



TEXAS
Christmas

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ROSE BAK

Texas Christmas

A Country Christmas Series

By

Rose Bak

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Copyright

TEXAS CHRISTMAS

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About This Book

When you're an introvert who works on a ranch, it's pretty hard to meet women. Unless they fall from the sky...

Peter Jeffers spent his entire life working on his family's ranch. His friends joked that he could have been a grumpy mountain man if Texas wasn't so flat. But the truth is, the peace and quiet of working on the land suits him. Even if it gets a bit lonely...

Dr. Abigail Southerland has a job to do. There's been a report of animal abuse on the Jeffers ranch, and as the county's lead animal cruelty investigator, she's obligated to see if the reports are true. She thinks she's being stealthy hiding in a tree to get a look around the property, but she's never been particularly graceful. Which is how she winds up literally landing on top of the man she came to investigate...

When a snowstorm strands Abby at the ranch, she's forced to spend more time with the grouchy introvert and his Christmas-obsessed family. As cold days lead to hot nights, the lonely veterinarian learns that sometimes found family is the best family – and sometimes love comes just when you least expect it.

“Texas Christmas” is a midlife instalove romantic comedy with a grouchy rancher, a jaded veterinarian, naughty animals, and a matchmaking family determined to finally marry their son off to a good woman. This book is part of the multi-author “Country Christmas” series.

About A Country Christmas Series

A Country Christmas is full of heartwarming holiday fun but that doesn't mean it's missing the heat! Even in the dead of winter, our couples burn with love and the instant attraction of steamy romance!

This holiday, 12 of your favorite instalove writers heat up your holidays with A Country Christmas!

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have a real Country Christmas? Even if you're a city mouse, the allure of a homegrown, warm and welcoming Christmas can make us feel all the holiday fuzzies.

Settle back and join us for a fun, welcoming and magical holiday series! Check out the whole series here!

<https://mybook.to/ACountryChristmas>

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Join Rose Bak's mailing list at bit.ly/RoseBakNewsletter.
You'll get a free book and be the first to hear about all the latest releases, special sales, free books, and funny stories about my dog.

Dedication

*This book is dedicated to all the introverts, all the shy people,
and all the socially phobic folks. You are my people. I see
you.*

Peter

“It’s about time you got here, little brother. We’re all starving.”

I glanced up from washing my hands in the sink in the mudroom to see my older brother Allen smirking at me. The bastard had lost his normally surly demeanor once he’d been reunited with his long-lost love, Clara. Unfortunately, he hadn’t lost the rest of his annoying personality quirks.

Allen was only two years older than me, and we’d been super tight growing up. Competitive, but tight. We hadn’t seen each other much during the years when he was in the Army, but since he’d retired and joined the Houston police department, he’d spent a lot more time here at the ranch. It had been good to reconnect as adults.

“Get moving, butthead. We’re all waiting.”

“Bite me,” I growled back.

Well, maybe not that adult...

When Allen got together with Clara a few months ago I’d been worried he’d start pulling away, but it turns out that his girlfriend fit right in with our family. Mama had told me that Clara didn’t really have family of her own and so we’d adopted her right into the Jeffers clan.

We were all wondering how long it would be before my brother put a ring on her finger. The two of them were so in love it was almost nauseating. I suspected that my brother was biding his time given that Clara had been a bit skittish when they first got together.

I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of jealousy now and again though. At forty-seven, I’d resigned myself to living alone. But that didn’t mean I liked it. I wanted more.

Clara came up behind my brother, wrapping her arms around his waist, and sent me a friendly smile. She was a doctor, but totally down-to-Earth.

“Hey Peter, I bet you’re hungry. Your mother has lunch on the table whenever you’re ready.”

I followed my brother and his girlfriend into the large dining room. The room had a long wooden table with seating for twelve. There’d only been the four of us growing up, but we had several cousins, and when they came with their families, we filled up the table.

“Hi sweetie.”

“Hey, Mama.”

I pressed my lips against the top of my mother’s head, noticing how her once-dark hair was completely gray now. I didn’t live here – technically I lived in a house on the other side of the ranch – but I always joined my family for Sunday dinner. Mama was adamant about that, even though I saw them every day when we were working. She was big on family time, especially since Allen moved back to Houston.

“I made you chicken fried steak,” Mama told me.

“Great, thank you!” Chicken fried steak was my favorite.

I was mostly quiet throughout the meal. When you spent most of your time alone, you learned to enjoy the quiet. Growing up, I’d been painfully shy, but as I got older, I realized that I was also an introvert. Being around a lot of people exhausted me. Even with my family I could only take socialization in small doses. I preferred to stay in rather than go out and crowds were my worst nightmare.

I also hated to be the center of attention. Like now.

“Peter, Clara was saying that there are a lot of nice single women working at the hospital that she could fix you up with.”

I suppressed a sigh. I knew my mother meant well, truly I did. I wished I was in a long-term committed relationship just as much as she did, more even. But for me, blind dates were akin to getting a root canal. My mother badgering me about it was not going to make me find a woman anytime soon.

“We could go on a double date,” Allen piped up, reading my mind. “It will be less pressure that way if you don’t mesh well.”

“Not interested,” I bit out.

I took a deep breath and sent my mother and Clara something that I hoped passed as a smile. “I appreciate you thinking of me, but blind dates really aren’t my thing.”

My mother wasn’t done though. Of course I was willing to bet that the idea of fixing me up with someone from the hospital was hers anyway. Clara didn’t strike me as a matchmaker.

“Peter, you’re never going to meet someone if you don’t leave the property,” Mama lectured me. “You know we all appreciate how hard you work, but you need to put yourself out there if you ever want to find love. It’s not like the perfect woman is going to fall out of the sky.”

“I’m perfectly happy with my life the way it is, Mama,” I lied.

I wished my family understood me better. I wasn’t a blind date with a stranger or go to the bar and troll for women kind of guy. Being in a crowd made it hard for me to breathe. I sucked at small talk to the extent that most people thought of me as surly. I was socially phobic well before I started hearing that term after the pandemic. And as much as I wanted to find love, I wasn’t willing to bring on an anxiety attack to make it happen.

Pushing my chair away from the table, I grabbed my empty plate.

“Thanks for dinner, Mama. I’ve got to get some work done this afternoon before the storm comes in. I’ll see y’all later.”

“Peter, wait,” Mama called. “I’m just trying to help.”

I ignored her and headed outside, shivering as I realized that it had gotten cold while I was inside. I detoured to my house to pick up a jacket.

I spent the next two hours checking on the fences and making sure that the animals had sufficient food and shelter if a storm came in. They were predicting an inch or two of rain, but the temperatures had been dropping rapidly, making everyone wonder if this was going to be one of those rare occasions when we got some snow. Or worse yet, ice.

If there was one thing we couldn't deal with here in Texas, it was winter weather. Snow and ice shut down the state every time.

I buttoned up my jacket as I walked the fence line, checking for issues. Our property abutted the county road here, with rows of oak trees offering privacy. As I studied a section of the fence that looked like someone had tampered with it, I heard a squeaking noise overhead.

I looked up, just in time to see something – someone – come crashing down from the tree. Out of instinct, I stretched my arms out in an effort to catch them. I heard another squeak and the next thing I knew, I was flat on my back, covered with a body.

Abby

Growing up, I'd had a reputation for being clumsy. There wasn't a curb, stick, or shoelace that I couldn't manage to trip over. At forty-five I would have thought I'd grown out of that clumsiness. I thought wrong.

Case in point: I'd just fallen out of a tree and landed on someone tall, dark, and handsome. And possibly an animal abuser.

As a veterinarian and the lead animal abuse investigator for the county's Animal Services department, my job was to make sure our animal companions were being treated well. We'd received a complaint about the Double J Ranch. Word was that the Jeffers family, who'd owned the ranch for over a hundred years, were cutting corners and the animals were suffering.

With it being Sunday afternoon and a storm supposed to be coming in, I figured it was a good time to snoop around the ranch while everyone was indoors. I'd do a little recon and if I saw any indication that the abuse allegations were true, I'd come back with the sheriff – and a warrant.

I'd climbed up an oak tree right on the border of the Jeffers property a short walk from where I'd parked my car. I used to be a prolific tree climber in my youth but despite the fact that I made frequent use of the climbing wall in my gym, my tree climbing skills were obviously a little bit rusty.

Or maybe it was just because I was distracted. I'd been stretched out on a thick branch that hung over the ranch property, using my binoculars to get a better look at the conditions, when a hot guy walked by.

Normally I wasn't one to go gaga over a good-looking guy, but there was something about this guy that immediately caught my interest. I felt inexplicably drawn to him.

The guy looked like a linebacker. A grumpy one though, judging by the pissed off expression he was sporting. His shoulders were broad, and even under his thick jacket it was

obvious that he was super fit. He had dark hair that was a little bit too long, a dusting of scruff along his square jaw, and one of those ageless faces that could be anything from thirty to fifty.

Leaning farther out to try to get a better view of his eyes had been my fatal mistake. I lost my balance and flew through the air with a squeak of alarm. The next thing I knew, I was sprawled on top of a dazed looking man who, now that I could see his face up close, was definitely over forty.

“What. The fuck. Are you doing?” he grunted out.

He looked pissed. Then again, I’d just fallen on him, and I was not a lightweight.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry.”

I tried to scramble off him and must have kneed him in the junk because he cried out in pain. I rolled onto the cold ground and the man immediately curled to his side in the fetal position, eyes closed and breathing heavily while he covered his crotch protectively with his hands.

“Oh, um, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to knee you in the nuts.”

His eyes snapped open.

“Who are you? And why are you on my land?”

“I’m not on your land on purpose. I fell out of a tree and accidentally landed onto your property.”

“No, you fell out of a tree and landed on me,” he reminded me.

He pushed himself up to seating, took a deep breath, then rolled to his feet with the grace of a man who was totally in control of his body. He towered over me, so I got up as well. I was tall for a woman – almost five ten – but he was still a few inches taller than me. He made me feel almost delicate.

I mentally rolled my eyes at my own ridiculousness and stuck out my hand.

“My apologies again. I’m Doctor Abigail Southerland with County Animal Services. You are?”

He glared at me. “Not required to answer questions from strangers who trespass on my land.”

He had me there. I dropped my hand.

“Again, I’m accidentally trespassing. I’ll just be on my way.”

I started to turn, but he grabbed my wrist just enough to stop my progress. The feeling of his strong fingers wrapped around my bare skin made me feel a little funny. I glanced down at his hand, and he immediately dropped my wrist.

“Why are you here, Dr. Southerland?” he growled.

Well, there was no sense lying about it. He’d find out about the complaint soon enough. But I still didn’t know who this man was.

“I’m sorry, I can only talk to the property owner.”

He looked up at the sky as if he was praying for patience. I had no idea why that grumpy expression made my core tingle, but damned if it didn’t.

“My name is Peter Jeffers,” he finally said. “My family owns the Double J Ranch. Now, what’s going on?”

I looked around, taking in the wide open space. The Double J Ranch was beautiful. And immaculate. From time to time Animal Services received false complaints. I had a feeling this was going to turn out to be one of those cases.

“There’s been an animal abuse complaint,” I said reluctantly.

Technically I shouldn’t be telling him this without the sheriff’s office or another Animal Services staff present. You never knew when someone was going to freak out and try to attack you for your work. It had happened before. But I wasn’t really getting a psycho vibe off of Peter Jeffers.

He swore under his breath. “It was Neal Thurston, wasn’t it?”

My eyes widened in surprise. “I’m not allowed to tell you that,” I said lamely.

I could tell by the look he was giving me that he saw the truth in my expression.

