way.”

As the last of the evening light begins to fade, we spot a couple of bats swooping overhead.

“It’s kind of late for birds to be out, isn’t it?” she asks.

“Those aren’t birds. They’re bats.”

“Bats!” She bolts upright, shaking the swing. “Are you serious?”

I rub her back. “It’s all right. They won’t hurt you.”

“No, it’s cool.” She leans back against me once more. “I always wanted to see a bat.”

“Oh, right. I guess there aren’t too many bats in the city.”

“I never saw one.”

She relaxes against me again, and her closeness feels so damn good. Part of me is afraid to get my hopes up that somethin’ can come of this. She’s so young and vibrant, not to

mention beautiful. I imagine she could have anyone she wanted.

Gabrielle lays her palm on my thigh. “So, what’s the plan? For our camping trip, I mean.”

“We’ll get up and have breakfast. Then I’ll pack us some gear and saddle the horses.”

“What can I do?”

“Maybe pack us some food? Things we can cook easily over a campfire. I can bring a pot for soup, or a skillet. There’s a grill up at the lake, so we could cook burgers.”

She nods. “Burgers sound good. And maybe some chili. Leave the food and drink to me. That’s sort of my thing.”

I shift in the swing to face her. It’s dark now, so the yard is nearly pitch black. The porch light casts a soft glow on Gabrielle, making her look impossibly lovely. I reach out with my left index finger and brush her hair back, tucking it behind her ear. “How is it that you’re sitting here with me planning a camping trip? How did I get so lucky? Why me, Gabrielle?”

She meets my gaze, studying me for a moment. There’s a hint of a sad smile on her face. “You underestimate yourself, John.” She reaches for my left hand.

Out of habit, I try to pull my hand away—not wanting her to touch my rough, damaged skin—but she holds on tight.

“Your scars don’t define you,” she says quietly. “You’re a good man, John. Dependable, strong, honest. And sexy as hell. Did I mention that?”

“Nope, you didn’t. I’m glad to hear you think so. You know all that about me already? In the short amount of time we’ve known each other?”

“I’m a good judge of character.”

“Honey, you don’t need to settle—”

“I’m not settling.” She stands abruptly and takes my hand. “Take me to bed, John Burke. You promised me orgasms—a dozen in fact—and I fully intend to collect.”

I stand. “Yes, ma’am.” One of the things I love about this woman is that she’s direct and speaks her mind. I lean close and kiss her. “Your wish is my command.”

Chapter 20 – Gabrielle

I should have thought this through better. I didn't bring anything with me other than our dinners. No PJs, no toothbrush, no hair brush, nothing. Fortunately, John has a package of spare toothbrushes in his bathroom cupboard.

“Help yourself,” he says. “As for pajamas, you won't be needing those tonight.” He stands in the bathroom doorway and watches me brush my hair first, then my teeth. He reaches out and strokes my hair. “It's like a flame.”

I chuckle as I spit and rinse. “It was a nightmare for me as a kid. I was teased mercilessly. If I hear another joke about carrot top, I'll lose it.”

He smiles. “They were just jealous.”

After I leave the bathroom, he takes his turn. I wander through the upstairs of his cabin, checking out the two bedrooms. The larger of the two rooms has a bookcase filled with westerns, everything from the classics by Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour to more contemporary authors. “You like to read westerns?” I ask when he walks into the bedroom.

He shrugs. “It's what I know.”

When I turn to look at him, I'm surprised to see his shirt off. The sight of his bare chest takes my breath away—his body is rock solid and muscular, as I would expect considering all the physical work he does. But what's more surprising is that he's baring himself to me. Trusting me like this is a huge step for him.

I smile, and my cheeks heat. His muscles are chiseled, his arms and shoulders, his abdomen. He's still got his jeans on and a brown leather belt. His feet are bare. Everything about him screams sexy and masculine. I've never been with a man like him. The guys I dated back home were academics and accountants. They never had reason to get their hands dirty. John is pure cowboy. He's rough around the edges, yet full of integrity, and I find that combination sexy as hell.

When I start unbuttoning my top, his dark eyes widen slightly. I can tell he's trying to act nonchalant, but his jaws are clenched, and his nostrils flare a bit. *He's excited.*

Good. Because I am, too.

I toss my top onto a wooden chair beside the bed and stand there to let him look his fill. I'm wearing a cream lace bra and panty set—yeah, I planned ahead. The pale color of the ensemble contrasts nicely with my skin and freckles.

As I reach behind me to unsnap my bra strap, he steps forward and shakes his head. When he motions for me to turn around, I do so, lowering my arms to let him do the honors.

His warm fingertips brush against my back, sending a delicious shiver skating down my spine. I realize he must have noticed my reaction because he chuckles softly.

“I’m going to make you do a lot more than shiver,” he says.

His voice has dropped to a low, resonant octave, and the sound of it makes me weak in the knees.

My bra ends up on the chair, too. And then, to my surprise, I discover he’s not done. He reaches for the waistband of my slacks and gently tugs them down past my hips, down my legs. The only thing I’m wearing now is my panties.

I feel his warm breath on my bare shoulder—another shiver. Then his lips press soft kisses there. When he reaches around me, the fingers of his right hand slip beneath the waistband of my underwear, giving me the tiniest of warnings. I lean my head back onto his shoulder and groan.

Sure enough, he slips the fingers of his right hand into my panties, slowly skimming down to the warm, tingling spot

where my thighs meet. I suck in a shaky breath and swallow a moan.

“Open your legs for me,” he murmurs. His rough voice does incredible things to me. When I do as he says, he slips a long finger between the lips of my sex and groans in my ear. “God, you’re so wet.” He presses an open-mouthed kiss to my throat, gently sucking on my skin.

I know he’s going to leave a mark—a brand on my skin—and yet I don’t do anything to stop him. I want this. I want his mark on me.

“You are so sweet,” he whispers.

His finger glides easily between my legs, sliding through my wet arousal. He teases my clitoris with firm little circles before slipping his finger down to my opening. Now he’s tormenting me on two fronts, with his finger slipping inside me, and his thumb rubbing tight little circles on my clit.

Electricity shoots through me, firing all my nerve endings. My sex, my belly, my nipples, even my scalp—every inch of me is tingling. My legs turn to jelly, and I’m afraid I can’t stay upright for much longer. When I stumble, he steadies me with his left hand.

“John.” My voice comes out breathy.

His lips kiss their way down my throat and across my shoulder. “What is it, sweetheart? Tell me what you want.”

I chuckle shakily. “I want more of what you’re doing.” My belly clenches hotly, and my thighs stiffen. I close my eyes and lose myself in the sensations swamping me. “I’m so close.”

His attention intensifies. His long finger has reached the sweet spot inside me, and his thumb is tormenting my clit. This man is diabolical. I realize last night was just an appetizer. I have a feeling he’s going to slay me this time.

I cry out when the fireworks go off deep inside me. I don’t even recognize the sounds I’m making—loud, keening cries. I’ve never come so hard with a partner before—I’m practically seeing stars.

When my legs give out on me, he catches me in his strong arms and carries me to his bed, laying me down on top of a navy-blue comforter. I lie there, trying to catch my breath, and watch mesmerized as he finishes undressing. My gaze is glued to his fingers as they unbuckle his belt. He pulls it free and tosses it onto the chair. Then he unsnaps his jeans, lowers the zipper, and shoves them and his underwear down his long legs.

I drink in the sight of him as he retrieves a condom from the nightstand drawer. He tosses it on the bed, and then he takes hold of the waistband of my panties and gently tugs them off me. They end up on the chair with the rest of our clothing.

Before I know his intention, he climbs onto the bed and positions himself between my legs, spreading my thighs to make room for his broad shoulders. I feel his hot breath bathing my still-throbbing sex.

“I can’t,” I say. I lay my hands on his shoulders and gently push him back. “I already came.”

He lifts his face to meet my gaze. “So, come again.”

“I can’t. I’ve never been able to—”

“Then you’ve had the wrong lovers, honey.”

I gasp when I feel his hot tongue there, suddenly, without warning. The pleasure is exquisite, and my thighs start to shake. He’s relentless, teasing and tormenting me, and almost immediately my belly starts quivering again. Pleasure swamps me.

“John.” I fist the comforter. My heels dig into the mattress.

His strong hands hold my thighs open, pressing them apart, baring every inch of me to his hungry attention.

His lips latch onto my clit, and his gentle sucking makes me see stars. “Holy crap!” I gasp.

He chuckles, and I feel the vibration against my flesh.

Mindless now, I release the bedding and dig my fingers into his hair, tugging on the strands. “John! Please!”

His finger slips inside me once more, finding my sweet spot with unerring precision. He strokes me in unison with the fluttering of his tongue.

When I come again, it’s just as intense as it was the first time around—maybe even more so because my body is like a live wire. While I’m catching my breath and trying to recover, he grabs the condom, lies on his back beside me, and tears open the packet. I finally get a really good look at his erection just before he sheathes himself.

Oh, my.

I *have* been dating the wrong men.

He comes up over me, slides his hand between my thighs, and opens me once more. I suck in a breath as he guides himself to my opening. Pressure follows, then a stretch and a sense of fullness, and then finally a delicious heat as he sinks slowly into me.

“Let me know if I’m going too quickly, or if I’m being too rough.” His voice is gruff.

But it’s not too much. “It’s perfect,” I say. We fit perfectly.

He braces his hands on either side of my head, careful not to crush me beneath his weight. He starts moving, slowly at first, giving my body time to adjust. Gradually, he picks up the speed.

I gaze up into his face, my eyes locking with his, and see so much emotion there. My throat tightens. I reach around him and stroke his back, amazed by the powerful ropey muscles flexing beneath my fingers. He’s definitely not a city boy.

I’m swept away by his strength and power. It’s not too much, and he’s not too rough, or if he is, I like it.

When he comes, his body tenses, his muscles tightening. His arms stiffen, his back bows, and his head arches back on his strong neck. I think he’s trying to hold back, but his cry is loud, practically shaking the rafters.

Gradually, he slows his thrusts and soon they’re languid, gentle movements. My body is still tingling from two orgasms and from the stimulation of feeling him driving hard into me.

He rolls us onto our sides. We're still joined together, and neither one of us seems in a rush to separate. He brushes my hair back from my damp face and gives me long, slow kisses.

Finally, although we're both loathe to leave the bed, he goes across the hall to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. When he returns to bed, I take my turn in the bathroom. As I stand at the sink to wash my hands, I notice a small hickey blooming on my throat. I smile at the sight. So, he did manage to leave his mark. *In more ways than one.*

When I'm done, I turn off the light and make my way in the dark back to his bed. As soon as I'm on the mattress, he pulls me close. I realize he pulled back the comforter and sheet. He snuggles up behind me so that we're spooning, his arm around my waist. He slides one of his legs between mine.

I lie there quietly, feeling his breath on my shoulder. Occasionally, he presses light kisses to the back of my head. I've never felt more cherished and better cared for.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

"Yes."

"I didn't hurt you?"

I smile in the darkness. "No."

“You’re sure?”

I laugh softly. “Yes.”

I feel his lips in my hair once more. “Sweet dreams. Tomorrow we’ll go on a little adventure. Just the two of us this time.”

“We’re not bringing the L.A. Trio?”

“God, no. They’re heading home in the morning.”

“Good. I’ve had enough of Brittany ogling your ass.”

He laughs, his chest vibrating against my back. “She was staring at my ass?”

“Yes. Don’t you dare act surprised. You have a very fine ass.”

John tightens his arm around my waist. “I’m glad you think so. That’s all that matters.”

* * *

After waking up, we decide to meet up at the restaurant for breakfast. I leave the cabin so I can return to my apartment to shower, change into camping-appropriate attire, and pack an overnight bag.

“Pack light,” John warned me before we parted ways this morning. “We have to carry everything we bring with us, so just the essentials, please. And it’ll be chilly up there at night, so dress warmly. Bring a jacket and warm pajamas. Although, I promise I’ll keep you warm.”

I know he won’t have any trouble keeping that promise, because his body radiates heat like a furnace. I do as he requested and pack only warm PJs and a change of clothes for tomorrow. I fill a small toiletries bag with the necessities and a spare battery for my phone. Even though I won’t have any cell service up there, I can still use my phone to take pictures. It also makes a great flashlight and, of course, an e-reader.

This morning I’m dressed in blue jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and short hiking boots. I tie the sleeves of my jacket around my waist, keeping it handy in case I need it.

I leave my bags in my apartment, just inside the door, and head down to the restaurant to help out this morning before we leave.

As soon as I step into the dining room, Hannah calls my name and waves me over to the table she’s sharing with Killian. It looks like they’re halfway through breakfast.

“Sit,” Hannah says, pointing to the empty seat across from hers.

I sit. “Hey, guys, good morning.”

Hannah swallows her food. “Where were you last night? I stopped by your apartment, but you weren’t home. And then I tried again this morning, but there was no answer. Is everything okay?”

Feeling awkward, I meet her gaze, then Killian’s. They both look eager for an explanation, but I think it’s more out of curiosity than outright concern.

“Well.” My face heats up, giving me away.

“Oh, my God,” Hannah says, pointing her fork at me. “You were out all night, weren’t you?” The fact that she’s grinning helps. At least she doesn’t seem upset.

Of course I’m blushing. I’m terrible at keeping secrets. “I may have had a sleepover last night.”

“With Chris?” she asks.

I swallow hard. I guess it’s time to let the cat out of the bag. “No, with John.”

Hannah’s brows knit together. “John?”

As Killian chokes on his coffee, he smacks his palm on the table. “I told you, babe,” he says to Hannah.

“But I thought—you said—” Hannah seems more than a little confused.

“When you asked me if I knew I had a secret admirer, I thought you were talking about John.”

Killian holds his hand out to Hannah. “Pay up, babe. Five bucks.”

“You guys bet on this?” I ask, surprised but also amused.

Hannah rolls her eyes. “Killian thought there was something going on between you and John. Or, to be more specific, he thought John was crushing on you. I told him he was nuts. I thought it was Chris. So, yeah, we bet on it.” She shakes her head. “*John?* Really?”

I nod.

“But, he’s so—I don’t know, standoffish, I guess. I never would have put the two of you together. You’re so *you*—all sunshine and positivity— and he’s such a grump.”

“He’s misunderstood. I’ve gotten to know him—”

“How well?” Hannah asks.

I don't even have to answer because my expression gives me away.

"Oh, my God," Hannah says. Then she's distracted by something across the room. "Speak of the devil, your misunderstood cowboy just walked in."

I turn to look, and when I spot John standing just inside the restaurant, I wave him over.

Almost reluctantly, he walks over to the table. "Mornin', Hannah," he says. He tips the brim of his cowboy hat. "Killian." Then he looks down at me, and immediately his expression softens, and I see a hint of a smile. "Gabrielle."

"You can stop pretending," Hannah says. She points at the empty chair beside mine. "You might as well have a seat and join us for breakfast. We know everything."

"I hope not *everything*," John says, drawing out the word. He winks at me. As he starts for the buffet, he motions for me to join him.

Smiling stupidly, I jump up from my chair and follow after him. It looks like the cat is definitely out of the bag.

Chapter 21 – John

I guess it's official. Gabrielle Hunter and I are *dating*. I haven't dated in years—not since before the accident. Now that Hannah and Killian know about us, I guess it's public knowledge. This is a small, tight-knit community; everyone will know before the week is out.

“Are you mad?” Gabrielle asks me as she joins me at the buffet.

I hand her a plate. “Mad? Why would I be mad?”

“Because I told Hannah and Killian we're dating.”

I find myself smiling. “That's fine. They should know. Then, when I do this—” I lean over and kiss her cheek “—they won't freak out.”

We're almost done filling our plates when I see Chris Nelson dressed in his sheriff's uniform walking our way. “Well, look who the cat dragged in,” I say, nodding to Chris as he joins us at the buffet.

“Mornin', guys,” Chris says. He's too busy mooning over Gabrielle to pay me any mind.

All right. It's time to nip this in the bud. "Chris, have you heard the news?"

Finally, he tears his attention away from her long enough to ask me, "What news?"

"Gabrielle and I are dating." *Damn, that feels good to say out loud.*

Chris's eyes widen, and his jaw actually drops. "You're—" He looks to Gabrielle for confirmation, as if he thinks I just pulled that out of my ass. "You're *what?*"

"Day-ting." I draw out the syllables. *Shit.* Do I have to draw him a picture?

Chris narrows his eyes on me. "When I asked you before if you guys were dating, you said no."

"It was true at the time," I say. "But now it's not."

"Huh." Chris looks back to Gabrielle, again for confirmation. I think he's havin' trouble wrapping his mind around this. Or maybe he's hoping she'll flat out contradict me—that it's all a big joke.

"That's right," she says, smiling apologetically at Chris.

Now I wish I hadn't told her he's sweet on her. She's going to feel bad for him.

Chris nods vigorously. “That’s great. Really great. I mean it. I’m happy for you guys.” Then he steps aside to grab a plate and get in line.

Gabrielle and I carry our plates over to Hannah and Killian’s table and sit.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I’m stealing Gabrielle away for a couple of days,” I tell Hannah. “We’re going camping up at Pine Lake for one night. I’ll have her back tomorrow by supper.”

“If that’s okay with you guys,” Gabrielle adds, smiling hopefully at Hannah and Killian. I’m guessing she hasn’t had a chance to talk to Hannah about it. I figure it won’t be a big deal as Betty and Nelle have been managing fine on their own for months now. I think they can live without Gabrielle for a couple days.

“Of course, it’s okay,” Hannah says, practically giddy with excitement. She takes a bite of her food, nods as she chews, and swallows. “You guys have fun.”

After we finish eating, I lay my arm across the back of Gabrielle’s chair. I’d do more, but we have a rapt audience. “I’ll go saddle the horses, honey. Come to the barn when you’re ready to leave.”

“I will,” she says.

Then I lean over to kiss her cheek, audience be damned. When I pull back, the smile on her face tells me all I need to know.

* * *

When I reach the barn, I find Zeus already saddled and ready to go. Nora’s currently saddling Odin. Sal, our resident pack mule, is also ready to roll. All of the supplies I packed earlier this morning are strapped in saddlebags placed on Sal. I packed light because we’ll only be up there one night.

“Have fun,” Nora says as she cinches Odin’s saddle.

“Thanks. You’ll take care of things here while I’m gone?”

She nods. “Will do, boss. Don’t give it another thought. Just go, relax, and have fun. You’re long overdue.”

Once Nora is done saddling the horses, I check all the fittings and gear to make sure everything’s secure.

Not long after, Gabrielle arrives carrying her overnight bag, a bag of nonperishable food, and a small soft-sided cooler. She holds up the bag. “Lunch and dinner for today, and breakfast and lunch for tomorrow. I brought as little as possible. Water bottles in the cooler.”

“Here, let me take those,” I say. I add her packs to Sal’s panniers and test the balance of the weight. “Really to go?” I ask.

Gabrielle nods. “Ready as I’ll ever be.” She glances at Zeus and notices the rifle I have packed in a scabbard. Then she notices the handgun holster around my waist. “Guns?”

“They’re just a precaution. This is the wilderness, honey. We may not be the only ones up on that mountain.”

Her eyes widen, and I swear her face pales. “Are you referring to other human or non-human company?”

“Could be either. Don’t worry; we’ll be fine. But it pays to be prepared, just in case we run into a hungry bear or a mountain lion.”

“There are bears up there? And mountain lions?”

“Could be,” I say. I walk over to her and cup her face so I can gaze down into those gorgeous pools of green. *Damn.* I could stare into these eyes forever. “I would never let anything happen to you. And I wouldn’t take you up there if I didn’t think it was safe. But I’d be a fool not to be prepared.”

She nods and swallows hard. “I know.”

“Here let me help you mount.” I walk her over to Odin, cup my hands to give her a leg up, and help her onto the saddle.

She wriggles her butt just a bit to get comfortable.

“All good?” I ask as I hand her the reins.

She nods as she pats Odin’s neck. “Good morning, Odin. Let’s go camping.” She chuckles. “I wish my parents could see me right now.”

“So, here’s how this is gonna go,” I say. “I’ll ride first, and Sal will follow behind me. You’ll take up the rear. If you have any problems at all, just holler, and we’ll stop. It’s a three-hour ride. Just like before, we’ll stop halfway to stretch our legs and drink something.”

Gabrielle nods, smiling like the trooper she is.

I lay my hand on her thigh. “Are you sure you’re a city girl?”

“Born and raised. But I grew up watching reruns of *Bonanza* and *The Rifleman* with my dad. I’ve always liked watching westerns. And I always liked cowboys.” Her smile widens.

“Well, then I guess you picked the right fella.” I wink at her before patting her leg. I move up the line to mount Zeus, and Nora hands me Sal’s lead. “All right, let’s move out.”

“Have fun,” Nora says as she waves. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. Hey, boss, did you remember to pack the sat phone?”

“Yes, missy,” I say as I nudge Zeus forward. “I packed it.”

* * *

Gabrielle is a good sport, riding along quietly as we head up the trail. I keep glancing back at her to make sure she’s okay, and she always gives me a reassuring smile and a thumb’s up. There’s one moment of drama when a rabbit runs across the trail in front of her. She makes a bit of a startled squeak, but Odin, like the dependable gentleman he is, traipses along as if nothing happened.

About halfway to the lake, we stop in a small clearing beside a stream to let the horses rest, drink, and graze on some lush grass.

Gabrielle and I grab water bottles and protein bars from our pack and find a fallen log that makes a nice park bench. We have a perfect view of the rushing stream.

“I can see why you like it here so much,” she says between bites of her protein bar. “It’s beautiful.”

I swallow a gulp of water and nod. “Indeed it is.” But it’s Gabrielle I’m lookin’ at, not the stream. You’ve seen one stream, you’ve seen them all. I’m used to them. But I don’t think I’ll ever get used to looking at Gabrielle. She lights up the place, wherever she goes. She practically glows.