“That guy is working with Big T Development,” he told me. “They’ve been trying to buy up ranch land to build a new housing development. No one around here is interested in selling so he’s been putting on some pressure.”

That explained why we’d gotten a similar complaint about the neighboring ranch too. My boss was not going to be happy that this developer was wasting county resources trying to intimidate local residents.

“He’s going after us because my father told him to go fuck himself.” Peter paused, and I could swear he was blushing. “Pardon my French.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“I’ve heard that word before,” I reassured him. “I am obligated to conduct an investigation, just so you know. But if Neal Thurston is making false complaints, rest assured that I will report it to the Sheriff’s Office. We take abuse complaints very seriously at Animal Services, and we don’t tolerate false reports.”

“So what? You need to look around or something?” His voice was deep and gravelly, almost like he didn’t use it very often.

I nodded. “Yes, I’ll reach out with a date for a visit. I was just doing some initial recognizance today. I’m sorry that I disturbed you.”

“How about I show you around now?”

He phrased it as a question, but it came out as an order. I couldn’t help the little shiver that tickled down my spine.

“I don’t want either of us to waste any more time on this ridiculous complaint.”

I backed away slowly just in case I was misreading him and he was really about to kill me or something.

“I really should come back later.”

Peter

I studied the County veterinarian, wondering if I was making her uncomfortable. I knew I could be gruff. But she didn't seem uncomfortable. Cautious maybe. I made a conscious effort to soften my expression.

She was an attractive woman. Only a few inches shorter than me, she was tall and slim, but she had curvy hips and good-sized breasts. *A nice rack*, as my brother would have said. Her skin was a light brown, like maybe she was part Latina or Native American, with longish brown hair threaded through with golden highlights.

Her thick pink lips curved into a smile that didn't quite reach her large brown eyes, but I noticed she was easing away from me.

"I really should come back later."

I took a step away from her, partly to keep from pulling her into my arms. I'm not gonna lie, I was totally freaking out right now, because all it had taken was one long look into those beautiful eyes and I was done. Turns out that love at first sight actually happened in real life.

My lips quirked as I remembered my Mama's earlier comment about the perfect woman not falling from the sky. Turns out Mama was wrong, because without knowing anything else about Abigail Southerland, I was sure of one thing: she was mine.

I just needed to keep her here until she realized it too.

"Come on." I tilted my head towards the fields where we kept the cattle. "I'll show you around. You'll see we have nothing to hide here."

She glanced back at the trees where she'd likely left her car, then came to a decision.

"Okay, fine, yes, I can look around now. But I may need a return visit later."

I gave her a smile.

“I hope you will return, and not just for the animals.”

It was the flirtiest thing I’d ever said in my life, which was a sad statement on my flirting skills. Thank God my brother Allen wasn’t here to mock me. He’d always been much smoother with the ladies than I was, although Clara had really made him work for it. I respected the hell out of her for that.

Abigail made a weird little sound that maybe was a laugh, maybe was a ‘I hope this guy isn’t going to kill me’ sound, I couldn’t tell for sure.

“You ready to look around, Dr. Southerland?”

“Please, call me Abby.”

Abby. That suited her better than the more formal Abigail.

“Okay Abby, this way.”

We wandered around the property for a spell, checking out the pastures where we kept the cows, the pen with the goats, and the chicken coop. I could tell she was impressed with how healthy our animals were. We took great pride in our work here.

“This here’s the barn,” I said as we reached the large structure.

I felt moisture on my nose and looked up. “Wow, looks like it’s tryin’ to snow.”

“Oh yeah, I guess I should leave soon. If it does snow, the roads will be a mess.”

Yet she followed me into the barn. I hoped it meant that she didn’t want to be away from me quite yet, the same way I felt about her.

As soon as we entered the barn, Annabelle started making a ruckus.

“I’m coming, baby,” I called.

When Abby gave me a curious look I explained, “That’s my pet cow, Annabelle. She always gets excited to see me.”

She laughed. “You’re a rancher but you have a pet cow?”

I nodded. “Yes ma’am. I pulled her from her mama when the poor animal was dying. The mother bled out during labor before the vet could get here, and Annabelle was half dead herself. I nursed her with a bottle and slept in the stall with her until she was strong enough to be on her own. I’m pretty sure she thinks I’m her daddy.”

Annabelle was small, her growth probably stunted by the early labor and her struggle to stay alive when she was first born. She was a beautiful animal with huge dark eyes that looked almost human. She poked her head over the door to her pen, looking way too excited for a cow.

“There’s my baby,” I crooned, petting her head.

Abby watched like she was fascinated to see this side of me, but there was no mocking in her expression. That’s good, because my damn family thought it was ridiculous that I had a pet cow. But I’d bonded with Annabelle when she was born, and there was no way I could think of her as anything other than my pet now.

I handed Annabelle an apple I’d stuck in my jacket pocket for her. She snatched it from my hand and chewed it contentedly.

“May I?”

Abby climbed up the gate to get a better look.

“She’s a beautiful cow. Looks real healthy.”

She climbed back down, but her foot caught on the lowest board, and she flew backwards. I caught her around the waist, pulling her back against my chest while I eased her feet to the ground. We stood there for a long moment, bodies pressed together, until I felt a little twitch below the belt. Not wanting to sport a hard-on in front of the curvy veterinarian – at least yet—I gently set her away from me.

“I seem to keep saving you from falling.”

Abby turned and gave me an embarrassed smile. “Sorry about that. I tend to be the tiniest bit clumsy.”

My gaze bounced between her eyes. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll catch you anytime, Abby.”

Abby

Good Lord, this man was a charmer. When he said he'd catch me 'anytime' in that deep voice, my panties nearly incinerated.

I was confused by the strong physical reaction I was having to Peter Jeffers. I wasn't a virgin by any stretch of the imagination – I was forty-five years old after all—but I'd only slept with four guys in my life.

I'd long suspected that something was wrong with me, because I didn't just look at a guy and feel attracted to him immediately like other women did. For me, attraction grew slowly as I got to know a person, and even then, it was generally pretty mild.

At least until today.

The minute I'd seen Peter Jeffers, I'd felt attraction hit me like a tsunami. Which was a problem, given that I was investigating him and his family. Although I didn't need to spend much time here to see that the abuse complaint was completely fabricated. The animals here were very well cared for.

I wondered if he felt it too – this almost cellular connection between us. I studied him out of the corner of my eye but had no clue. I was pretty sure he was flirting with me, but it was hard to tell with his unreadable expression.

We lapsed into silence as we gave Annabelle some love. Peter wasn't much of a talker, but I didn't mind that. I hated people who talked just to hear their own voice. It was so annoying. Working in my field, I was around a lot of men who felt compelled to share every thought in their head like it was a proclamation from on high.

Reluctantly I stepped away from Annabelle's pen. I should probably head on home, I told myself, remembering the storm predictions. Although home wasn't nearly as appealing as the Jeffers ranch.

"I have to say, Mr. Jeffers—."

“Peter,” he interrupted me.

“Oh. Okay, Peter, I have to say that I don’t see anything here to remotely corroborate the abuse allegations. You clearly provide excellent care for your animals here.”

He nodded. “We do.”

“Well...,” I paused awkwardly.

Why was I so thrown off by this guy? I felt like a teenaged girl with a crush. I wasn’t even like this when I *was* a teenaged girl.

“I guess I should probably get back to my car and leave you to your work.”

I wondered if he could hear the obvious reluctance in my voice. I had the strangest urge to stay here with Peter, possibly for the rest of my life. With a start I realized I was feeling a strong affection for him. If this was a Hallmark movie, I’d be telling him that I’d fallen in love with him at first sight.

But this was my life, not a rom com, so instead I said, “Thank you for your time and cooperation.”

Peter gave me a long look but when he didn’t say anything, I turned on my heel and headed towards the door.

Just then a man opened the door, letting in a gust of frigid air. To my shock, his head and shoulders were covered with snowflakes. What the hell? We hadn’t been in the barn that long.

The man was shorter and smaller than Peter, but there was no mistaking the resemblance between the two men. This must be Peter’s father.

“Peter, there’s—.”

The man skidded to a stop, staring at me in surprise.

“Who are you?”

To my surprise, Peter stepped in front of me almost protectively.

“Dad, this is Doctor Abigail Southerland.”

Mr. Jeffers took a step to the left so he could get a better look at me around his son. His eyes bounced between us.

“Are you...uh, is this a date?”

There was obvious shock in the older man’s tone. I saw a flush rise up Peter’s face again. The blushing was adorable.

I took a step forward, reaching my hand out.

“No, Mr. Jeffers. I’m here from Animal Services. We had an abuse allegation, so I came out to investigate.”

“Abuse allegation?” Peter’s father was immediately irate. “That’s—.”

Peter interrupted him. “It’s okay Dad, I showed Abby around and she has determined that it was a false complaint. It was probably that asshole Neal Thurston.”

Mr. Jeffers frowned. “Language, son.”

I could practically feel Peter trying not to roll his eyes.

“It’s fine, Mr. Jeffers,” I interjected before Peter could apologize. “But I’ve bothered you folks long enough. I should probably get back to the road and find my car.”

Mr. Jeffers shook his head.

“I don’t think you’re going anywhere, little lady.”

I couldn’t decide if I was offended by his sexist language or pleased that he’d called me ‘little’. I was many things, but little was not one of them.

“What do you mean, Dad?”

“We just got an emergency alert. The officials are closing the roads. The rain we got yesterday is freezing rapidly, and we’ve already had half an inch of snow. They’re saying this is going to be the worst storm we’ve gotten in fifty years. Everyone is supposed to shelter in place until the storm passes.”

Peter turned to face me, and I could swear he looked happy about the news.

“Guess you’re staying with us.”

Peter

This was great. Abby was trapped here, and while we were waiting for the storm to pass, I could get to know her better and convince her to spend the rest of her life with me.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I was thinking like a crazy person, but I didn't care. The perfect woman for me had literally dropped out of the sky and landed on my ranch, and now she couldn't leave for a while. There was no way I was letting this opportunity pass me by.

"We can put you up at our place," Dad said.

Behind Abby, I shook my head frantically.

"Abby can stay with me, she doesn't even know y'all."

Abby looked between us curiously. "Technically I don't know any of you. But where will I be the least bother?"

"My place," I said.

"With me and my wife," my father said at the same time.

"Um." Abby seemed confused. "Maybe I can try to make it home. The roads can't possibly be that bad yet. Plus, I don't have any clothes with me."

"You can borrow some from my mama," I told her.

She glanced down with a self-deprecating look. "I'm not a small woman."

I studied her, trying to figure out if she was insulting herself or just being practical. Either way, I didn't like it.

"You're fine just the way you are," I said firmly. "Tell you what, how about you come meet my mama and we can figure out our plan from there?"

I didn't want her to feel uneasy, and if there was anyone who could put someone at ease, it was my mama. The three of us headed outside, and I was shocked at how dramatically the weather had changed in the short time we'd been in the barn. The ground was already covered with snow.

I'd lived here for forty-seven years, and I could count on one hand the times we'd had anything more than a few flurries.

“Wow!” Abby looked around in amazement. “The snow is so pretty.”

I bit my lip to keep from adding, “So are you.” Based on the look my father sent me, I was pretty sure he knew what I was thinking.

When we got into the house my mother was sitting at the kitchen table doing a crossword. Mama worried incessantly about getting Alzheimer's like my grandma had, and she made it a point to do brain teasers and other mental activities every single day.

“Hey Lionel...”

She stopped as she glanced up and saw my father wasn't alone. She eyed Abby curiously.

“Who do we have here?”