I finish my protein bar and water and stow the trash in one of the packs. Whatever we bring up here with us, we carry back to the lodge. We’ll leave no sign of our presence.

“All done?” I ask Gabrielle.

She polishes off the last bite of her protein bar and balls up the wrapper. I hold out my hand to take it, and then I dispose of it with my trash.

“Do you need a potty break?” I ask. “If you do, now’s the time. It’ll be another hour and a half before we reach the lake.”

She seems torn, and then finally she nods. “I’d better go.”

“Don’t wander far from the trail,” I remind her. “Keep me in your sights at all time, got it? And watch for poison ivy. You don’t want a rash on your ass.” I wink at her.

Grinning, she salutes me. “Yes, sir.”

I guess I do get bossy at times. But I can tell from the impish smile on her face that she enjoys teasing me. I enjoy it, too.

A few minutes later, Gabrielle emerges from the woods washing her hands with hand sanitizer. “No ass rash,” she says with a grin.

As she passes me on her way to Odin, I reach down and palm her pert little ass. “Maybe I should double check when we reach camp. You know—just to be sure.”

She pauses and turns back to me. “Maybe you should.”

The temptation is too much to pass up, so I lean in and kiss her. I just meant for it to be a light kiss—nothing hot and heavy. But when our mouths touch, it’s like fireworks.

She opens her mouth to me, and I can’t resist the invitation. I seal our mouths, and my tongue finds hers. Her arms go around my waist, and mine go around hers. I pull her close and revel in the feel of her soft breasts pressed against my chest. I’m sure she’s fully aware of my sudden erection, which is nudging her belly.

“We’re sleeping in a tent tonight?” she asks, breathless from our kiss.

“Yeah.”

“One sleeping bag or two?”

“I brought two, but we can zip them together and make one big one, if you like.”

“Oh, I like,” she says. “I’ve never had sex in a tent before.”

“There’s a first time for everything.” I don’t think I’ve ever looked forward to sleeping on the ground as much as I am right now. I brush my lips close to her ear. “You’ll have to be on top this time so I don’t grind you into the ground. Our sleeping arrangements will be comfortable enough, but it won’t be like having a real mattress beneath you.”

Gunshot reverberates through the air, cracking like thunder.

Gabrielle jumps, and her startled gaze locks with mine.

“Was that gunshot?”

I nod. “Probably someone’s hunting.”

“I thought we were on McIntyre property.”

“We are. But in these parts, folks hike all through these mountains. There aren’t any property lines or borders.”

“Will we be alone at the lake?” she asks.

“Most likely. It’s a bit off the beaten path. There’s no other way to get up there other than to hike or come on horseback. We don’t see a lot of folks up there, which suits me just fine. I don’t like people.”

She laughs. “Don’t be such a grump.”

“I was born grumpy. Just ask my parents.”

We mount our horses and resume our journey. Right on time, we reach the lake around lunch time. I unload the gear from the horses, remove their saddles, and tie them to a highline stretched between two trees. Each horse gets a bell around its neck, just in case one gets loose, and I have to go searching for it in the woods.

While the horses rest, I begin setting up a dark green nylon tent in a grassy area out in the sun. It’s a small, two-person tent. Nothing fancy. But setting it in the sun will help heat up the interior and keep us warmer at night. At this elevation, the temperature dips down at night. Once the tent is up, I roll out a sleeping pad, and then I combine the two sleeping bags into one and inflate two pillows.

Gabrielle slips her jacket on. “It’s chilly,” she says as she rubs her arms.

I nod. “At this elevation, you’ll feel the temperature difference.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Do you know how to start a fire?”

“With what?” she asks. “Did you bring a lighter? I have no experience rubbing two sticks together.”

I laugh. “Yes, I brought a lighter. The goal here is not to reenact stone age living conditions. I’ll collect some kindling and firewood. Once we get a fire going, we can make coffee and have lunch.”

“I brought some burgers to cook on the grill,” she says.

After a lunch of burgers, chips, and soft drinks, I collect the bag of nonperishable food and the soft-sided cooler and hoist them both until they’re hanging from a high tree limb.

Gabrielle watches me. “That seems a bit inconvenient, don’t you think?”

“You have a lot to learn about the wilderness, young lady. One word—bears.”

“Oh. Are you serious? They’d come right into our camp?”

I nod. “Yep.”

“What about the horses? Are they safe from the bears?”

“The bells help with that. The bears will hear them and hopefully move on to avoid a confrontation. And the horses will let us know if any predators are nearby. But honestly, I’ve never had a problem with predators here at the lake. If one shows up, I’ll handle it.”

“That’s what the guns are for,” she says.

I nod. “And bear spray. That’s probably the most effective deterrent in case one shows up.”

“Would you like to hike around the lake?” I ask when we’re done with lunch.

“What about the horses? Is it safe to leave them alone?”

“We won’t be so far away that we can’t see and hear them. If they get spooked, we’ll know.”

After we remove all traces of our meal, we start off around the lake. The path is a bit difficult in places, with fallen logs and branches barring our way. When Gabrielle steps up to cross a log, I offer her a hand, steadying her when she loses her balance.

We see all sorts of wildlife on our hike—rabbits, snakes, lizards, and deer. Gabrielle jumps every time something slithers across the path, or when we hear loud splashes coming from the lake.

“It’s just the fish,” I tell her.

Turtles bolt at our approach and disappear into the reedy shallows. Bullfrogs serenade us with their deep croaks.

We take our time, pausing periodically to stand and gaze at the mountain peaks in the distance.

“I didn’t realize I was so out of shape,” Gabrielle says when she notices she’s having to stop to catch her breath a lot.

“It’s the elevation,” I say. “You’re not accustomed to it. The air pressure is lower up here. Hey, if you start to feel sick, let me know, and we’ll take it easy.”

We hold hands the last leg of our hike. Here the ground has evened out some, and it’s easier going.

When we reach camp, I feed the horses while Gabrielle heats up a pot of beef stew and wraps some rolls in foil and sets them on the grill to heat. Looks like we’re having stew and warm rolls with butter for supper, along with chilled soft drinks.

“Why does everything taste better when you eat it outside?” Gabrielle asks as we sit around the fire and eat.

That evening, after we clean the dishes, I stoke the fire and check the animals to make sure they’re safe and comfortable. They all seem pretty relaxed, which is reassuring. Horses can smell predators from quite a distance, and these three seem at ease.

I stroke Zeus’s neck. “You let me know if there’s any trouble, all right? And keep an eye on the others.” Odin and Sal are both asleep on their feet.

Zeus whinnies as he butts his nose against my chest.

As darkness falls, we sit by the fire, quietly relaxing, while the insects serenade us.

Gabrielle holds my scarred hand on her lap and gently strokes it. Linking our fingers, she sighs. “I’m sorry you were hurt.”

“Thanks, honey. But look on the bright side. If it hadn’t happened, I wouldn’t have met you.”

She smiles, but it’s a sad smile. Then she cups my face and leans in to kiss me.

Her lips are soft and cool on mine, gently coaxing them open. Immediately, my body responds, and I have to shift in my seat to make room for a growing erection. Is it too early to suggest we go to bed? Right now, all I can think about is getting her onto that bedroll.

When Gabrielle yawns, I suggest we call it a night. I bank the fire, and then we both get ready for bed.

“I’m not going in there alone, not even to pee,” Gabrielle says, staring into the pitch-black woods.

I bite my lip to keep from smiling. “Do you want me to go with you?”

She contemplates that idea for a moment, balancing privacy with safety. “I think you’d better.”

“Okay.” I bring a flashlight with me, stand a few yards away, and give her some privacy while she takes care of business.

She returns to camp while I pee, and then we wash up and crawl into the tent. I turn on a small battery-operated lantern and set it on the floor in the corner. It provides just enough light that we can see what we’re doing.

She's sitting on our sleeping bag, her legs crossed, watching me. "What's on your mind, sweetheart?" I ask.

"You."

I sit beside her on the bedroll and stretch out my legs.

"How so?"

Without another word, she runs one of her hands slowly up my right leg, not stopping until she encounters the hard-on pressing against my zipper. She rises up on her knees and unsnaps my blue jeans, pausing long enough to look me in the eye, as if asking permission. *Ah, bless her heart.* As if she needs to ask permission.

I lie back on the padded bedding, my head on a pillow. I stretch my arms out to my sides. "I'm all yours. Do with me whatever you want."

She grins. "I plan to."

It's already several degrees warmer in the tent now, just from our combined body heat. Gabrielle's on her knees, facing me. She removes her jacket, then her long-sleeved T-shirt. I stare in fascination at the soft flesh of her breasts practically spilling over the cups of her pale, peach-colored bra. She starts removing her jeans, but nearly loses her balance in the

process, falling forward. I catch her, and she laughs. I do, too. She finally gets her jeans off and lays them aside. Her panties match her bra, little peach-colored panties that beckon me to put my hands on her. When I reach for her, hoping to relieve her of her underwear, she pushes me onto my back.

“It’s my turn,” she says.

I’m all for fair play, but right now I’m torn between wanting my mouth on her and having her mouth on me. I guess the decision is made for me when she takes my erection in her hand and squeezes.

I see stars, literal stars, as light bursts behind my eyes. I just know she’s going to be the death of me.

But, man, what a sweet way to go.

Chapter 22 – Gabrielle

John has given me several orgasms, so it's my turn to return the favor. This is something I've been looking forward to all day. The whole time we were riding up here, I was fantasizing about giving him head. Ever since he mentioned that I'd be on top—*so that he didn't grind me into the ground*—it's all I've been able to think about.

There's no doubt in my mind—John Burke is the most exciting lover I've ever had. The most raw and elemental lover.

I unzip his jeans and work them down his long legs.

“By the way, there's a condom in my satchel over there,” he says, nodding toward a small canvas bag in the corner of the tent. His voice seems a bit deeper than usual, rougher. “I came prepared this time.”

“You're such a Boy Scout.”

“Me? Hardly.” He scoffs. “I want to be prepared for any contingency. It's the Army in me.”

I glance over at his rifle, tucked safely in its worn, leather scabbard. He also has a pistol in a holster somewhere, but I

don't see it. "Like the rifle?"

"You'll be glad I have it if something unpleasant comes into our campground during the night."

I shudder at the idea of a wild animal coming into our campground. The proximity of the rifle also makes me nervous, but I guess it's a necessity out here in the wilderness. I look away, returning my attention back to John, which is where it should be.

"Do you know how to shoot?" he asks me. Apparently, he's not ready to let the topic drop.

"No."

"Then I know what we're doing tomorrow after breakfast."

"And what's that?" I'm pretty sure I can guess.

"Shooting lessons. If you're going to be traipsing around the wilderness, you need to know how to handle a firearm—just in case. It's for your own protection."

"Okay," I say as I toss his jeans aside. "But that's a conversation for tomorrow."

The outline of his erection presses firmly against his black boxer-briefs. It's just as impressive now as it was the last time.

It wasn't my imagination. The man is endowed.

I reach for the waistband of his briefs and begin sliding them down past his hips, careful not to catch the fabric on his package. Meanwhile, he's casually unbuttoning his shirt and slipping it off. Then he whips off his undershirt and tosses it aside. When he's finally naked, I take a moment to look my fill.