I sent her a smug smile. “This here is Abby. She dropped out of the sky.”

My mother gasped in shock. Abby sent me a strange look before stepping forward to greet her.

“Hello Mrs. Jeffers, my name is Dr. Abigail Southerland. I was here doing an investigation for Animal Services and I'm afraid that with the snow coming in so quickly, I might be stuck here.”

“You dropped from the sky? Did you parachute in?” my mother asked in confusion.

“No ma'am, I climbed a tree to get a look around your property and somehow I managed to fall. Right on top of your son. Then I accidentally kneed him in the privates.”

Abby turned back to me. “Oh no, I should have asked. Does it still hurt?”

She glanced at my crotch and my dick twitched with interest. *Down boy*, I told myself. I didn't need to be acting

like a fifteen year old boy with a perpetual hard-on.

“Yes, I’m fine. Everything is...perfect.”

My mother looked between us curiously. She insisted on making us all hot chocolate, and we sat around the table, sipping our drinks while my mother interrogated Abby. When she informed Abby that she would be staying in the house with her and my father, Abby sent me a look that I interpreted as a plea for help. Mama could be a lot.

“It’s quieter at my place,” I told her. “And I’ve got a spare bedroom there. It’s totally up to you though Abby, whatever makes you more comfortable.”

My mouth said the right thing while my eyes pleaded with her to pick me.

“Um, if you don’t mind Mrs. Jeffers, I think I’ll stay at Peter’s house. I can...help him with the animals since I’m a vet and all.” Her words were rushed.

To my shock, my mother didn’t bat an eye. I wondered if she was picking up the vibe between Abby and myself, or if she simply thought this would further her matchmaking goals.

“Okay dear, but you and Peter should come back for dinner. We’re decorating the Christmas tree tonight,” Mama said. “We usually do it much earlier, but we had some issues. I could really use some help.”

She sent a scolding look towards my father, who had waited too long to get a tree and then come back with one my mother deemed subpar. Why she hadn’t just gotten it herself, I had no idea. But they’d been arguing about it since yesterday. Well, Mama had been arguing, Dad had just been suffering in silence.

Abby looked at me and I just shrugged. I couldn’t tell whether she was interested in decorating the tree or not, but there was no sense resisting once Mama got an idea in her head.

My mother headed upstairs to find some clothes to loan Abby. Even though Mama was a couple inches shorter, she was a bit stout, as she liked to say, and she was sure she had

some things that would fit Abby and hold her over for a few days until the storm cleared and the roads were open again. She returned with a large tote bag stuffed with clothes. I stood up and took it from her, eager to get Abby all to myself.

“Are you ready to check out my house?”

Abby

It was probably a bad idea going to stay at Peter's house, but something about his family made me twitchy. Mrs. Jeffers was nice, don't get me wrong, but she was also nosy as hell. She'd been badgering me like a trained interrogator the entire time we were drinking our hot chocolate. I'd come close to breaking a few times.

The one question I did answer was my relationship status. I wanted Peter to know I was unattached in case we decided to act on the strong attraction simmering between us. I'd seen him watching me when he thought I wouldn't notice. He was definitely interested.

He'd been a bit grumpy when we started the day, but as he warmed up to me, I could see the grumpiness was likely a protective measure. Or maybe not. At his parents' house his mother had gone on at length about how Peter reminded her of one of those grouchy mountain men she read about in romance books.

His surliness faded as soon as we left his parents' house.

"I'm about a five minute walk this way," he said, pointing to the north.

I zipped up my too-thin coat over a sweater that Peter's mother had loaned me, and pulled on a knit hat she'd also shared. It helped some, but the wind was still bitingly cold. As a Texan, I was not used to this kind of cold. I subtly moved closer to Peter, using his bulk to block some of the wind. If he noticed, he didn't say anything.

The ground was turning slippery from the snow, and after the third time I skidded on the Nikes I was wearing, Peter took my hand. My hand was bare and cold, and he tugged it into his coat pocket to warm me up. I didn't mind that at all. There was something akin to an electrical sensation traveling between our skin at every point of contact.

"Here we go."

Peter's house was adorable, a two-story bungalow with a wraparound porch where I could easily imagine us sitting in the morning drinking coffee.

As soon as the thought entered my head, I ruthlessly pushed it away. I don't know what was wrong with me, daydreaming like some kind of a romantic schoolgirl. I was a forty-five year old veterinarian. I'd learned years ago not to rely on anyone but myself. And I'd given up on my fantasy of a knight in shining armor somewhere around my fifth foster home.

We headed up the porch and Peter pushed the front door open. Following his lead, I removed my shoes and left them on the mat by the front door.

"Let me just get the fire going then I'll show you around."

"Do you need help?" I offered.

"No, just make yourself at home."

I wandered around the open concept space, noting the comfortable couch facing the fireplace, the overstuffed chairs arranged by the front window, and the small dining table set up in the area between the kitchen and living room. It wasn't anything fancy, but it was clean and comfortable, and I loved it immediately.

When I completed my circuit I saw Peter squatting in front of the fire, biceps bulging as he arranged the heavy logs on the grate. The position made his jeans stretch tight over his muscular ass. My throat grew dry.

Once the fire was going, Peter led me upstairs, showing me the guest room and the shared bathroom. The bedroom was plain but comfortable, but the bathroom was fancier, with a huge shower, black and white subway tile, and a double sink vanity.

Returning to the bedroom, I dropped the bag of clothes that I'd gotten from Mrs. Jeffers onto the bed.

"Is it okay if I take a shower?" I asked Peter. "I'm freezing."

“Go right ahead. There are towels in the cabinet, soap, and shampoo in the shower. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

I pulled up my hair and took a quick shower, trying not to fantasize about my host downstairs. I put on a pair of yoga pants and tee shirt that Mrs. Jeffers had given me, pulling the sweater over the ensemble, and adding a pair of thick wool socks. It wasn’t the most glamorous outfit, but it was warm and that was all I cared about right now.

When I got back downstairs, Peter was standing in front of the fireplace, staring pensively into the fire.

“Thanks again for letting me crash here,” I told him. “It was nice of your parents to offer me to stay at their house, but honestly, I felt a little awkward.”

He nodded. “Yeah, sometimes Mama is a little...much. She means well but you might as well know, she’s likely planning our wedding right now.”

I burst out laughing. “Yeah, I picked up on that matchmaker vibe for sure.”

He gestured at the couch, and I sat down. Peter went to the kitchen, returning with bottles of water for each of us before joining me.

“So, tell me about yourself Dr. Southerland.”

“You first.”

Over the years, I’d become a master of not disclosing a lot about myself. When people heard my story, they either tended to judge me or pity me, and I couldn’t stand the thought of Peter doing either of those things.

“There’s not much to tell,” he said pensively. “I grew up here on the ranch, and other than when I went to college, I’ve lived here all my life.”

“And become a grumpy mountain man,” I teased. “Here in the flat lands.”

One corner of his mouth quirked, but his expression was serious. “I’ve always been...shy. Introverted. My family has never fully understood how much I like the quiet. How much I

prefer to be alone. I think they think it's depression or something but honestly, it's just how I'm built. I like solitude."

I felt a flash of remorse at my insistence that I stay at his house.

"Oh no, I'm so sorry. I can stay with your parents instead, that would be totally fine. I didn't mean to intrude."

God I was such an idiot. I thought he actually wanted me here, and instead here I was, cramping his style. I felt a twinge of sadness at the thought that once again, I was unwanted. A bother. It was a feeling I'd become intimately familiar with during my childhood in foster care.

"Just let me get my stuff and I'll go back to the main house."

I started to rise from the couch, but Peter's hand shot out, capturing my wrist and stalling my progress. Just like the last time he touched me, I felt little zings traveling up my arm.

"I do like to be alone, Abby. But right now, I want to be alone with you."

Peter

I felt terrible that I'd made Abby uncomfortable.

"I'm not very good with words sometimes," I told her, still holding her wrist. "I didn't mean that you should leave."

Absently, I rubbed my thumb against the inside of her wrist, and felt her pulse pick up.

She studied me for a long time.

"I know I've already fallen on you, kneed you in the balls, accused you of animal cruelty, insulted you by telling you that your mother makes me uncomfortable, and intruded on your privacy, so I might as well go for broke."

She paused to take a breath. I loved the way the words tumbled out of her mouth when she was nervous. It was adorable.

"So, I'm just going to ask you, do you, um, do you feel this too?" She waved her hand between us. "Because the truth is I'm really attracted to you, and if you're not, that's okay, I know I sometimes misread signals. But I don't normally feel this way around, well anyone, so if you are, attracted to me I mean, you should know it's...mutual."

I slid closer to her on the couch and lifted my other hand to cup her cheek. She leaned against my palm, her expression almost vulnerable.

"I feel it too, Abby."

Slowly, giving her time to pull away or knee me in the balls again, I moved forward and pressed my lips against hers. We were both completely still for about ten seconds before her arms flew around me, pulling me closer. I licked along the seam of her lips, swooping in with a satisfied groan when she opened her mouth to let me in.

Our tongues slid against each other and at that moment, I knew things would never be the same for me again.

I tilted my head, deepening the kiss, and gave myself over to the sensation of holding her in my arms and kissing her. Abby made an adorable little moaning noise in the back of her throat, her hands running up and down my back as if she thought I'd disappear.

My cock hardened, pressing against the fly of my jeans. I grabbed Abby's waist and lifted her to my lap. Straddling my thighs, she rolled her hips against my growing bulge as the kiss went on and on.

When we finally pulled apart, we were both breathing heavily. Abby looked shell-shocked. I knew the feeling.

"That was...wow."

I nodded. Pressing my forehead against hers, I stared into her eyes.

"I want nothing more than to lay you out and kiss every inch of your body," I told her. "But we should probably take a break before we do something we regret."

"You think we'll regret this?" she asked, her fingers moving to play with my hair.

I shook my head. "Not at all, but I want you to be sure, one hundred percent sure before we do this, Abby, because once I have you, there's no way I'm going to be able to let you go. I want forever."

She scooted back on my lap to study me more carefully. "We just met today," she reminded me. "It's a little soon to talk about forever."

She was right. I knew she was. But I couldn't help the almost primal urge to claim her before she got away, before she figured out that an intelligent and beautiful doctor could do much better than the grumpy, introverted guy who spent his days with cows and rarely left his property.

Because if that happened after waiting so long for the perfect woman to come along, it would probably kill me.

Abby

A few minutes after our impromptu make out session, Peter and I headed out into the storm again. The snow was still falling, blindingly white against the ground. The sun was setting, making it difficult to see where I was going, and I couldn't say I minded it when Peter took my hand to keep me from stumbling. Again.

My clumsiness was a source of constant embarrassment for me. As a foster child, I'd always tried hard to be invisible. To fade into the woodwork. But it was hard to make yourself disappear when you managed to trip a few times a day.

My friend Melinda thought my clumsiness was some kind of neurological problem, but I knew that wasn't it. I only tripped around other people. When I was home alone or around people I was one hundred percent comfortable with, I could walk in a straight line and make it across the room without an incident.

Clearly it was some kind of a nervous habit or something.

Speaking of being nervous, I hoped it wasn't obvious to Peter's mother that we'd been making out. When I'd stopped in the bathroom before we left Peter's house, I noticed that my lips were red and swollen. I mean, we were both grown ass people, but I didn't want to give her any fuel for her matchmaking attempts.

I was flattered of course, but I could tell that Mary Jeffers was looking for a wife for her son. The truth was, no matter how attracted I was to Peter, forever wasn't for people like me.

"I want us to be sure, one hundred percent sure before we do this, Abby, because once I have you, there's no way I'm going to be able to let you go. I want forever."

Peter's words from earlier played on repeat in my head. I'd been simultaneously thrilled and terrified. I only had to look into his expressive dark eyes to see that he meant what he said, but that didn't mean he wouldn't change his mind. They always changed their minds.

A guy who lived his whole life on an isolated ranch was probably hoping to find himself a sweet little homemaker who could bake him brownies and bear him children. That wasn't me.

First of all, I was too old to have children. Even if it was safe to do it, I'd lost both of my ovaries to burst cysts, one in my twenties and one in my thirties. Secondly, I'd pulled myself up by my literal bootstraps, working three jobs at a time to make my way through college and veterinary school. I loved my job. I loved protecting animals and healing them. There was no way I'd be content to hang out making doilies or whatever it was that a ranch housewife would do for Peter.

And then there was my main fear: people always seemed to grow tired of me. There was no way I was going to build a life with Peter knowing that someday he'd just get tired of me.

As soon as we entered the main house, Peter's mother pulled me into a hug like I was a long-lost friend.

"You two made it!"

"Thanks for inviting me, Mrs. Jeffers," I said politely.

"Please, call me Mary."

"We got the tree up in the stand while you two kids rested," Mary told me, gesturing over her shoulder to where a huge fir tree was set up in front of the picture window. Two huge stacks of boxes were stacked to the side.

"Let's eat before we get busy," she continued, gesturing for us all to sit down.

I followed her into the dining room where the table was set with a bunch of dishes in the center. I glanced at Peter and he just did that lip quirk thing that I already loved. He could say an awful lot without opening his mouth.

"Wow, I hope you didn't go to a lot of trouble, Mary."

She shook her head. "This is mostly leftovers, plus sandwich fixin's and salad. No trouble at all."

It was quite a spread, with more food on that table than I had in a week, but I didn't comment. The four of us sat at the

table, chatting while we ate. Well, Mary and I chatted. Peter and his father were mostly silent, which I suspected was typical.

Dinner may have all been leftovers, but it was delicious. There was a tray of cold cuts and cheese, leftover chicken fried steak that Mary had re-heated in the cast-iron skillet, mashed potatoes, some kind of casserole that they'd had the night before, freshly baked bread, and several salad variations. It wasn't fancy, but it was perfect.

"What's your favorite Christmas tradition, Abby?" Mary asked.

I froze, a roast beef sandwich halfway to my mouth.

"Um, I don't have a favorite Christmas tradition." I shrugged awkwardly.

"Oh, are you Jewish or something?" Mary looked sympathetic.

"I'm not really anything. I just...I grew up in foster care, so I didn't really celebrate holidays."

I resisted the urge to slap my hand over my mouth for saying too much.

"I don't understand. Didn't you celebrate the holidays with your foster families?" Mary looked confused.

This is why I hated talking about my time in foster care. I almost always had to burst people's bubble about foster care being nice, caring families who did things like give the foster kid a decent Christmas or celebrate their birthday. I was sure there were some families who tried to make their foster kids feel like part of the family, but unfortunately, none of my many foster families had been in it for more than what they thought was easy money.

"The state doesn't pay for extras like holiday gifts," I explained. "So, when you're a foster kid you learn to not expect anything."

This was why every year I gave a generous donation to a local charity that brought holiday gifts to kids in the system. I

knew how important it was to those kids to have something special too.

“Sometimes the families would include us in the dinners or give us a tiny gift of some sort, but most of the time they’d leave us some TV dinners or a frozen pizza and let us entertain ourselves while they spent time with their families for the holidays. Or sometimes they’d ask us to stay in our bedroom while they celebrated with their families.”

I looked up to see all three Jeffers staring at me in horror. My eyes returned to my plate. I hated being pitied. And this wasn’t even the worst part of growing up in foster care. I wasn’t going to tell them about the foster parents who hit us or the dads and foster brothers who had grabby hands once I came into my breasts.

“So anyway, I didn’t really pick up any holiday traditions of my own.”

After a long silence I looked up again to see Mary staring at me, eyes watery like she was fixing to cry. Suddenly she leapt out of her chair and came over to give me a big hug.

As she pressed my face tightly against her generous cleavage she whispered, “You’ll have a traditional Christmas with us this year. Even if things don’t work out with you and Peter, you’ll still join us, this year and every year. Promise me.”

“Um.”

She squeezed tighter, and I choked out, “Okay, I promise.”

Peter

Abby's casual retelling of her terrible holidays in foster care damn near broke my heart. I didn't know her very well yet, but I instinctively knew she wouldn't want us to make a big thing about what she shared.

"Mama, quit smothering her and let's get decorating."

My mother released my future wife, and after clearing the table, we got to work setting up the living room for Christmas. Mama turned on a Christmas song playlist she liked, the familiar tunes playing through the speakers set up in the corners of the room. Abby and I started putting the lights on the tree while my parents unpacked the boxes. There were a lot of them. Allen and I had spent part of the morning helping our father drag them all down from the attic.

"Is that all going on the tree?" Abby whispered to me.

I shook my head.

"Oh no, it's a whole thing. There will be a Christmas village in front of the fireplace, a Nativity scene on the other wall, and decorations on the walls, doors, and windows."

"Good Lord, we'll be here all night."

I had better things I'd like to do all night, starting with licking my way up her body, but I resisted mentioning that right now.

"We'll just do the tree tonight," Mama interjected. "I'll work on the village and Nativity in the morning after we feed the animals."

We worked together putting on the ornaments, Mama chattering the whole time. She had some story for almost every ornament, and I could tell her sharing was making Abby feel more comfortable. She might not have celebrated Christmas that much, but she took right to decorating, even getting into a good natured discussion with my mother about the correct placement of some of the more elaborate ornaments.

When Abby walked away to use the rest room, my mother pulled me into a hug.

“Oh my God, Petey,” she said, using the nickname she’d saddled me with as a kid. “She’s perfect for you. You have to keep her.”

“I’m tryin’, Mama, but I’ve known her for less than twelve hours. Give me some time.”

She pinched my cheek. “Just don’t mess it up.”

When Abby and I headed back to my house, it was still snowing, although not as heavy as when we left. Still, we had to have gotten at least two inches. The snow crunched under our feet, and when Abby slipped a little in her running shoes, I grabbed her hand and held on tight.

“I should have gotten you some boots,” I said. “Those aren’t the kind of shoes that are meant for this weather.”

“Well, I wasn’t expecting any of this,” she reminded me. “And even if I had, I don’t exactly have snow boots at home.”

Suddenly she paused, staring out at an expanse of the yard with a speculative look on her face.

“I think we should make a snow angel.”

“A what?”

She tugged me forward by the hand. “You know, I’ve seen this in movies. You fall backwards in the snow and move your arms and legs to make an angel.”

It sounded vaguely familiar. I didn’t tend to watch television or movies, but when we were kids we would watch Christmas movies with my mother.

“Here.” She pointed to a flat stretch of undisturbed snow. “Turn around.”

She moved us so that our backs faced the area she’d indicated, then grabbed my hand again.

“Okay, on three we fall back. Ready?”

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

I couldn't help but smile at her childlike enthusiasm. I hadn't expected this from Abby. She seemed to be a pretty serious person, but maybe the tree decorating had gotten her into the Christmas spirit.

“One...two...three!”

We both fell backwards, hands still connected, landing on our backs in the snow. Abby released my hand and started sliding her arms and legs out and back. I followed suit. After a few passes, she gingerly got to her feet and stepped away from the angel.

Her face lit up when she saw the result. It took my breath away. Abby always looked kind of somber and serious, but right now, she looked like a kid, with a huge smile on her face.

“Oh! Look! It worked!”

I rolled to my feet, admiring the two side-by-side snow angels. Abby took out her phone and snapped a few pictures of our work.

“These are beautiful,” she said happily.

“They are beautiful,” I said, turning to face her. “But not as beautiful as you.”

Reaching forward, I pulled her into my arms for a long, hot kiss that left me wanting more.

Abby looked up at me with wide eyes before shivering.

“My ass is wet,” she said. “We should probably get inside.”

She turned in the direction of my house, then suddenly took off at a run.

“Last one to the house gets the last shower.”

I didn't tell her that there was a second shower behind the house. Instead, I fixed my eyes on that shapely ass with the wet yoga pants plastered to its curves and followed her to my house.

Abby

I woke up the next morning feeling uncharacteristically cheerful. After we'd gotten back last night, Peter and I took turns in the shower. I put on some sweats that his mother had loaned me, and then we sat by the fireplace drinking a glass of whiskey.

By the time we were done, my eyes were heavy. It had been a full day, what with falling out of a tree, inspecting the ranch, meeting Peter's family, decorating the tree, and making a snow angel. Definitely much more eventful than my typical Sunday, that's for sure.

When I started to nod off on the couch, Peter took me by the hand, walked me to my room, and after pressing a soft kiss to my forehead, headed into his own room. I'd been sorely tempted to follow him, but then again, I probably would have fallen asleep on him if I'd tried to do anything else.

The sun was shining in the window when I woke up, and I was shocked to see it was after nine o'clock. As a rule, I was an early riser, usually waking before six a.m. to go for a run before I went into the office.

I got dressed and headed downstairs. I wasn't surprised to see that Peter was gone. A note on the bathroom mirror let me know that he'd gone to take care of the animals. I sucked down a quick cup of coffee from the pot on the counter, then headed out to help him.

Peter was in the goat pen, trying to wrangle the little terrors as they jumped around.

"Do you need any help?" I called.

He turned to greet me, a smile on his handsome face. Dark scruff covered his chin, and I got a nice visual of how that would feel between my legs. Mentally shaking my head, I focused on not being a weirdo.

"One of these guys are limping but the rest of them seem determined to keep me away from him."

I laughed and let myself into the pen. Goats were very sneaky that way. Peter distracted the other goats while I cornered the one who was limping. He was a beautiful brown goat who was quite spirited. He seemed blissfully unaware that anything was wrong with his leg.

“Can you hold him so I can get a closer look?” I asked Peter.

He easily picked up the goat, cradling the animal in his strong arms. I inspected the goat’s foot carefully, immediately finding the problem.

“He has a sore on the bottom of his foot,” I told Peter. “Probably from slipping on the snow. We should wrap it up and put some antibiotics on it, just to be safe. Is there any place you can isolate him for a while?”

“Yeah, we can pen him up in the barn.”

“Great, let’s go.”

Something hit me right in the ass, sending me flying into Peter. He was still holding the goat, who got squished between us as I grabbed Peter’s shoulders for balance.

“Sorry about that,” I said. “One of these jokers goosed me.”

The corner of Peter’s mouth quirked up.

“Are you sure that wasn’t just an excuse to get closer to me?” he teased.

I couldn’t say what possessed me, but I stood on my tiptoes and nipped at his earlobe with my teeth.

“Oh, I don’t need a goat as a wingman,” I told him. “I’ve got my own moves.”

I was lying. I literally had zero moves.

“Well, I look forward to seeing those later,” he replied with a wink.

I loved this easy teasing between us. Normally I was a pretty serious person, and I already knew Peter well enough to know that he was the same way. Even with his parents, he was

pretty reserved. But somehow we seemed to bring the whimsy out in each other. I didn't mind that a bit.

Peter and I worked together to take care of all the animals. Between the cattle, the goats, a pack of feral cats, and the chickens, they had quite the menagerie here at the Double J Ranch. I was surprised they didn't have any dogs though. Every ranch I'd ever been to had dogs. I was a sucker for a dog.

"Hey, how come you don't have any dogs here?" I asked curiously as we worked together to make soup and sandwiches in his kitchen for lunch.