His body is gorgeous—there's no other way to describe him. Everything is so firm and chiseled, probably a result of lifting saddles and hauling around bales of hay and straw, or sacks of grain. He has an actual six pack. I can easily count the ridges.

The thought of him being injured breaks my heart.

When my gaze lingers on his face, he says, "It was a long time ago, Gabrielle. Don't fret over it. I hardly remember anything from that day."

I don't know if that's true, or if he's saying that so I won't feel bad for him. Mentally, I shake myself. This moment is supposed to be about *him*. I don't want to bring him down by stirring up bad memories.

I press my hand to his bare chest and push him onto his back once more. Then I wrap my fingers around his erection.

When he makes a sound that's half groan, half growl, I smile.

He's hard, the length of him firm and defying gravity. When I draw him into my mouth, he sucks in a sharp breath and fists the sleeping bag beneath him. His eyes are clenched shut, and I get the feeling he's trying to hold on. I may not be the best or the most experienced when it comes to giving a man a blowjob, but he seems to think I'm doing fine.

I've watched enough soft porn videos to have a decent idea of how to use my mouth and hands on him. His chest rises hard and fast, and he's about to rip a hole in the sleeping bag, so I figure I must be doing something right.

I lick and suck on him, rim the crown, stroke the long hard length of him. I feel a vein pulsing underneath my tongue and fingers. When I reach down to cup his sac, he blows out a rough breath.

I lick around the rim of his head, then draw him in all the way to the back of my throat.

“Gabrielle, fuck!” The words are ripped out of him.

So I keep doing what I'm doing, enjoying every second of it. Enjoying the feel of him underneath my fingers and in my mouth. But most of all, I'm enjoying his reaction. The sounds of his pleasure.

Suddenly, he sits up, yanks my panties off me, and pulls me astride him.

"Fuck! Condom!" He leans way over, catching me when I almost topple off him, to grab the condom packet. He tears it open with his teeth and quickly rolls it on. Then he slips an index finger between my legs, touching me gently, sliding through my arousal. "Thank God!" he says.

Oh, I'm plenty wet. I think I've been that way most of the day, anticipating this very moment.

"I have lube in my satchel," he says. "Do you want it?"

Shaking my head, I push him back down so he's lying flat before I straddle his thighs. I guide him to my opening.

He mutters something raw and rough, and I can't quite make out the words. I get the gist though, because when I start to lower myself on him, he clenches his jaws.

I gasp when the head of him presses inside me. I rock on him, slowly working myself down his long shaft. He fills me

exquisitely, stretching me perfectly. The feeling of fullness is delicious.

He looks up at me with a heated gaze. “You are so damn beautiful.” Then he cups my breasts with his warm palms, gently covering them, holding them, molding them to his palms. His thumbs brush over my nipples, making them pucker tightly.

Heat rushes through me, from head to toe. Every inch of me is aroused. Once I’m almost fully seated, I begin to move, slowly at first, then with more confidence. He reaches for my hands and presses them to his chest so I have something to brace myself on.

I rock myself on him, adjusting the angle so he’s hitting my sweet spot.

He groans loudly. “You’re killing me, honey.”

Once my body adjusts to him, I start to move faster. His hands grip my hips, and he helps me raise and lower myself on him. Eventually, he bucks his hips, thrusting into me, and I grip his wrists to hold on. He’s incredibly strong, thrusting deep and hard.

“Okay?” he pants.

“Yes.” I gasp, my own breathing picking up as feelings of pleasure swamp me.

He reaches between my legs, and his thumb starts rubbing circles on my clit, alternating between firm and soft touches. Tingles shoot up my spine, and my belly clenches tightly. My body clamps down on him, squeezing him, and increasing the sweet friction between us. Our gazes meet, and neither one of us looks away.

We come at the same time. My body has turned to mush, and I nearly collapse on him. John thrusts one last time, so deep his hips raise off the mat as he sinks deep inside me. He catches me when I lose my balance.

“Oh, wow,” I say. My heart is pounding. “I thought this only happened in romance books.”

“What?”

“Climaxing at the same time.”

He smiles as he sits up and wraps his arms around me, pulling me close. The night air feels cool against my damp skin, and I shiver.

“I guess we’re meant to be then.” He kisses me gently, and then he strokes my cheek.

He's still inside me, and when I flex the muscles between my legs, he closes his eyes and moans. "Damn."

Then he lies back down and rolls us onto our sides. After gently withdrawing, he removes the condom, wraps it in a tissue, and sets it aside. "Come here."

We slip inside the double sleeping bag, and he turns me onto my side so he can spoon me from behind. His hand covers my breast, and I feel his lips in my hair.

He kisses the back of my head. "Sleep well, sweetheart."

* * *

I wake with a start, momentarily confused by the raucous sounds coming from outside our tent—hooves pawing at the ground, the jarring clang of cowbells, and Zeus's loud, angry snorts. "John! What's wrong?"

John slips out of bed and quickly pulls on his jeans and boots. "Stay in here," he barks at me.

I reach over and switch on the lantern. "What is it?"

He removes his rifle from the scabbard, then he grabs a long black flashlight. "Predator." As he unzips the tent, he says, "Do not go outside, Gabrielle. You hear me?"

“Yes,” I whisper. My heart is pounding from fear of the unknown. It could be anything out there—a bear, wolves.

Those poor horses!

John slips silently into the darkness as the horses continue making enough noise to wake the dead.

“Ha! Get out of here!” he yells. Then I hear the crack of a rifle shot. Then another.

I crawl to the tent flap and unzip it just enough so I can peer outside. As my sight adjusts to the darkness, I can just make out John standing by the horses, going from one to another as he examines them with the aid of his flashlight. “It’s okay,” he says. “Everybody’s fine.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Did you see what it was?”

“Bobcat.”

“You didn’t shoot him, did you?” I ask, horrified at the thought.

“No.” He chuckles. “But I put the fear of God in him. He hightailed it out of here.”

“Will he come back?”

“I doubt it. And if he does, he’s no match for Zeus and Odin.”

After making a thorough search of the immediate area, John returns to the tent, puts the rifle away, and slides back into our sleeping bag. “You okay?” he asks as he draws me close. “You’re shaking.”

“I was startled, that’s all. It’s not every night I’m awakened by the sound of Armageddon.” I reach for his hand and link our fingers together. “Are you sure the horses are safe?”

“Don’t worry. They’ll raise an alarm if there’s a problem. Horses have an excellent sense of smell and hearing.”

He drops a kiss on my bare shoulder, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Go back to sleep, sweetheart,” he says. “I’ll stay awake for a while and listen, just to be sure.”

* * *

When I wake again, it’s light outside. I roll over to find the other half of the sleeping bag empty. Then I realize I can hear John outside stoking a fire.

I manage to find my clothes and put them on before crawling out into the early morning chill. “Good morning.”

He looks up from his task and smiles. “Good morning. I hope you slept well after all the excitement last night.”

“I did.” I look to the horses, who are all calmly nibbling on the grass at their feet. “The horses are okay?”

“They’re fine. Coffee?” He nods to the tin coffee pot on the grill.

“Yes, please. It smells wonderful.”

He reaches for a black-and-white speckled enamel mug and pours a cup. “Everything tastes better outdoors.”

I come out of the tent and join him at the fire. After taking the hot mug from him, I sit on the log and sip the strong concoction. “Mm. Cowboy coffee. If you’ll get the cooler down from the tree, I’ll start on breakfast. Scrambled eggs and bacon. I also brought some bread. We can toast it on the grill and have it with butter and strawberry jam.”

John wipes his hands on his jeans. “I’m on it.”

After breakfast, I wash the dishes in a plastic tub of warm soapy water while John sees to the horses. He moves them to another grassy patch so they can graze and offers them water.

“Any sign of the bobcat this morning?” I ask as I dry our dishes.

“Nope. I think he’s long gone.”

Later in the morning, we hike around the lake again. I stand on top of a fallen log at the water’s edge and watch fish darting amongst the rocks and fallen limbs. We spot three turtles sunbathing on a log half submerged in the water. As we pass by, startled frogs leap into the water, splashing.

We finish off the last of the leftover beef stew for lunch and eat baked potatoes that I wrapped in foil and cooked on the grill.

“Ready to head back?” he asks me as he finishes the last bite of his food.

I frown. “Do we have to?” I’m really enjoying being out here with him, just the two of us.

“Afraid so. I promised Hannah I’d have you back in time for the supper rush this evenin’. But we can come back again, any time you want to. Just say the word.”

I stand to collect his dirty dishes, then lean down to kiss him. “I’ll wash these while you start to pack up.”

Just as he’s putting the rolled-up tent into its bag, we hear loud voices coming from the other side of the lake. Several young male voices from the sound of it, loud and obnoxious.

As John finishes packing up, he keeps an eye on the approaching group of three young men.

“Hey!” one of them yells at us as they get near. “How’s fishing?”

I guess them to be in their early twenties. They’re dressed in jeans, boots, and hoodies. Two of them are wearing University of Colorado Denver hoodies. They’re each carrying a backpack loaded with camping gear.

“Don’t know,” John replies. “We’re not fishing. You guys camping?”

“Yeah,” one of them says. “Camping and climbing. We’ve been out here roughing it for a couple days now.”

“We’re on summer break from school,” another one says. He points at a tall, vertical rock face to the west of the lake, not far from where we’re standing. Probably a hundred yards away. “That looks like a good site,” he says to his friends.

“That’s insane, Kirk,” the third guy says. “You’ve never climbed anything that high.”

“Don’t be such a baby,” the one called Kirk says. “I’m gonna go check it out.”

As the three guys head toward the rock face, John asks, “Are you experienced climbers?”

The trio stops and turns back to John.

“Sure. I climb all the time,” Kirk says. “These guys, not so much. But they’re learning.”

John points toward the rock face. “I happen to know that’s a tough climb.”

Kirk shrugs. “Like I said, I’m experienced.”

“Yeah,” his buddy says. “He climbs at the rec center all the time.”

John shakes his head. “This is no rec center climbing wall, pal. Where’s your gear?”

“I don’t need any gear,” Kirk replies. “I’m going to free solo it.”

John props his hands on his hips. “I don’t advise that. If you’re going to climb it, at least use gear. Are your friends experienced belayers?”

The kid waves John off and continues to the rock face, followed by his friends.

I sidle up to John. “What’s wrong?”

“He has no business trying to free solo that rock.”

“What does *free solo* mean?”

“Climbing without gear. Just using his hands and feet.”

The one named Kirk is sitting on the ground changing his shoes.

I crane my neck up to the top of the rock. “That’s huge. If he falls—”

“Yeah. Maya’s nickname for that rock is Resting Bitch Face.”

I try not to laugh, but I can see the resemblance. “What should we do?”

“We finish packing up camp,” he says, “and then we hang around and wait for him to fall.”

John says that with such certainty I realize it’s a sure thing. And I really don’t want to stand here and watch.