My stomach growled loudly, reminding me that I hadn't eaten since the night before.

"I had a dog when I was younger," Peter said. "His name was Bagel. I got him when I was five. He was my best friend. Well, after Allen."

His face turned sad. "When I was eight, he was chasing something, a rabbit or somethin', through the wheat field and he ran right out in front of my father's tractor. I tried to call out to my dad, but he couldn't hear me over the noise of the tractor. He ran right over Bagel."

I gasped, imagining the terrible scene. "Oh no."

He nodded sadly. "I couldn't bear to have another dog after seeing my little friend have such a gruesome death."

This story shed more light on why the man had a cow for a pet now.

I wrapped my arms around Peter's waist, pulling him in for a hug. Normally I wasn't a hugger, but with the Jeffers family, it seemed kind of natural. My head lowered to his shoulder, and I inhaled the scent of fresh air, cow manure, and something that was uniquely Peter. We stood there for a few minutes, silently embracing, until Peter pulled away, looking slightly embarrassed.

"Sorry to unload all that on you," he said, turning to dish out the soup into bowls.

“Oh please, you heard my long sad tale about foster care,” I reminded him. “Now we’ll have a bond from sharing our childhood traumas.”

“I hope that won’t be the only bond we have.”

Peter

After lunch, I decided to take the afternoon off. My parents had ridden the perimeter of the property, making sure that there wasn't any damage from the snow, and Abby and I had done all we absolutely needed to do with the animals. Even though there was always work to do here on the ranch, I figured an afternoon off was in order. The snow had tapered off, but it was still cold and icy outside.

It was the perfect day to hunker down in front of the fireplace, so that's what we did. Abby and I discovered that we both had a shared love of cozy mysteries, so she grabbed a book off my bookshelf and settled in next to me on the couch. We read mostly in silence until the sky started to darken. I got up to turn on a light, finding Abby watching me.

I quirked one eyebrow.

"This was a good day," she said quietly. "Thank you."

"I've never been around anyone who likes the quiet as much as I do," I told her, thinking of the few women I'd dated over the years. They'd always needed to talk, to 'do something' other than read and relax. But Abby had seemed to enjoy our quiet afternoon as much as I had.

Returning to the couch, I patted my lap. It was a bold move for me, and I wasn't normally a bold guy, but it paid off because Abby slid over to sit crosswise on my legs, draping one arm over my shoulder.

"What should we do now?" she asked, with a twinkle in her eyes.

"I might could come up with some ideas," I said.

She shifted to face me more fully. "Are they naked ideas?" she asked. "Because I would totally be up for that. I mean, if you are?"

Her expression was vulnerable, like maybe she was expecting a rejection. I couldn't decide if I was more surprised by her uncertainty or by the fact that she'd made the first

move. Abby was coming on to me? Sure, we'd made out twice yesterday, but other than that hug in the kitchen when I told her about my dog Bagel, we hadn't touched each other all day. I'd been worried that she'd changed her mind.

"I'd be up for that too," I finally answered. It was the understatement of the year.

Abby's face cleared and she lifted her head up to meet my lips. Just like yesterday, everything in my body lit up the minute our lips touched. It was hard to explain, but kissing Abby almost felt like...coming home.

She nipped at my bottom lip, and I granted her access, welcoming her questing tongue with my own. She managed to shift positions without breaking the kiss, moving to straddle my lap, just like she had yesterday. I loved having her there.

I tunneled my fingers into her long brown hair, holding her close but otherwise letting her take the lead. When her hands moved down to unbutton my shirt, I didn't stop her. I couldn't stop her. I wanted this as much as she apparently did. Thank God *she* wanted this as much as I did.

After a few minutes, she pulled back, breathing heavily. We both gasped for air.

"If we're going to do this – and let me be clear that I hope we're going to do this – there are two things I need you to know."

I leaned forward to nip at her chin, then pulled back again. "What's that?"

"Well, maybe it's three things," she corrected. "First, I don't do this very often, so I'm out of practice."

"I'll give you all the practice you need," I promised. "Plus, I haven't been with a woman in three years so I'm out of practice myself."

"You've been celibate for three years?" she asked, rearing back in shock.

"Well, when you're shy and introverted, it's hard to go pick up women at bars. And when you rarely leave your

home, it's hard to meet them any other way. So yes, it's been a while."

She seemed to ponder this. After a few seconds I prompted, "What are the other things I need to know?"

"I can't get pregnant, so we don't need to worry about protection, especially when it's been a while for both of us."

At this point my cock was so hard it was diverting the blood from my brain.

When I didn't answer, she hastened to add, "We can glove up if you prefer, I just wanted you to know that I'm clean and if you are too, going bareback is definitely an option."

"I'm fine going without," I said slowly.

My tone was serious, completely at odds with the jubilant cheering in my head. I was too aroused to form complete sentences. "Third thing?"

"I'm too damned old to have sex on the couch. I need a bed."

I grabbed a hold of her ass and pushed to my feet, keeping her in my arms. She squealed in alarm and grabbed onto my neck.

"Peter, what are you doing?"

"Taking you to my bed."

I started race walking towards the stairs.

"Don't blame me if you hurt yourself carrying me around," she warned.

Abby was tall, but she wasn't particularly heavy, not for a guy that was used to carrying bags of feed and caring for large animals.

"You're a doctor," I reminded her. "You can fix me if I get injured."

"I'm a vet, I can't treat your back. I'm only licensed to do things like deworming and neutering."

“I don’t need either of those,” I assured her as I carried her up the stairs.

“Thank God.”

Abby

Peter carrying me up the stairs like I was a tiny little woman was easily the hottest thing that I'd ever experienced. Having someone who seemed desperate to sleep with me was as unusual as my own feeling that I was absolutely going to die if I did not get him naked as soon as possible.

With that in mind, the instant Peter put me on my feet I damn near started tearing off his clothes. He laughed, stilling the hand that was struggling with his belt. My eyes moved up from the giant bulge pressing against his fly to look at his face.

“What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong, darlin’. I just want to take my time with you.”

I lifted my hands to cup his cheeks, and when his eyes met mine, I said, “Take your time next time. It’s been too damned long for both of us. I need you, Peter.”

I’d never once told anyone that I needed them. Desire flared in his eyes, and I resumed my efforts to get him undressed. Meanwhile he plucked at the buttons of the flannel shirt I’d borrowed from his mother. I unzipped his jeans, carefully pulling his boxers around his cock until it sprung free, thick, erect, and angry looking. I licked my lips.

“Next time,” he said, reaching to unclasp my bra. “It’s been too damned long for both of us.”

I grinned as he echoed my words.

Peter walked us back to the bed and we toppled sideways, kissing and touching. He got up on his knees to pull off my jeans and underwear and when I was as naked as he was, he pushed me onto my back and scooted down between my legs.

The first touch of his tongue made my hips punch up in the air. It had been a long, long time since anyone had done this, and I felt incredibly sensitive.

“Oh. Peter.”

My voice was soft and breathless as he continued exploring my folds with his tongue. He cupped his hands under my ass, tilting my hips and pressing deep inside me with his tongue. Peter ate me out the same way I'd seen him do everything: with a quiet but intense focus.

I was close to coming just from this, but I needed more. Sliding my hand down, I began teasing my clitoris, pressing and tapping. The combination of sensations sent me over the edge.

“Peter!”

That was all I got out before my orgasm hit me, making me shudder beneath Peter's tongue as he continued to wring pleasure out of me. I finally threw my hands out with a dramatic sigh, and he looked up at me from between my thighs. My juices glistened against his scruff, and it was one of the most erotic things I'd seen in my life.

When he crawled up my body and kissed me, I could taste myself on his lips. The orgasm had taken the edge off, but I was still strung tight. I needed more.

“I need you inside me,” I said. “Get on your back.”

His eyes widened. “I had no idea you were such a bossy little thing,” he teased.

I rolled my eyes and pushed on his chest. Peter shifted onto his back, and I swung my leg over him.

“Try not to knee me in the junk this time,” he teased.

“Do you really want to mess with me when I've got you in such a vulnerable position?” I sassed back as I straddled him.

Moving up his body, I lined his cock up with my opening, then met his eyes.

“You ready?”

He nodded, eyes blazing with need.

We both groaned as I slipped the tip inside me, pausing to allow my body to adjust. Peter was trembling slightly beneath me with the effort of holding himself back. Exhaling deeply, I

lowered myself down in one steady movement until he was all the way inside me. When our hips met, we both sighed.

“You’re so tight,” he grit out.

Instead of answering, I began lifting and lowering my hips, moving steadily. Peter fisted the sheets, his hips rising to meet me, but allowing me to set the pace.

“You want to take over, don’t you?” I asked.

It was funny. I’d known the man for two days and I could already read him like we’d been together for years. Together for years...that sounded nice.

“Yeah, I do.”

I stopped moving. “Do it.”

He paused. “I don’t want to be too rough with you.”

“It’s impossible for you to be too rough with me,” I said, hoping it was true. “Do your worst.”

I expected him to roll me over so he could be on top, but instead he grabbed my waist and began slamming me up and down his cock, hard enough that all I could do was brace my hands on his chest and hold on for the ride. I. Loved. It. With every slap of his hips, the tip of his cock hit something deep inside me that made my eyes roll back in my head.

This time when I came, I completely lost it. This was no gentle orgasm, it was a whole-body experience. My eyes screwed closed, my breath stuttered, and every muscle in my body spasmed as I found my release. It only took a few more strokes before Peter was coming too, spurting warm cum deep inside me with a long groan.

When he sagged against the bed I pulled off him, grabbing a box of Kleenex off the side table to clean myself up. Tossing the wad of tissue in the trash, I grabbed the blanket from the foot of the bed, pulling it over us while I snuggled into Peter’s side.

“Can we do that again?” I asked. “After we take a break, I mean?”

“Darlin’, I thought you’d never ask.”

Peter

Having sex with Abby was life changing. There was no other way to describe it. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close, biting my lip to keep from doing something stupid like telling her that I loved her.

Sure, I knew it was ridiculous to think I was in love this soon, but I'd known the minute I saw Abby that she was the one I'd been waiting a lifetime for. I would have known it if we passed each other on the street the same way I knew it when she dropped into my arms falling out of that tree.

I loved her, but I wasn't sure yet how she felt.

"Will you stay here for Christmas?" I asked.

"What?" She sounded sleepy.

"I know it's supposed to warm up tomorrow and the roads will likely be opening up sometime soon, but Christmas is in three more days. Stay. Please."

Abby pushed up on her elbow.

"You want me to stay for Christmas with your family?" she asked, as if she thought she'd misunderstood.

I don't know why. She'd already promised my Mama she would come. I was just asking her to stay here in the interim.

"Yeah."

"I promised my boss I would come to work tomorrow if the roads were open," she told me.

This was news to me, but I guess it shouldn't have been. Of course she would have been giving status updates to her boss when she wasn't able to come in today.

"Come back after work," I said, desperate to keep her close. "The county offices are closed on Christmas, right? You can come back here tomorrow night after work, and then after you work on Christmas Eve you can come back again to spend the holiday with us."

“We are actually closed on both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. I’m on call though. I always volunteer so other people who have families can have Christmas off.”

The fact that she never had a reason to celebrate Christmas broke my heart. I wasn’t an overly sentimental person, but Christmas was special. Magic. A time for family and loved ones. I was determined to have my newest loved one right next to me at Christmas dinner.

“Can you take the emergency calls from here?” I asked.

She nodded thoughtfully. “I don’t see any reason why not. I’ve only gotten one call in all the years I’ve done this.”