Chapter 23 – John

Our gear is packed up—tent, bedroll, cooking supplies, food, everything. Well, almost everything. I haven't packed the satellite phone yet. I'm pretty sure we're going to need it to call for help. I haven't saddled the horses and mule, either, as that might be premature.

Gabrielle and I grab some water bottles and sit on the log bench beside our fire pit to watch the shit show unfolding just a hundred yards away. The afternoon is getting on, and we're going to be late getting back. There's no way we can leave now, not when all hell's about to break loose.

As the kid climbs, his buddies stand at the base of the rock and cheer him on—loudly.

Gabrielle watches the kid climb, her expression a mix of confusion and horror. “Why isn't he using any ropes?” she whispers. “Is he crazy? He could fall so easily.” When he misses a hand hold and scrambles for purchase, she covers her eyes. “I think I'm going to be sick.”

I put my arm around her and pull her close. “Yeah, this isn't going to end well. He's in way over his head.”

The kid's foot slips on the rock, and he flails for a better hold.

"You got this, Kirk!" one of the kids on the ground yells up at his friend. "You got this!"

Gabrielle turns to face me. "I can't watch this. Seriously, I can't."

I stroke my thumb across her cheek, mesmerized by her soft skin.

"Did I ever mention I'm afraid of heights?" she asks.

"You do fine on Odin, and he's a tall horse."

"That's because I'm careful never to look down at the ground. I keep my gaze fixed straight ahead, usually at the back of your head. It's not so bad then."

"You flew to Denver. You're not afraid to fly?"

"Aisle seat. I avoided looking out any windows. I told myself we were sitting on the runway the whole time."

I laugh. "Did it work?"

She shrugs. "Mostly. Except for when we hit turbulence."

Chuckling, I lean forward to kiss her lightly. "You are—"

We break apart at the sound of an earth-shattering scream, followed by sheer pandemonium by the two guys standing at the base of the rock.

Well, fuck.

We both stand. Kirk is nowhere to be seen. His buddies are hysterical, racing back and forth frantically, calling up to Kirk—who is still not visible.

But he's alive. We can hear him screaming a blue streak, his curses punctuated by cries of pain.

I grab the sat phone and power it up as I head over there. Gabrielle follows right behind me.

“Where is he?” I ask the two on the ground.

They both point up to a ledge about twenty feet above the ground.

“He fell on that ledge,” one of them says.

“Kirk!” I yell. “You okay?”

“No, you asshole! My fucking leg is broken!”

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“Yes, I'm sure! The fucking bone is sticking out of my skin.”

Well, shit.

The phone is powered up now and connected to a satellite. I phone the main desk at the lodge and put the call on speaker so everyone can hear.

“McIntyre Wilderness Excursions,” Tammy says with a cheerful voice. “How can I—”

“Tammy, it’s Burke. I need you to put Killian or Hannah on the phone A-SAP.”

“Um, sure. Just a sec. They’re in the office.”

A moment later, Killian comes on the line. “What’s wrong, Burke?”

“We need a med evac up at Pine Lake.”

“What happened? Is it Gabrielle?”

“No, she’s fine. It’s an idiot climber who had no business doin’ what he was doin’. We’ll need climbers, and we’ll need Micah to bring his chopper up here to lift the guy off the ledge and transport him to the hospital. Compound fracture of the leg.”

“All right. I’ll radio Travis and Maya. They’re off duty at the moment. And I’ll call Micah. We’ll get up there as quickly as possible. I’ll be in touch.”

“Thanks. We’ll be here.”

Kirk is alternately screaming and crying.

“Hang on, kid!” I holler up at him. “Help is on the way.”

The two guys on the ground are having panic attacks.

“Hey,” I tell them. “He’s damn lucky he landed on that ledge. If he’d hit the ground, he’d have more than a broken leg to complain about. It might have killed him.”

One of the kids turns away and throws up.

I glance over at Gabrielle, who’s white as a sheet. “Well, the upside,” I tell her, “is you’ll get to see McIntyre Search and Rescue up close, doing what they do best. They’re on their way.”

Chapter 24 – Gabrielle

This is unreal. Poor Kirk. He's been wailing nonstop. And his friends aren't in any better shape. They're both drowning in anxiety.

It's been nearly forty minutes since John called down to the lodge and talked to Killian.

"It won't be much longer now," John says as he consults his watch.

Sure enough, a moment later we hear the approach of a helicopter. It lands in a flat, grassy spot beside the lake. Three people immediately hop out—Killian, Maya, and Travis. The pilot remains in the chopper.

Killian and the climbers race over to the base of the rock face, where the rest of us are standing.

Maya gazes up the rock face, shading her eyes from the sun. "Where is he?"

I point at a wedge of rock jutting out from the face. "The ledge broke his fall, but unfortunately, his leg is broken—compound fracture."

Maya looks around the base of the rock and frowns. “I don’t see any equipment. Don’t tell me he was free soloing.” She glances at Kirk’s two friends, who are sitting on the ground now, both of them pale. Maya shakes her head. “Idiots.”

She and Travis are both already geared up to climb, with harnesses strapped to their bodies, ropes, and so many carabiners I can’t count them all. They’re dressed in jeans, T-shirts, and strange-looking shoes. I watch them as they stare up at the rock face, studying it.

Kirk moans loudly high overhead.

“I’ll go first,” Maya says as she starts to check her equipment.

Travis nods as he begins uncoiling a long length of rope, which he connects to a device at Maya’s waist. Then he attaches it to a device at his waist. They both check the fittings, making sure they’re secure.

“When we reach the ledge,” Maya says, “we’ll radio Micah to bring up the gurney. We’ll splint the patient’s leg and then strap him onto the gurney.”

“Kirk,” I say. “His name is Kirk.”

Maya rolls her eyes. “I’ve got another name for him. Anyhoo, Killian will use a winch to bring *Kirk* on board the chopper, and then Micah will fly him to the hospital.”

Killian returns to the chopper.

John and I watch as Maya and Travis do their thing. It’s impressive to watch them work. Maya starts climbing, and Travis stands on the ground below her, holding a length of rope attached to Maya. They’re talking to each other, giving commands and replying, but I can’t make out what they’re saying.

I look at John. “Why is Maya the only one going up?”

“Travis is belaying her.”

I feel so clueless. “What does that mean?”

“He’s her safety line while she’s ascending. If she loses her footing, he can prevent her from falling. Once she gets to her destination, she’ll place a lead rope so Travis can climb up. They’ve climbed this rock many times before, so they know where the bolts are and where to secure the rope.”

I’ve seen people climbing walls at the rec center back home, but it looked nothing like this. They grabbed onto brightly colored hand and foot holds. Here, it looks like Maya

is randomly clutching the rock face. As she ascends higher and higher, my stomach plummets.

Finally, she reaches the ledge. Before climbing up onto it, she hooks two carabiners into a large bolt and connects the rope. Then she hauls herself up onto the ledge. She disappears from sight for a couple of minutes before she reappears, peering over the ledge. “Yep. Compound tibia fracture. Right leg. Come on up, Travis.”

While Travis scales the wall holding on to the rope Maya secured to the rock, the helicopter blades start rotating, and soon the chopper lifts into the air. I see a dark-haired man I’ve never met before sitting in the pilot’s seat. Killian is in the rear of the chopper.

Just as Travis reaches the ledge, the helicopter moves into place many feet above the ledge. The wind whips at Travis’s and Maya’s hair. A side door of the chopper opens, and Killian appears in the opening. The next thing I know, he’s lowering a gurney on a cable connected to a winch.

Once the gurney reaches the ledge, it takes a while for Maya and Travis to get Kirk strapped onto the gurney. The entire time, the poor guy is wailing.

Travis gives Killian a thumbs-up sign, and Killian starts raising the gurney. When it reaches the chopper, he pulls it inside. Not long after, the chopper door closes, and Micah turns the aircraft to the east and off they go.

Travis starts to descend first. When he reaches the ground, Maya starts making her way down.

“That was utterly nerve wracking,” I say.

John chuckles. “You’ll get used to it if you watch them enough. Maya and Travis know what they’re doing.”

I shake my head. “You’ll never get me up there.” I shudder. “No thanks.”

Maya finally makes it to the ground. “That kid is an idiot. He’s lucky he didn’t break his freaking neck.” She slaps Travis on the back. “This calls for drinks tonight at Ruth’s. What do you say?”

Travis nods. “Sounds good to me.”

“You guys should join us,” Maya says to me and John. Then she winks at us. “I heard the news,” she whispers, although we’re all standing right there and can hear everything she says.

I look to John, not wanting to commit him to something he's not ready for.

But he just shrugs. "Sure. If you want to," he tells me.

"How will you and Travis get back to the lodge?" I ask.

Travis shrugs. "The old-fashioned way. We'll hike down."

While John saddles our mounts, I fetch and carry for him to speed up the process. Travis and Maya pack up their gear, drink some water and eat protein bars, and then start hiking down the trail.

"It's a shame they have to walk so far," I say as John gives me a lift up onto Odin's saddle.

"Don't worry about them." He makes sure my feet are securely placed in the stirrups. "They'll beat us to the lodge."

"Really? That's a three-hour trip on horseback."

"Yes, really. Those two move fast, trust me." He pats my thigh. "All set? Are you comfortable?"

"Yes."

He brings one of my hands to his mouth and kisses it.

"You did well on your first camping trip. I'm proud of you."

I lean down, and he meets me halfway for a kiss. “I’m proud of you, too. You saved the horses from a bobcat, and you saved that kid. You knew he’d fall.”

“Thanks. As for the kid falling, that was a foregone conclusion. That’s a tough rock to climb under the best of circumstances, and he’s clearly inexperienced and overly-confident.”

John mounts Zeus and picks up Sal’s lead. And with that, we’re off on our three-hour long trek back to the lodge. It seems like we have a date this evening, with Maya and Travis. I’m looking forward to it. It’ll be the first time John and I are out in public together, as a couple.

Chapter 25 – John

It's five o'clock by the time we arrive at the lodge. I got Gabrielle back later than I'd promised Hannah. I help Gabrielle dismount Odin. She groans when her feet touch the ground.

“Are you sore?” I ask.

She nods as she rubs her backside. “My thighs and butt hurt.”

“Sorry about that.” I cup her face and gaze down at her. “I'm proud of you. You handled everything well—the bobcat, camping rough for the first time, and the climbing incident.”

“It certainly was an adventure.” She glances toward the lodge. “I guess I'd better get cleaned up and get to work.”

“I'll come find you as soon as I take care of the horses and the tack. How about I meet you for dinner in an hour?”

She lights up at that. “Yes. I'd like that.” She sighs. She surprises the daylights out of me when she cups my left cheek and goes up on her toes to kiss me. “I'll see you in a bit, cowboy.”

I watch her until she disappears inside the lodge.

“So, how was it?” Nora asks me. She’s leaning against a wooden fence post, her arms crossed over her chest.

“It wasn’t boring,” I say with a laugh. “Had to chase a bobcat off in the middle of the night, and then we dealt with a rescue and medical evac.”

“I don’t mean that part. I mean you and Gabrielle, up there by yourselves. How’d it go?”

I fail at keeping a straight face. “It was amazing. *She’s* amazing. I think she enjoyed it. I know I did.”

Smiling, Nora nods. “Good. Like I said, you deserve someone special, boss.”

After we finish with the horses and gear, I run up to my cabin to clean up. Looks like we’re goin’ out on an official date this evening. I should look my best.

After I step out of the shower, I wipe the condensation off the bathroom mirror and stare hard at my reflection. If Gabrielle’s willing to go out with me—be *seen* in public with me—then the least I can do is show up for her. Show up all the way—all in. No hiding. No cowardice. No insecurities.

I dress in my nicest pair of jeans, my best brown leather boots, and a white dress shirt with mother-of-pearl snaps. I

strap on my watch, then towel-dry and comb my hair.

No hat this evening. No hiding.

I walk over to the lodge and enter through the main doors and cross the lobby. “Hey, Kevin.”

Kevin’s working the guest counter. He does a double-take when he sees me. “Wow, Burke. I almost didn’t recognize you without your hat.” His gaze lands on my scarred face, then he quickly looks away, down the hall. “If you’re looking for Gabrielle, she’s in the restaurant.”

I nod. “Thanks.”

The restaurant is nearly half full this evening. I recognize a lot of folks from town, so I guess word is getting out.

Tammy’s standing at the podium. I catch sight of Gabrielle walking through the dining room carrying a water pitcher, stopping from table to table to refill people’s glasses. When she spots me, she stops in her tracks, her eyes widening.

She changes direction and comes right to me, beaming. “Your hat.”

Nervously, I brush my hair. “I thought I’d leave it at home this evening.” I also left my glove.

When she looks at me, I see so much emotion in those beautiful eyes. She knows what a big deal this is for me, to go out without my hat. I'm exposing myself to curious gazes. I'm risking a lot.

She skims my outfit, then reaches up and brushes my hair. "You look very handsome, John."

I catch her hand. "You look beautiful." That's an understatement. Her hair is up in some kind of loose bun, with a couple of ringlets hanging free. She's wearing those gold hoop earrings again and lip gloss from the looks of it. She's wearing a cream-colored dress that displays a hint of cleavage, a gold heart locket around her neck, and sandals on her feet. "Peaches and cream."

She smiles. "Thank you." And then to my absolute shock, she leans closer and kisses me on the mouth, right out in public. It's a light kiss, but it's intentional, and her lips linger a moment against mine.

My heart slams into my ribs.

"I saved us a table," she says, taking my left hand and leading me across the room to a quiet corner table. "Have a seat. I'll join you in a moment."

She fills the two glasses at our table with ice water, then walks back to the podium to have a word with Tammy.

Tammy nods, puts out the *PLEASE SEAT YOURSELF* sign, and takes over Gabrielle's server duties.

Gabrielle returns to our table. "How about some chili and cornbread? Nelle made it from scratch since I didn't have time to prepare anything for this evening."

"That sounds fantastic," I say. The evenings are getting cooler as fall approaches, so chili is perfect.

She heads to the kitchen and returns a few moments later with our food. Then she takes a seat opposite me at the two-person table. "Thank you," she says, holding her hand out.

I take her hand and squeeze it gently.

"You did that for me," she says.

I know she's referring to my hat. "I figured I might as well get used to it. If you're brave enough to be seen with me, then I should at least be brave enough to show myself."

"I'm not being brave." She squeezes my hand. "I'm honored to be out with you."

I see nothing but sincerity in her gaze. I hear nothing but sincerity in her voice. My throat tightens, and I'm at a loss for

words. I swallow hard. “Thanks.”

She smiles. “Dig in. I think you’ll like it.”

While we eat, Hannah and Killian stop by our table to say hi.

“How’s the kid doing?” I ask Killian.

“He’ll live.” Killian shakes his head. “The dumbass. He’s lucky he only broke his leg. It could have been a lot worse.”

“You guys are coming to Ruth’s tonight, right?” Hannah asks us. “Maya has organized a bit of a celebration.” She laughs. “Of course, Maya doesn’t need much of an excuse to organize a party.”

“We’ll be there,” Gabrielle says, catching my eye as if to confirm.

“Lookin’ forward to it,” I say, lying through my teeth. I’d rather stay home and sit out on the front porch with Gabrielle to watch the stars come out and listen to crickets, but if Gabrielle wants us to go, we’ll go.

As they take their leave, Killian nods to me. “I never realized you had so much hair.” Then he winks at me. “It’s a good look for you, man.”

* * *

After dinner, I hang around the restaurant to help Gabrielle out. When the dinner period is over, I help her clean up the dining room, while the ladies clean up the kitchen.

We're ready to leave for the tavern a few minutes before nine.

"Are you sure about this?" Gabrielle asks as she climbs into my truck. "We don't have to go if you don't want to."

I start the engine. "I'm sure."

She leans over and kisses my cheek. "I appreciate what you're doing."

I brush off her thanks. "It's nothing." I'm attempting to play it down, but I think she sees right through me.

We drive into town, and I have to go around to the back of the building to find a parking spot. "Looks like it's gonna be crowded tonight."

When we walk in through the back door, Maya jumps up from a big table and waves.

It's packed in here tonight. The tables are full. The dance floor is busy, as are the pool tables and the dart boards. There's even a small crowd of youngsters standing around the juke box.

Ruth waves at us from behind the bar. “Glad you could make it,” she yells over the chatter. “Have a seat and I’ll come take your drink orders.”

I feel naked without my hat. I’ve gotten so used to being able to hide myself in public. Now I’m on full display. I notice a few curious stares.

Gabrielle reaches for my hand and links our fingers together. “Ready?” she asks, smiling.

I nod. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

We join our friends at a long table. Everyone’s here— Maya, Travis, Hannah and Killian, Jennie, Maggie and Owen, and Micah.

“Let me introduce you to Micah,” I tell Gabrielle. “He’s the helicopter pilot who flew Kirk to the hospital.”

Micah stands and offers Gabrielle his hand. “Micah Jackson,” he says. “Pleased to meet you.”

Like his sister, it’s apparent Micah is Native American. His hair is jet black, long and straight, held back with a leather tie. His skin is burnished a warm shade of copper, and his eyes are dark as obsidian.

“Please to meet you, too,” she says. “That was pretty impressive flying up at Pine Lake today. And I understand I have you to thank for the new brakes and tires on my Jeep.”

He laughs. “Yeah, I’m the resident grease monkey around here. If you need a vehicle fixed or a chopper ride, I’m your guy.”

Micah shakes my hand. “Hey, Burke.” He gives me a once over. “I didn’t know you had so much hair. Anyway, I’m glad you were on site at Pine Lake today and able to call us in so quickly. That poor kid was really suffering.”

Now that all the introductions are done, Gabrielle and I take our seats, opposite Maya and Travis.

“Hey, girlfriend,” Maya says as she offers a fist bump to Gabrielle. “Glad to see you could make it.”

Gabrielle touches her fist to Maya’s. “Thanks for inviting me.”

Ruth sets two pitchers of beer on the table. Teddy, one of her employees, sets down a tray of glasses. “Beers are on the house this evening, guys,” she says. “To a job well done.”

Most everyone is still full from dinner, but Ruth brings out two platters of appetizers. She comes to join us for a few

minutes, taking the empty seat at the head of the table.

Maya leans across the table. “Hey, Ruth, who’s the hottie sitting at the end of the bar?”

Of course everyone turns to look. Sure enough, there’s a dark-haired man sitting back in the shadows, holding a shot glass in his hand.

Ruth shrugs. “No idea. I think he’s new in town. Not very talkative, though. He keeps to himself, doesn’t say more than he has to, and always pays in cash.”

“I’ll bet he’s some kind of cop,” Maya says.

“I’d know if he worked for the sheriff’s office,” Ruth says.

“No, not that kind of cop,” Maya says. “I’m talking federal, like he’s some kind of agent. Maybe he’s undercover.”

Travis shakes his head. “Maya, you watch too much TV.”

“I’ve seen him in here before,” Killian says.

Maya pours herself a beer. “Everyone be cool. He’s looking this way.”

Of course everyone looks, but the mystery man doesn’t appear to notice. Or, if he does, he’s not showing it.

Ruth rises from her chair. “As long as he behaves himself and pays his tab, he’s welcome to sit there as long as he wants.”

Maya stands, too. “Come on, Gabrielle. Let’s go see if they have any music from this century on the jukebox. I’m getting tired of listening to country music from the eighties.”

Gabrielle laughs as she stands. “I’m not sure I’ll be of much help, but I’ll go with you.”

Jennie and Hannah join them, and the four girls crowd around the jukebox.

“How you doin’?” Killian asks me.

I shrug. “Fine. Why?”

“Just askin’. I’m just not used to seein’ you socializing. I’m glad you’re here.”

Suddenly, there’s a commotion coming from across the room. We all turn to see a young blond-haired guy wearing jeans and a red plaid shirt standing at the jukebox.

“Back off, asshat,” Maya says, loud enough to be heard throughout the bar. “We’re not interested. That means you need to get lost.” Then we clearly hear her threatening to break his arm if he touches her again.

Instantly, my pulse shifts into high gear. The men at our table shoot to their feet. At that same moment, I notice the stranger at the bar stands, too, his laid-back posture gone in a flash.

Before I can even take a step toward the jukebox, the guy in the red plaid grabs Gabrielle's hand and pulls her into his arms, clearly trying to coax her into dancing with him.

Oh, hell no.

And then I'm on the move, followed closely by the rest of the guys.

Chapter 26 – Gabrielle

Well, that escalated quickly. One minute I'm hanging out at the jukebox with my friends, looking for some good songs to play, and the next, this obnoxious blond guy starts crowding us. He smells strongly of alcohol. Obviously he's intoxicated.

"Hey, ladies," he says. He's wearing a red plaid shirt, blue jeans, and a big shiny belt buckle. "How about a dance?" He zeroes in on Maya. "What'dya say, sugar?"

"I am *so* not your sugar, pal," Maya says, turning her back on the guy.

When he lays his hand on her shoulder and tries to turn her back around to face him, she pivots and says, "If you touch me one more time, I'll break your arm."

He lowers his arm and takes a step back, his eyes comically wide, and then starts laughing. "Oh, sugar, I'd like to see you try."

Maya takes a step forward, apparently intending on following through with her threat, but Hannah steps between them and holds Maya back. "Don't waste your time, Maya. He

was just leaving. Isn't that right?" Hannah says, pointedly staring at the guy.

"Well, if she doesn't want to dance, how about you, *red*?"

Now, Mr. Plaid Shirt's attention is on *me*. Great. How did I get so lucky? "Um, no thanks," I say.

He grabs my hand. "Come on, baby," he says, slurring his words. "Just one dance."

As he starts pulling me toward the dance floor, Maya grabs his free hand and twists his arm up high behind his back. "Let her go, moron."

"Kenny!" Ruth shouts. "Get your hands off her. Now!"

We all turn to see Ruth heading our way. When she reaches us, she grabs the guy—Kenny—by the back of his neck and marches him toward the door. Another one of Ruth's employees, a big, dark-skinned guy, follows them to the door. I take it he's a bouncer, but Ruth seems to be handling Kenny just fine on her own.