“Good, it’s settled then. You’ll stay over here and then spend Christmas with your new family.”

I saw a flash of something on her face. Maybe fear. Maybe disbelief. Whatever it was, I was determined to prove to her that she had a place to belong. Here with us.

She laid back down and I pulled her close, pressing my lips to the top of her head. After a few minutes she relaxed against me, and her breathing evened out as she fell asleep.

We both got up early the next morning, and Abby insisted on helping me with the animals before she left for work. We made a good team. She was strong and knew just as much about what they needed as I did. More even.

The injured goat seemed to be on the mend, and Abby deemed him okay to return to the pen with his goat family.

She left about ten in the morning, giving the roads some more time to clear, though the grass was still covered with a layer of snow. I couldn’t get her out of my mind all day.

“How’s it going with your girl?” my father asked me as we spread new hay in the barn later that day.

I looked at him in surprise. My father only asked questions about the ranch and sports. I couldn’t think of a single time when he’d ever asked me a personal question.

“It’s going great,” I said. “She’s a bit guarded, but I’m determined to show her that she belongs with me.”

“You know, I fell for your mama the moment I saw her.” His face softened with the memory. “She thought I was crazy, of course, but I just kept coming around until I wore her down. And of course Allen fell for Clara in an instant, even if they weren’t able to be together for so many years. Men in the Jeffers family, when we find the one we’re meant to be with, well, we just know.”

I hadn’t known any of this, probably because as much as I loved them, I had a tendency to keep myself separate from the rest of my family.

“Thanks, Dad, that’s helpful to know.”

He clapped me on the shoulder. “You’ll do all right, son. Now that you found her, I told your mama to stop worrying about you.”

“Why would she be worried about me?” I asked, puzzled.

“No man should be alone, Peter. You’ve always been a lonely soul, but it looks like you found another lonely soul and together, you’ll do all right. I just know it.”

Abby

I second guessed my decision to spend the holiday with Peter and his family about a million times as I went through my day. Everything had seemed good, really good, while we were together yesterday, but what if Peter came to his senses while I was away?

Plus, I was sure that Peter's brother Allen and his girlfriend Clara were going to be there for Christmas. They might not like a stranger joining them for the holiday. Even if they were okay with it, I knew I was going to feel like an outsider.

I hated feeling like that. I'd worked hard as an adult to never feel like an outsider in someone's family. In fact, I'd successfully avoided holidays my entire adult life. When guys I was dating invited me to attend a family event like a wedding or a holiday, I always refused to go.

But between Peter and his mother, I would feel churlish turning down the invitation. Mary Jeffers had been so affected by my Christmases in foster care story that she'd gotten teary eyed. I felt like I would be disappointing her by not coming.

And in his quiet way, I knew Peter wanted me to come as well. He wasn't just inviting me out of obligation, that was clear.

All my swirling doubts disappeared when I got to Peter's house that night after work. I'd stopped at home to water my plants and pack a bag of my own clothes, prepared to spend the next few days with the Jeffers family if things went well.

I only hoped that they went well.

When I got back to Peter's after work, I forgot about all my doubts. He looked thrilled that I was there, and to my shock, the man had dinner on the table.

"You cooked?"

He nodded shyly. "It's just beef stew, biscuits, and salad. I wasn't sure how late you'd be, but I figured I could leave it in

the slow cooker, and it would be good no matter when you got here.”

A man who'd cook for me? I liked that. Maybe Peter didn't expect his wife to be an obedient Suzie Homemaker after all.

I strode over and gave him a smacking kiss on the lips. “Remind me later to thank you.”

He looped his arms around my waist, holding me close. “How you gonna do that?” he asked, a twinkle in his eyes.

I slid my hand between us and cupped the bulge in his pants. “Oh, I've got an idea or two.”

Honestly, I didn't even recognize this flirty and confident Abby, but I liked her.

As we ate dinner, I was struck by how domestic it all seemed. We worked together to clean up the dishes, then Peter suggested that we take a walk. The temperature had warmed up throughout the day and while it was still a bit chilly for Texas, it was much warmer than it had been.

“Oh, our snow angels melted,” I said sadly.

“Someday I'll take you somewhere snowy and you can make all the snow angels you want,” Peter promised.

I wrapped my hand around his elbow, wanting to touch him while we walked.

“I didn't think you were much of a traveler.”

“I'm not,” he said. “But I'd do it for you.”

I pulled us to a stop.

“Peter, I don't know what's happening between us or how long it will last, but I need you to know that you don't need to change yourself for me. And, as it happens, I'm not much of a traveler either. Other than the occasional trip to Dallas or Austin, I've only left the state a few times, and I'm perfectly happy with that. I'm more of a homebody anyway.”

“You are?” His eyes searched my face.

“Yes.”

On the way back from our walk, we stopped in the barn to say hello to Peter’s cow, Annabelle. She was a beautiful animal, but I’d already seen that she was jealously protective of Peter. Every time we were around her, she’d try to push me away and get between me and Peter.

“Aww, don’t worry Annabelle, you know you’re still my best girl,” he crooned, rubbing her head. The cow was practically purring like a kitten.

“You two are so cute together,” I said, snapping a quick picture with my cell phone. If this thing with Peter didn’t last, I wanted to remember this moment.

He snatched my phone, pressed his cheek against mine, and took a selfie of the two of us together.

“There, that’s better,” he said, handing my phone back while I tried not to swoon like a romance heroine.

Peter got an expression on his face I’d never seen before. It seemed...mischievous.

“Hey Abby, have you ever had sex in a barn?”

My eyes widened, and I looked around. We were alone, other than the animals.

“No, have you?”

He nodded.

“I lost my virginity in this barn,” he said proudly. “I was seventeen years old and dating one of the neighbor girls. She was an older woman, all of eighteen. She had to help me figure out how to get the condom on, because I’d never used one before. That was embarrassing.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m betting you recovered though?”

“Yeah, she had a great rack. She took her shirt off and I forgot all about my condom problems.”

I lifted my fingers to my shirt.

“So, all I have to do is flash my boobs and you’ll be eating out of the palm of my hand, is that what I’m hearing you say?”

He nodded solemnly. “Absolutely.”

“Any chance your parents would come out here at this time of night?”

He shook his head. “No, it’s after eight o’clock. They’ll both be falling asleep in their recliners in front of the TV by now.”

“And your ranch hand?” I asked.

“Already went home for the day.”

I undid my top button, then two more.

“In that case then...”

Peter

My eyes bulged out of my head as Abby slid her shirt off her shoulders, revealing a sexy black bra.

“You had that under there all this time?” I asked, staring at her lace-covered breasts.

“I wanted to surprise you,” she said, unzipping her jeans and dropping them to the ground to reveal matching underwear. “Surprise!”

I advanced on her, grabbing a saddle blanket and spreading it on a nearby hay bale. I knew from experience that laying naked on hay was not pleasant. I eased her down onto the thick blanket, then spread out on top of her, my elbows on either side of her head.

“Hey,” I whispered.

“Hey.”

I lowered my head and pressed my lips against hers. Just like every time we kissed, passion seemed to flare between us immediately. I deepened the kiss, licking my way into her mouth and giving her a rough, claiming kiss. Abby brought her legs up to wrap around my jeans-clad hips.

“Hey little brother, are you and Annabelle...”

My brother’s words came to me like they were coming through a deep fog. The asshole always gave me a hard time about being too emotionally attached to Annabelle. He thought it was weird that I had a cow as a pet.

“Allen, what’s wrong? Why are you...? Oh! Oh!”

And there was my brother’s girlfriend, Clara.

Underneath me, Abby cried out in surprise. Our lips separated and we both turned our heads to see my brother and his girlfriend standing there. Allen was wearing a shit-eating grin, but Clara at least had the grace to look embarrassed.

“I’m so sorry Peter, we thought you were out here alone,” my future sister-in-law said.

“Alone with Annabelle,” Allen added snarkily.

Clara took a step forward and gave Abby an awkward wave. I kept myself on top of her so they wouldn't get an eyeful of her dressed only in lacy lingerie.

“Hi there, I'm Clara.”

“Hi,” Abby said weakly. When I glanced down, her face was red with embarrassment.

“Can you two give us a minute?” I barked.

Allen laughed. “If that's how long my brother lasts, you might want to find yourself another guy,” he said, his comment clearly directed at Abby.

“Asshole,” I retorted.

When he laughed it was all I could do not to leap across the barn and punch him in the face. It didn't matter to me that he was a cop, I was younger, bigger, and stronger. I wouldn't hesitate to kick his ass, even if we were both staring at fifty right now.

“Allen, let's step outside.” Clara took one look at the thunderous look on my face and wisely pulled my idiot brother out of the barn.

I pressed my forehead against Abby's and looked into her eyes.

“I am so sorry.”

“It's fine,” she said. “I mean sure, it's embarrassing for two middle-aged people to be found making out half naked in a barn, but at least they didn't come in a few minutes later and get the full show.”

“I'll make this up to you later,” I said, pushing to my feet. I grabbed her hand and pulled her up after me.

“You'd better.”

We pulled on our clothes and headed outside to find my brother and his girlfriend. They were standing hand in hand, staring at the moon like a couple of saps. Although I had to

admit, now that I had Abby, I felt way less hostile about things like that.

“Peter, again, I’m so sorry.” Clara spoke as soon as she saw us, her curious eyes going right to Abby. “We had no idea you weren’t alone.”

Allen smirked. “Mama told me you had a surprise for us, but this was the last thing I was expecting.”

He reached out a hand to Abby. “Allen Jeffers. I’m Peter’s older and better looking brother. And this here is my girlfriend, Dr. Clara Bownton.”

“Hi, I’m Abby,” my girl said politely, shaking both of their hands.

“Abby is a doctor too,” I told my brother. He was proud of Clara and always made sure to mention that she was a doctor.

“Oh, that’s so cool. I work in emergency medicine. What do you practice?” Clara asked.

“I’m a veterinarian. I work for the Animal Services Department investigating abuse and neglect cases.”

“It’s great to meet you,” Clara said sincerely.

Clara had been a little closed off when she first started coming around with Allen, but she’d warmed up to us. I remembered Mama telling me that Clara didn’t have much of a family, so I guessed that was another thing that she and Abby had in common.

“How did you two meet?” Allen asked.

Abby and I exchanged a look.

“She fell from the sky like an angel,” I said.

I could tell by the shocked looks on their faces that Allen and Clara remembered my mama telling me at the last family dinner that the perfect woman for me wasn’t going to fall out of the sky.

Abby huffed out a laugh. “We received an abuse complaint about the Double J Ranch and I climbed up a tree

outside the fence to get a better look. I slipped and fell right on your brother when he tried to catch me.”

“Well that’s quite a coincidence,” Allen said.

“And romantic,” Clara added. I was surprised, she’d never struck me as someone who was into all that.

“Not that romantic,” I said, “She also kneed me in the balls.”

Abby elbowed me in the ribs. “Keep telling that story and I’ll do it again.”

Abby

We ended up walking back to the main house to have a drink with Allen and Clara. They both seemed very interested in me, which felt weird for someone who spent most of her life being ignored, but I decided to go with it.

As we entered the house, I tripped on the doormat. Peter pulled me back.

“Don’t be nervous,” he whispered in my ear.

“What?”

“I’ve noticed you get kind of clumsy when you’re nervous about something. Or around new people. Like you walked into the wall when I introduced you to our ranch hand and you almost fell over a chair when you met my Mama.”

My mouth dropped open. I couldn’t believe that he’d picked up on that. I’d only realized it myself a few years ago.

Peter used one finger to close my mouth.