The big guy runs ahead to open the door for Ruth, who shoves Kenny outside. "You sit right there and don't move a step," Ruth says. Then, to her bouncer, she says, "Reggie, will you drive him home?"

Once the disturbance is taken care of, Ruth comes over to check on Maya and me. “You girls all right?”

“I’m fine,” I say.

“You shoulda let me break his arm,” Maya says.

“I’m sorry about the disturbance,” Ruth says. “He’s normally harmless. Looks like he had a bit too much to drink tonight.”

When a pair of hands settle on my shoulders, I glance back and realize John’s standing right behind me.

“You okay, honey?” he asks.

When he starts rubbing the back of my neck, a shiver courses through me. “I’m fine. Just shaken a bit.”

Now I notice that all the guys from our group are standing around us—Killian, Travis, Owen, and Micah. Wow, this is a protective bunch.

A romantic slow song that even I recognize—*Breathe* by Faith Hill—starts playing on the jukebox. Laughing, Maggie drags a reluctant Owen out onto the dance floor. Killian takes Hannah’s hand, twirls her, and leads her onto the dance floor.

A guy I don’t know approaches Maya, and before he can get a word out, she raises her hands. “Nope.” She turns and

heads back to our table, followed by the others.

I stand rooted to the spot. I'd love to dance, but I don't want to put John on the spot. He's already done so much for me this evening by agreeing to come out.

A low voice ruffles my hair. "Gabrielle, would you like to dance?"

When I turn to face John, he slips his arms around me. "Really?" I ask.

He nods. "Yes, really. If you want to."

I grin guiltily. "I do."

He takes my hand and leads me to the dance floor, then pulls me close as we merge into the crowd.

"Hey, you're good at this," I say, surprised at how easy this seems for him.

John wraps his right arm around my waist and takes my right hand in his left. His *left* hand! I drape my other arm across his shoulders. He leads me effortlessly, like he's done this a million times.

"You know how to dance," I say.

"I never said I didn't."

“But I—I didn’t think you’d feel comfortable dancing.”

“When I was younger, you couldn’t keep me off the dance floor. Now, to be honest, I haven’t done this in years, but it’s like ridin’ a bike. You don’t forget how.”

“Have you danced since—” I glance at his left hand.

He shakes his head. “No. Not once.”

He hasn’t danced in ten years, and tonight he’s doing it only because he knew I wanted to. As I gaze up at him, emotion swamps me, and my eyes tear up. *He’s doing this for me.* He’s stepping completely outside of his comfort zone *for me.*

This man... he slays me.

“Hey,” he says softly, smiling down at me. “Why the tears?”

My throat tightens, and it’s hard to get the words out.

“You’re doing this for me.”

The look on his face says everything. “Who else would I do it for?” He places a gentle kiss on my lips. “Gabrielle, in case you haven’t figured it out, there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you.”

I bring our joined hands closer and place a kiss on the back of his left hand.

His eyes widen, and he swallows hard. “Gabrielle, I—” He looks around at the crowded dance floor. “Would you mind if we called it a night? I’d like to take you home.”

I stroke the back of his neck. I want to get out of here, too. I want to be alone with him, in a quiet place, where we can talk. “I’d like that.”

Holding hands, we return to our friends at the table and say our goodnights. Hannah and Maggie both have knowing smiles on their faces. Maya is secretly giving me a thumbs-up. Ruth joins us and pats John’s shoulder.

And then we’re gone, out the back door, into the truck, and heading back to the lodge.

“I’d like to spend the night with you,” he says quietly on the drive.

He offers me his right hand—he’s using his left to steer. We link fingers.

I nod, feeling a bit too overwhelmed to speak. So much has happened so quickly. It’s like gravity is drawing us together. It’s like we were meant to be together.

“My place or yours?” he asks when we turn onto our road.

“Either is fine with me.”

He thinks it over, then says, “Your place. That way you’ll have everything you need in the morning to get ready for work at the restaurant. It’ll be easier for you that way.”

“There are still two more condoms in my nightstand drawer,” I remind him.

He grins. “I was trying not to be presumptuous.”

“It’s okay. I want you to be presumptuous. I am.”

He nods. “Remind me to pick up a box of condoms to keep at your place.”

* * *

When we arrive at the lodge, I go straight to my apartment to freshen up. John heads to the barn to do a quick check on the horses, to make sure everything’s all right. The timing is perfect because it gives me time to get ready. Something happened tonight—something momentous. Our budding relationship took several leaps forward. I don’t want us to get ahead of ourselves, but John took some real personal risks tonight—*for me*.

I slip into a cream-colored silk lingerie set, with a baby doll top and matching lace panties. It was a gift from my friend Lia McIntyre, Hannah's baby sister.

Lia gave it to me at my farewell party, saying, "This is in case you meet a hot cowboy. You really need to get laid, Gabrielle. You work way too much."

She was right about my work hours. Back in Chicago, I routinely worked six nights a week, and on my one night off—Mondays—I crashed in my apartment and watched movies.

The pace here in Bryce is very different, and I'm finding I like it.

When I hear a quiet knock, I slip the matching short silk robe on and go answer the door.

John's eyes widen a bit when he sees what I'm wearing. "Wow." He steps inside, closes the door, and reaches behind himself to lock it. "As pretty as that robe is, I'm a bit more curious about what's underneath it."

I feel myself blushing. "This is me being presumptuous."

"Honey, you can presume all you want." He pulls me close, running his hands down my arms to capture my hands in his. He brings first one hand, then another to his lips to kiss.

Then he surprises the daylight out of me when he scoops me up into his arms and carries me down the hall to my bedroom.

* * *

I'm lying with my head pillowed on John's shoulder. He has one arm around me, and his other hand is lightly stroking my back.

"Mm, that feels good," I say, shivering when the cool air hits my heated skin.

He kisses the top of my head. "That's my job—to make you feel good."

"Well, you certainly succeeded just now." I stretch, moaning with pleasure. "I definitely feel good."

He chuckles. "Glad to hear it." He rubs my back a little while longer before saying, "If it's okay with you, I'd like to invite my parents to the restaurant's grand opening."

I raise up on my elbow to face him. "That's a wonderful idea. I'd love to meet them."

"That's sort of the whole reason for inviting them. I want them to meet *you*."

"You do?" I can't help smiling.

He nods. “Yeah. Unless you’re uncomfortable with the idea.”

“No! Not at all. I’d love to meet them.”

“I’ve mentioned you to them, and of course my mom wanted to know all about you. When I told them about the renovations at the restaurant, they were begging to come.”

John and I haven’t known each other that long, and yet somehow it feels like I’ve known him forever. I never gave any credence to the idea of love at first sight, but now I’m not so sure. I remember how fast and hard my friend Beth fell for Shane when they met. Honestly, I think he fell for her even faster. So maybe there is something to it.

“Speaking of the grand re-opening, I’m going to invite some friends from Chicago—Shane and Beth. I’d really like for them to meet you.”

John rolls us suddenly so that he’s lying half on top of me. “I’d love to meet your friends.” He kisses me then, gently, almost reverently. “Thanks for letting me sleep over tonight. I really didn’t want to leave you.”

I brush back his hair. “I didn’t want you to leave either.”

“Be careful, Gabrielle,” he says with a grin. “If you give me an inch, I guarantee you I’ll take a mile. You might get sick of seeing so much of me.”

I slip my arms around him. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

Chapter 27 – John

Finally, after waiting three weeks, the kitchen renovation is underway. Fortunately, I don't have any trail rides scheduled for today, so I'm hanging around the restaurant so I can be of help to Gabrielle.

Today's the day. The new appliances are being installed. There are half a dozen trucks and vans parked in front of the lodge—delivery trucks, two electrician vans, two plumber vans, and a van from the kitchen supply store. The project manager is here to oversee the installation.

Poor Gabrielle is runnin' around like a chicken with her head cut off—trying to be everywhere at once, answering questions, directing traffic. Somehow she manages to maintain her composure through it all.

The restaurant is closed to guests today, of course. Instead, Hannah and Killian are directing everyone to either Jennie's Diner or Ruth's Tavern for meals. Nelle and Betty are helping out at the diner.

All of the old, outdated—and mostly rusty—appliances have been hauled outside and are being loaded into a truck for disposal. The new equipment, all shiny and wrapped in plastic,

is spread throughout the dining room. Right now the kitchen is pretty empty while the electricians and plumbers are rewiring and replumbing. It's a huge undertaking.

Gabrielle rushes past me holding some drawings and schematics, which she takes to the workers in the kitchen.

The renovations are expected to take at least two days, maybe three. I just hope, for Gabrielle's sake, that it all goes well. She's worked so hard to get ready for this day.

She finally returns from the kitchen.

"How's it going?" I ask.

She nods. "It's going. There was a problem with the wiring to the new stoves, but that's been fixed. And the pipes for the new industrial washing stations had to be completely redone—they weren't up to code. Nothing's up to code, not by today's standards. Everything's taking longer than expected."

"It's okay. These things happen."

"Yeah, but the longer this takes, the longer the restaurant will be out of commission."

"The guests still have the snack room, and they go to Jennie's or Ruth's for meals. It'll be fine."

She nods, trying to stay positive. Then she smiles. “It’s going to be fantastic once everything is in. The new menus arrived yesterday, so once the installations are done, we’ll be in business. Hannah scheduled a grand re-opening party for a week from Saturday.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” I say. “So are my parents. When do your parents get in?”

“They’re flying in with the McIntyres the day before the event. Shane McIntyre has a private jet, and they’ll fly in to an executive airport near Estes Park.”

Around six, the workers call it a night. They still have an hour long drive back to Denver, only to return early tomorrow morning.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m starving,” I say as I pull Gabrielle into my arms. “How about you let me cook dinner for you this evening?”

She lights up. “You’re going to cook for me?”

I nod. “I sort of planned something for us. It’s nothing fancy, but come to my cabin and let me make you dinner. I even have dessert and a bottle of wine. Then we’ll relax for the rest of the evening. How about it?”

Gabrielle puts her arms around my neck. “That sounds fantastic. Thank you.”

When all of the workers have gone, we close up the restaurant and head outside to my cabin.

Today, I snuck away to Maggie’s and to Jennie’s and picked up some things for dinner tonight. I even bought an entire coconut cream pie from Jennie—one of Gabrielle’s favorite pies. She’s always cooking for me. I want to return the favor.

* * *

When we reach the cabin, I pour Gabrielle a glass of red wine and sit her down on my sofa to relax.

“I can help with dinner,” she offers.

“Thanks, but I have it covered.” I slip off her shoes and place her feet on the coffee table. “You just sit here and relax.”

She does as I suggest, but five minutes later she’s in the kitchen looking over my shoulder. “Are you sure I can’t help?”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“What are we having?”

“Nothing as nice as what you would make, but it will suffice. We’re having picnic food—burgers, corn on the cob,

and baked beans. I snuck off today and stopped at Maggie's and Jennie's to get everything I'd need."

Curious, she glances around. "What did you get at Jennie's? Dessert? Please say you got dessert."