“Don’t give me ideas, darlin’,” he teased.

True to Peter’s word, his parents were asleep in front of the television in the living room when we got back to their house. They were both in great shape from their work on the ranch, but they were also in their early seventies so undoubtedly they were slowing down.

Allen, Clara, Peter, and I sat around the kitchen table talking. Peter grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet, and Allen raided the fridge, bringing out cold cuts, cheese, and crackers. As we snacked and sipped at our whiskey, we got to know each other a little bit.

I couldn’t get a good read on Allen, but I liked Clara instantly. She was pretty serious, but she also had a goofy side that came out as she teased her boyfriend and his brother.

She told me about how she and Allen had first met doing response work for Hurricane Rita, then found each other again years later when Allen’s police partner came to the ER with a

gunshot wound and Clara was his doctor. It was a weird coincidence, that's for sure.

“Are you staying for Christmas?” Clara asked me.

I nodded. “Mary asked me to come, yes. I'm on call though, so if anything comes up with Animal Services I'll need to go.”

“Don't worry, we all understand having to work on holidays. Between my work at the hospital and Allen's work as a police detective, one of us is always getting called out somewhere at weird times.” She gave Allen a smile. “But it's our first Christmas together, so I'm hoping it'll be quiet.”

After about an hour Peter and I said goodbye and headed back to his house. It was getting late and we'd both been up early to care for the animals, so as much as we wanted to finish what we'd started earlier, we decided to get some sleep instead.

Peter insisted that I should sleep in his bed, and I wanted that too, so I readily agreed. Normally I wasn't big on sleepovers, but like so many things, it felt different with Peter. When I got done in the bathroom, he was already in bed, bare chested and sleepy looking.

I was falling in love with him. The thought hit me like a freight train. I'd been half in love with him since the moment I'd dropped into his arms. Had that really only been a few days ago? It was crazy, but that's how I felt.

As I cuddled into his side and fell into a deep, peaceful sleep, my last thought was that I hoped I wasn't making a mistake letting my emotions get involved.

It was sunny and significantly warmer when I woke up on Christmas Eve. It was ironic that we finally got a good snowfall in Texas, and it melted right before Christmas.

After I got dressed and brushed my teeth, I grabbed a travel mug of coffee and set out to find my guy. Funny how I was thinking of Peter like that now. When I didn't find him, I headed toward the barn, running into Clara and Mary on the way.

“Oh Abby, good, we were looking for you,” Mary said as she pulled me into a tight hug. “I need to get your phone number so I don’t have to rely on my son when I want to talk to you.”

She shoved her cell phone in my hand. “Here, text yourself from my phone and add yourself to my contacts.”

I glanced at Clara but she seemed unfazed by the exchange, so I went ahead and followed instructions.

“Why were you looking for me?” I asked. “Is one of the animals sick?”

“Oh heavens no. Clara and I are about to make Christmas cookies.”

“By that Mary means she’s going to bake cookies and then give me simple jobs that I can’t mess up,” Allen’s girlfriend clarified. “I’m a disaster in the kitchen.”

“You just need more practice, dear, and then you’ll be just fine.”

Over Mary’s shoulder, Clara shook her head. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Well, I’m afraid you’re going to have two remedial students, Mary, because I’ve never baked a cookie in my life. I don’t have the faintest idea how to bake anything.”

Mary looked positively delighted by this.

“Great, you’re a blank slate. Let’s get you baking.”

Peter

When I went home for lunch Abby wasn't at the house, so I assumed that she'd gotten pulled into something by my mother. Sure enough, I found Abby in the kitchen, getting baking lessons with Clara. Mama loved to make holiday cookies, enough that she could give out to our cousins and the neighbors.

Abby looked adorable. She'd pulled her hair back from her face and was wearing one of my mother's aprons as she decorated Christmas cookies, a look of intense concentration on her face. She had a smudge of flour on her cheek, and another one near her right collar bone.

I walked around the island and kissed her cheek.

"How's it going, darlin'?" I asked.

"Good."

My mother gave us a fond look.

"She's picking this all up way faster than I am," Clara groused. "And it's not even my first lesson."

"That's okay Clara, you have many other skills," my mother reassured her. "We don't need these cookies to look fancy anyway. They'll still taste the same."

My brother had been trying to teach Clara to bake ever since they'd gotten back together. Allen, like our mama, loved baking and was quite good at it. Poor Clara just could not pick it up. She might have been a skilled emergency medicine doctor, but she was a disaster in the kitchen.

"Are you finished for the day?" Abby asked me.

"Yeah, I am. You about done here?"

"You can both relax until we go to church tonight," Mama interjected.

Abby dropped the knife she was using with a clatter.
"Church?"

“We always go to church on Christmas Eve,” Mama explained. “I confess that we sometimes skip a week of Sunday services, but we’d never miss going on the big holidays of Christmas and Easter.”

I didn’t usually attend services, much to my mother’s annoyance, and I suspected that this was her way of sneakily getting me to church. Too bad for her I was a grown man who couldn’t be forced to attend church anymore.

“We can’t go to church with you, Mama. Abby’s on call. She has to be available in case something comes up.”

I grabbed Abby’s hand, pulling her away from the counter.

“If y’all will let me steal away my girlfriend for a while, we’ll see you tomorrow for Christmas dinner.”

Abby was quiet on the walk back to my house. Hopefully someday soon it would be our house.

“You can go to church without me,” she said as we entered the house. “If you want to go, I mean. I’ll be fine here on my own.”

“I haven’t been to church since my uncle’s funeral six years ago,” I told her. “My mama was hoping if she got you to go, she’d be able to guilt me into coming as well.”

She smirked. “Are you using me as an excuse with your mama?”

“You got that right,” I said. “Plus, I’ve got plans for you tonight, and they don’t involve leaving the house.”

“You do?”

I nodded. “Yeah, they start with us making dinner and end with me having you for dessert.”

She stepped closer, wrapping her arms around my neck. Everything inside me seemed to calm whenever we touched. Her hair was messy, and she smelled like sugar and vanilla. I’d never thought of those scents as arousing before, but I did now.

“How about if you have dessert before dinner?” she asked. “Like maybe right now?”

I leaned forward and nipped at her ear lobe. “I might could have dessert a little early.”

She batted her eyelashes at me.

“Great, how about we take this to the bedroom?”

“I’ll race you.”

We laughed as we jogged up the stairs, and I realized that I’d never laughed this much with anyone, even my own family. When we got to the bedroom, I grabbed Abby by the waist and tossed her on my bed. She landed with a bounce, and I dropped down next to her, kissing her until we were both breathless.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I told her when we came up for breath. My eyes bounced between hers. “I just want to be honest and tell you that I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.”

She looked thrilled, then a shadow passed across her face. “This is all very new, Peter, let’s not move too fast.”

“Are you afraid of moving fast? Or afraid I’ll change my mind? Because I have to be honest with you, I fell in love with you the minute I saw you.”

“Before or after I kneed you in the balls?” she joked, but it fell short.

I could practically see her shutting down right in front of me.

“Let’s just take this day by day,” she mumbled, rolling away from me.

From our conversations and observing her reactions to my family, it was apparent that Abby had a deep fear of being left out or thrown away. With her history in foster care, it totally made sense, but I needed her to understand that she didn’t need to worry. I intended to keep her forever if she’d have me.

I only hoped that she would...

Rolling closer to her again, I waited for her to meet my eyes.

“I get that you need time, but I’m not going to change my mind. The men in my family, we fall hard, and we fall forever. You’re it for me, Abby. But we can go as slow as you want.”

When she gave me a small smile I added, “Now take off your pants. It’s time for my dessert.”

Abby

“Should I have brought something else?”

I gestured towards the bag in my hand. When I was in the city for work yesterday, I’d picked up a couple of bottles of wine, a box of expensive chocolates, and a fancy scented candle to bring with me for Christmas dinner.

It was ridiculous that at my age, I’d never really gone to a Christmas dinner, other than hanging out on the fringes of dinners with foster families who hosted events. Despite the fact that Peter had just rendered me senseless with not one but two orgasms this morning, I was still feeling nervous.

It was because it mattered, I realized. Normally I tried hard not to care about what people thought of me, but I wanted Peter’s family to like me. I wanted to spend all my holidays with them. For the first time in my entire life, I allowed myself to want a family. And love.

“It’ll all be great,” Peter promised, once again picking up on my anxiety.

He was a very observant guy and had an uncanny ability to know what I was thinking despite my years of experience learning how to hide my emotions.

When we got to the main house, everyone was in the kitchen. The room was a flurry of activity as they finished preparing the Christmas brunch. Peter had explained that since they had work to do on the ranch in the morning, over the years they’d created a tradition of having a holiday brunch around eleven on Christmas Day, then opening presents and watching football or Christmas movies, depending on who was playing.

With Allen staying the night over at the main house with Clara, he’d told Peter he could sleep in while he and the others handled the morning chores. We’d used that time to snuggle in bed drinking coffee before getting to the aforementioned orgasms. It was the perfect morning.

“Oh good, you kids are just in time to set the table,” Mary announced when we arrived.

It cracked me up that we were both over forty-five and she still called us kids.

Peter’s mother hustled over to give us both a big hug, as if she hadn’t seen us the day before, and I handed her the gift bag with the items I’d brought. She seemed appreciative, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Navigating social situations always felt like a challenge for me.

Brunch was a chaotic, noisy affair due to the addition of other guests I hadn’t known about. That was probably for the best, since I would have freaked out if I’d known more people were coming.

Peter and Allen’s cousins arrived right after we did. George and Josie’s mother was Mary’s sister, although their mom had passed on. Mary explained that the four kids had all grown up together.

George, a big burly factory machinist, brought his girlfriend Cassie and an ancient and stinky basset hound named Bart. Josie was accompanied by her husband David, who worked as a manager in George’s factory, and their whip-smart little daughter Sofia.

Peter pulled me into his side and proudly introduced me as his girlfriend, rolling his eyes at the good-natured ribbing from his cousins about their shock that Peter had found someone.

Peter’s cousin Josie clearly took after her aunt because she grabbed a seat next to me and proceeded to barrage me with questions. I did my best to deflect until Peter finally leaned across me and told her to quit being ‘so damned nosy’.

The group of us ate an obscene amount of food. The cousins had each brought dishes, and between that and the spread that Mary and Lionel had cooked up, we had some of everything: bacon, scrambled eggs, cinnamon rolls, sausage, a frittata, chili rellenos, biscuits and gravy, toast, croissants, fruit, and ham.

Bart paced back and forth underneath the table, waiting for someone to drop some food.

Despite my nervousness, everyone at the table was welcoming, being careful to include myself and Clara, the other newcomer, into all the conversations. The guys joked around with each other, trading casual insults, while the women tried to steer them back to the conversation. They were a large, loud, and obviously loving family who somehow already considered Clara and me to be one of them.

After dinner Mary insisted that ‘the boys’ clean up while ‘the girls’ enjoyed a spiked Mexican hot chocolate in the living room. At my questioning look, Mary reassured me that she’d made a ‘virgin’ chocolate for little Sofia.

Mary, Sofia, Clara, Josie, Cassie, and I moved to the living room, hot chocolates in hand. We talked and laughed as we heard the sounds of plates clattering in the kitchen. Mary told me even though the ‘menfolk’ helped more with the cooking than they had when she was a kid, she liked the tradition of making the men clean up after Christmas dinner.

“Did I hear that you’re a doctor, Abby?” Josie asked.

I looked up from subtly checking my phone to make sure I hadn’t gotten an emergency call. I was limiting myself to one drink just in case I had to go out to help an animal. With it being Christmas, it wasn’t uncommon for someone to hit a deer or accidentally injure an animal.