"That's for me to know and you to find out." I laugh as I walk her back to the sofa, sit her down, and hand her the wine glass. "Sit and sip."

Then I head outside to the front yard to fire up the grill. While that's heating up, I husk four ears of sweet corn and wrap them in foil, then I prepare four burger patties. Knowing Gabrielle, she won't eat half of this, but that's okay. It leaves more for me.

Once the grill is hot, I put the corn on to cook. I'll add the burgers in a bit. And when everything is cooking, I put some baked beans in a sauce pan and put them on the stove to heat.

She watches me set the table. "Can I—"

"Nope. Just sit and relax."

When everything's done, I join her on the sofa and steal a sip of her wine. When I make a face, she laughs.

"Still prefer beer," I say. "So, tell me how the renovations are going."

She runs through her day, telling me about the good and the bad. “But overall, I think it’s going to turn out great.”

When the timer on my phone goes off, I run outside to flip the burgers. “Do you want cheese?” I ask her when I come back inside.

She gives me a look.

“Okay, yes on the cheese.”

When the burgers are nearly done, I lay thick slices of cheddar cheese on them to melt. And moments later, I bring in all the food and set it on the table.

Gabrielle joins me, and I motion for her to take a seat. “It’s a perfect picnic,” she says, smiling as she grabs a bun for her burger.

I set the bowl of baked beans on the table, and then I grab butter for the corn and condiments for the burgers. Lastly, I refill her wine glass and grab a cold beer for myself.

Once I’m seated, I ask, “Am I forgetting anything?”

“I don’t think so.” She takes a bite of her burger and moans in pleasure.

“Good?” I ask.

“Perfection. You should come work in the kitchen. We can use all the help we can get.”

I laugh. “No, thanks. Unless it involves a grill, I can’t cook. I’d better stick with horses.”

After we finish eating, we clear the table and load the dishwasher. “Go sit out on the porch swing, and I’ll bring you a surprise.”

Grinning, she goes outside. I get out the coconut pie I bought at Jennie’s and cut us each a slice. When I carry our dessert out onto the porch, she beams. “You are so good to me,” she says as I hand her a plate.

She takes a bite of her pie. “*Ohmygod*, this is so good.”

By the time we’re done with dessert, the sun is setting and the bats are out, flying overhead as they search for their supper.

As the swing gently moves back and forth, I put my arm around Gabrielle’s shoulders and draw her close. There’s something on my mind, but I’m not sure this is the right time to bring it up. “Gabrielle, there’s something I’ve been wanting to say to you.”

She takes my left hand in hers and links our fingers together. “And, what’s that?”

“I’m hoping it’s not too soon to say this.” The last thing I want to do is mess things up between us.

“You can tell me anything you want,” she says.

“Are you sure? Anything?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Maybe there’s something I want to tell you.”

I smile. “I brought it up, so I get to go first.”

She laughs softly. “Fair enough. Go ahead.”

As my pulse starts racing, I lean closer and kiss her temple. “Is it too soon to tell you I’m in love with you?”

She’s silent for a moment. For two moments. My heart goes from racing to slamming into my ribs.

“No, it’s not too soon,” she says. And then she releases my hand and turns to face me. Her soft hands come up to cup my face, and when I look into her eyes, I see the glitter of tears.

“John Burke, I love you, too.”

Epilogue

Gabrielle

At four-thirty, I put the last of the decorations on the dining room tables—fresh-cut flowers in crystal vases. Everything's ready for our grand re-opening event. The doors open in just half-an-hour.

The new menus are ready at the host's podium. The floor is freshly mopped and polished. The staff are all here—including all the new hires who've been with us for over a week now. Everyone looks so sharp in their black trousers, white dress shirts, and black ties.

"Relax, honey," John says as he massages my shoulders. "Everything's perfect."

Tonight, we've set up a buffet table of hot *hors d'oeuvres*, a champagne fountain, and a dessert table. And of course guests are welcome to sit and order from the new menu. We have six entrees on offer tonight.

I turn at the sound of voices coming from the entrance. Killian and Hannah are here, all dressed up for the event. They're joined by Hannah's parents, Calum and Bridget McIntyre, from Chicago.

“Hello, Gabrielle,” Bridget says as she comes to hug me. She’s a petite strawberry-blonde with blue eyes. “Everything looks so nice, sweetie. Congratulations!”

She looks at John. “You look very handsome this evening, sir.”

Bridget is right, of course. John looks dashing handsome in a black suit and tie. No hat, no glove. He stopped hiding himself shortly after we first got together.

Calum McIntyre joins us. He’s tall and broad-shouldered, his brown hair threaded with gray. He shakes John’s hand, then gives me a hug. “Congratulations, Gabrielle.” Calum peers over at the *hors d’oeuvre* buffet. “Can we sample the goodies?”

Bridget playfully smacks her husband’s arm. “You’re always hungry.”

I laugh. “Help yourself, Mr. McIntyre.”

Killian and Hannah join us. He’s wearing a black suit and tie, and Hannah is wearing the new staff uniform.

Hannah grins at me. “Ready for the big night? I sure am. There are already a ton of cars out in the parking lot. It looks like half of Bryce is here for the opening.”

There's more commotion at the entrance. In walks Shane McIntyre, my dear friend Beth, his wife, and their two young kids. Shane, who looks so much like his dad, is holding Luke, and Beth is pushing Ava in a stroller. Luke takes after his mother, in that he has pale blond hair and blue eyes. Ava, on the other hand, takes after her daddy, with her brown hair.

At the pitter patter of little feet, we turn to see Luke McIntyre running toward us.

"Gabby!" he cries as he runs to me, his little arms outstretched.

When I scoop him up, he presses his hand to my cheek. "Hi, Luke! How are you?"

"Gabby?" John asks, chuckling.

I shrug. "He can't say Gabrielle yet."

Luke then turns his attention to John, and he stares curiously at John's face.

"Luke, this is my special friend, John," I say.

"Hey, little guy," John says, reaching out to squeeze Luke's sneaker.

Luke surprises us both when he reaches for John.

“He wants me to hold him?” John asks, sounding more than a bit surprised. He takes the little boy into his arms. “I don’t know anything about kids,” he says to me.

“It’s okay. Just don’t drop him.”

Luke stares hard at John’s face. Then he reaches out and cups his left cheek. “Owie?”

John smiles. “Yeah, I have an owie.”

Luke frowns. “Hurt?”

John smiles at the little boy. “No, buddy. It doesn’t hurt. Not anymore.”

When John makes eye contact with me, we both smile. We haven’t had a conversation about kids yet, so I don’t even know if he wants them. I do.

“You’d make a great dad,” I tell him.

He grins. “You think so?”

“I know so.” I wonder if he’s ever given it much thought. The look on his face, though, makes me think he’d be open to the idea.

Beth comes to give me a hug. She looks stunning in a pale blue linen dress, her long blonde hair pulled up into a loose top

knot. I peer down into the stroller at a sleeping Ava. Her little tufts of soft brown hair are starting to fill in. “She’s got more hair now.”

Beth nods. “She’s growing like a weed.”

Shane joins us, and immediately Luke reaches for his daddy.

It’s five now, and the party is officially underway. A small crowd of guests starts lining up at the podium. Jackie and Steve, our new hosts, start seating people. One of the new servers is organizing platters on the buffet table.

When I spot our parents in line, I pull them aside and seat them at a table for four. Our parents met yesterday, and they seem to have hit it off.

Garrett Burke looks so much like his son. They’re the same height and have the same dark brown hair and dark eyes. John’s mom, Brenda, is a wiry little thing with blonde hair and blue eyes. She seems to possess boundless energy. She’s already invited me to come visit their horse ranch.

My parents have both taken to John.

“Good evening, Dr. Hunter,” John says as he shakes my father’s hand.

“Call me Rick, please,” my dad says to him. “There’s no need for us to stand on formality.”

As he’s greeting my mom, a server comes to the table to take their orders.

“We’ll let you get on with your dinner,” I say, and we leave to mingle with the guests.

Sheriff Nelson comes in dressed in casual clothes. It looks like he’s off duty for a change.

“Hey, guys,” Chris says as he greets us. He shakes hands with John. “Congratulations, you two. You make a great couple. I’m very happy for you.”

“Thanks, Chris,” John says.

I’m glad there’s no bad blood between them.

The dining room fills quickly. John sits with our parents while I go into the kitchen to help with the preparations. Both of our new cooks are working tonight, as well as Nelle and Betty. We have someone doing food prep now, as well as someone to wash the dishes. I mostly supervise and pitch in where I can.

When I leave the kitchen, I make my rounds through the dining room, greeting lodge guests and townsfolk. When I

arrive at Shane and Beth's table, Beth smiles up at me with tears in her eyes.

"I'm so happy for you," Beth says. "The restaurant is fantastic. I know Hannah and Killian are thrilled with it. They can't stop singing your praises." Then she nods in John's direction. "I like him a lot, too."

My cheeks grow warm. "So do I."

"So, things are going well between you?"

I nod. "I don't want to jinx it, but I think he's the one."

"Maybe the next time we come out here will be for a wedding," Shane says as he cuts up Luke's food.

For the rest of the evening, I mingle with guests, checking to make sure everyone's enjoying their meals. I refill water glasses and coffee cups. I monitor everything to ensure the restaurant is running smoothly.

Hannah comes up and puts her arm around my waist. "You did it. This restaurant is everything Killian and I hoped for. We can't thank you enough, Gabrielle."

"I can't thank *you* enough," I say. "You gave me the opportunity I'd been dreaming of." John smiles at me when he

catches my eye from across the room. “And, you introduced me to the love of my life. I can never repay you for that.”

“Just be sure you invite us to your wedding. And, you’re welcome to hold the reception here. Free of charge.”

Maya and Travis stop in, as do Maggie, Owen, and their three kids. Ruth, Micah, and Jennie make an appearance, as does Ed from the butchers.

Even though I haven’t been in Bryce long, it already feels like home. I have friends here. And most importantly, I have John.

It turns out it was the right decision.

Toward the end of the evening, the crowd starts to thin out. I stand at the door to thank the guests as they leave, shaking lots of hands and hugging some newly familiar faces.

When everyone’s gone, I help the servers clear the dining room. The kitchen staff seems to have everything well in hand.

“Hey, you,” John says. He takes my hand and leads me out the French doors that lead to the rear patio. “Congratulations on a successful opening, honey.”

I smile, feeling both elated and relieved. “You think so?”

He clasps my waist and pulls me closer. “I know so. And it’s all because of you, Gabrielle.”

And then he kisses me. It’s a not-very-innocent kiss. Fortunately, we’re the only ones out here. His fingers slip into my hair, and he clutches the back of my head.

“I love you,” he murmurs against my lips. “I can never thank Hannah enough for bringing you here.”

I return his kiss. “I love you, too. Coming here was the best decision I ever made, because it brought me to you.”

* * *

Thank you for reading *Tattered and Torn*. I hope you enjoyed Gabrielle and John’s story. Stay tuned for more books in the *McIntyre Search and Rescue* series. Audiobooks as well!

* * *

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