“I’m a veterinarian, yes.”

She gave me a friendly smile. “I feel like the loser in the family next to two doctors,” she joked.

“You’re not a loser, Mommy,” Sofia said firmly. “You’re beautiful.”

Josie hugged her little girl. “Thank you, Sofia, that’s very sweet of you.”

Watching mother and daughter together made my heart twinge. I didn’t really remember my mother. The state had taken me away from her when I was a toddler. When I aged out of the system, I requested my records and learned that

she'd disappeared after relinquishing custody of me to the state. There was nothing in my file about who my father was, if my mother had even known. I had no idea why my mother hadn't wanted me.

It was nice to see an example of a tight-knit and loving family. I needed to remember that these kinds of families also existed.

Clara leaned towards me.

"It was weird for me when I first started seeing Allen," she whispered.

I turned to face her. "What was?"

"Seeing a big, rowdy family like this. I was raised by a single mom who worked a lot, then died young. I had some cousins that I saw when I was younger, but mostly I didn't have a family for a long time. Until the Jeffers adopted me."

For some reason I felt like crying, which was really weird since I hadn't cried since I was a tiny girl.

"Yeah, they're great," I agreed.

"You're part of the family now, and when you marry Peter and I marry Allen, we'll officially be sisters."

"You and Allen are getting married?" I asked softly, looking around in case it was confidential. Peter hadn't mentioned that his brother was engaged.

Mary, Cassie, and Josie were deep in conversation and not paying any attention to us. Sofia was playing a game on her tablet.

"We will get married at some point. He's been hinting around, trying to see if I'll freak out."

"Why would you freak out?" I asked curiously.

"I was a little...jaded when we first got back together. Afraid to trust anyone. You know how we met years ago, then ran into each other again a few months ago?"

I nodded.

“Well, in the ensuing years I spent a lot of time going to disaster zones and seeing the worst in humanity and, well, it hardened me. Right before I came back to Houston I had a very bad experience in Ukraine and almost died. I lost part of myself and had given up on ever having a normal life or a normal relationship. Then, as corny as it sounds, Allen helped me find the joy in life again, and I learned it was okay to open myself up to love.”

“I’m glad,” I said sincerely.

Clara seemed awesome, exactly the type of woman I’d love to be friends with.

“I’m learning that all the boys in this family love hard. Just be open to taking a chance with Peter. You’re both worthy of love. Don’t let your past determine your future.”

It was exactly what I needed to hear.

Peter

Abby strode into the kitchen, looking like a woman on a mission.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, hurrying over to her. “Did someone say something?”

I couldn’t imagine what anyone in that room would say that was offensive, but then again, Abby was still a bit unsure about me. She’d practically run away screaming when I told her I loved her last night. Fortunately, I’d distracted her with orgasms.

Abby shook her head.

“I’m fine, but can we talk outside for a minute? It’s important.”

“Sure.”

Ignoring the curious eyes of my family members, I grabbed our coats off the rack and followed her out into the yard. When we reached the bottom of the stairs, she started pacing back and forth. I followed her, intercepting her. Placing my hands on her shoulders to keep her in one place, I met her eyes.

“What’s wrong, Abby?” I asked again.

“Last night, you said you loved me...” She paused, almost as if she was doubting that it happened.

“Yeah, I did.”

“I, um, I’m sorry I freaked out about it. I know I didn’t respond the way you were hoping I would.”

I slid my hands down her shoulders to interlace her fingers with mine.

“You get to feel your own emotions and be true to yourself, Abby,” I told her. “It’s okay if you’re not feeling the same. I just wanted you to know where I stand, and to declare my intentions.”

She stared up at me for a long moment. “It seems ridiculous, us feeling like this at our age. I mean, we’re not teenagers, we shouldn’t be feeling so strongly so soon.”

“Who says?” I asked. “The way I look at it is that I’ve waited a long time to find you, Abby. And now that I’ve found you, I don’t want to waste any time. I love you and I want to be with you until I take my last breath. But I also don’t want to push you. These things need to go at their own pace. I’m willing to wait for you, for as long as it takes.”

“It’s not that you’re pushing me,” she said slowly. “I’m just...”

“Scared?”

“Yeah, I guess. I’ve never been in love before. My entire life, not one person has ever told me they love me.” She blinked like she was trying not to cry. “I just, I don’t know if I can believe it.”

“I’ll believe it for the both of us then,” I vowed.

She nodded like she was making a decision. Looking up, she whispered so softly that I almost missed it.

“I think I love you too.”

My eyes widened. “Did you really just say you love me?”

“Yeah. I mean, I think about you all the time, and I feel like I breathe easier when we’re together. When I close my eyes, I can picture us growing old together. It’s like you’re a missing piece in my life that I never knew wasn’t there. So, is that love?”

“I’d say it is.” I couldn’t help the big goofy smile that lit up my face.

“So, we’re in love then?” she clarified. “We’re a couple who’s in love?”

“Yep, we sure are.”

I pulled her into my arms and kissed her until the moment was ruined – by my brother of course.

“Hey, break it up! We’re tryin’ to have a Christmas here! Now get your asses inside so we can open presents.”

As we walked back to the house, my arm around Abby’s shoulders, I whispered, “Remind me later, I have a present for you back at the house.”

“Is it a sexy present?” she asked.

“Maybe.”

I’d gone into town today and bought her a new pair of cowboy boots after snooping for her shoe size when she was in the shower this morning. I couldn’t wait to see her wearing the boots – and nothing else.

“I didn’t get you anything,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re my present, darlin’.”

“Oh jeez, that’s so lame,” Allen piped up.

I smacked him on the back of the head. “Shut it, asshole. I’m trying to have a tender moment with my girl.”

Abby slipped her arm around my waist. “We can have a tender moment when we’re alone.”

“I can’t wait.”

Epilogue – Abby

Six months later...

“I told you we’d be sisters someday!”

I smiled as Clara burst into the room, wearing the maid of honor dress she’d picked out. It was dark blue with a lacy bodice and a poofy skirt, a surprisingly girly choice for the no-nonsense doctor.

Clara and I had gotten to be good friends over the last few months. I felt closer to her than I did to any of my other friends, and since Allen was standing up for Peter as best man, it only made sense to ask Clara to be my maid of honor.

Neither Peter nor I wanted a big wedding, so we’d opted to have a small ceremony right here at the ranch. Honestly, we both would have been fine going to the courthouse, but Mary was appalled by that idea.

I’d nearly fallen over laughing when Peter’s mother pointed out to him that if we got married here, he wouldn’t even need to leave home. The joke was on her though because we were going down to Padre Island for our honeymoon.

“Is Allen with Peter?” I asked.

“Yeah, and he’s still grumbling about Peter scheduling your wedding before ours.” She lowered her voice in a spot-on impression of her fiancé. “My little brother is so damned competitive. He always has to beat me at everything.”

I laughed.

“In fairness, Peter did propose before Allen, so it makes sense for us to get married first.”

Like everything with us, our decision to get married was low key. We were in the goat pen one day helping a mama goat who was in distress. I’d safely delivered the two kids and saved the mother. Peter and I were sitting on the ground, each of us holding a baby goat, and out of the blue he said, “We should get married.”

He'd kept his eyes on the kid, a sure sign he was nervous. Sometimes I forgot that I wasn't the only one in the relationship with a fear of rejection.

"Okay, but I don't want a whole big fancy thing."

I don't know which one of us was more surprised that I'd agreed so readily. But then again, we'd been living together for a few months and things were going great for us, so I no longer had any doubts.

"I'd marry you right here in the goat pen," he said sincerely.

I laughed, getting to my knees so I could lean over and kiss him. "Well, maybe just a smidge fancier than this."

A few days later Clara, who was a total adrenaline junkie, convinced Allen to jump from a plane in a parachute. After her terrified boyfriend landed safely, he'd told her he was planning to propose, then followed up with a real proposal that very night.

There was a knock on the door, and Lionel stuck his head in. The guy was normally pretty stoic, but when I asked him to walk me up the aisle he'd actually teared up. He and Mary were the parents I'd never had, both of them treating me like a daughter.

"You ready to get hitched, little lady?" he asked with a wink.

"Yeah." I spun around, making the skirt of my ivory dress poof out around my legs. "How do I look?"

"Beautiful," he said sincerely.

A few minutes later Lionel handed me over to Peter as the wedding ceremony started. I glanced around at my found family and the handful of friends who'd made the cut and received an invite to the wedding, and my heart was filled to bursting.

Peter took my hand.

"Before we get started, I want to say something in front of everyone," he said, his voice louder than I'd ever heard it. "I

choose you, Dr. Abigail Southerland. I want you, and only you.”

I knew why he was making this public proclamation, and I loved him for doing it.

I threw my arms around him. “And I choose you, Peter Jeffers.”

“In that case, how about we get this wedding started?”

Hey there! If you liked this book, please show me some love, and leave a review. Good reviews are like puppies, they make everyone feel happy.

You can read about Allen and Clara’s romance in “[Saving Texas](#)”, available now. And catch up with Peter’s cousin George, his girlfriend Cassie, and their gassy basset hound Bart in “[Factory Reset](#).”

And if you’d like another fun story about a midlife couple falling in love at the holidays, keep reading for a special excerpt from “[Dropping the Ball](#),” an opposites attract workplace romance available everywhere now.

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Special Preview

Dropping the Ball by Rose Bak

I looked around the crowded conference room and resisted the urge to crawl under the table in embarrassment. I was a highly trained Special Agent with the FBI and somehow I'd managed to not only get myself kidnapped, but also had to be rescued by a damn civilian. An older, plus-size civilian who'd been impersonating me and from the looks of it, sleeping with the guy who was supposed to be my new partner.

What did it say about my life that I was gone for more than two days and none of my colleagues had even noticed that I was gone?

The civilian – also named Michelle—had somehow retrieved a key piece of evidence from a mob boss, knocked him out with a bowling trophy, disarmed one of his thugs, and rescued both myself and Derrick Hayes, a detective with the Seattle Police Department who was supposed to be working the case with me. Although why he thought the civilian was me was beyond comprehension. She got winded running a block!

I gave in and rubbed my temples a few times, hoping it would at least make my headache go away.

The room quieted as my boss, Supervisory Special Agent Gary Fencik, strode into the room with the air of authority that always surrounded him.

Just like every time I saw Gary, my heart sped up the tiniest bit. He was a good ten years older than me, around forty-five, with brown hair cut in one of those nondescript FBI haircuts pretty much everyone here wore. Over the past year, streaks of silver had started to appear mixed between the brown strands. Not that I studied him carefully or anything...

Because it was a holiday weekend he was dressed casually in faded jeans and a navy blue FBI tee shirt that hugged his broad shoulders and the muscled planes of his hard chest.

The second he breached the door his eyes went right to me, concern and regret flashing in their brown depths.

He strode over to my chair, forcing me to look up at him. I had a quick vision of other things I could do that would require me to look up at him from below, then I ruthlessly squashed that thought the same way I did every time I was tempted to think of him as anything other than my supervisor.

That's right, I was a damn cliché. A single career woman hopelessly in love with her boss.

“Are you okay Michelle?” he asked me softly. He'd never called me by my first name before.

“We were worried when we heard they found you out at the warehouse. With the name confusion between you and the civilian over there, we had no idea that you were missing. I'm so sorry.”

I was surprised at how emotional he sounded. For just a second, I let myself believe his interest was more than professional. Then a flush climbed my cheeks as I reminded myself that we had an audience. I gave him a nod and kept my voice neutral.

“I'm fine, Gary.”

The professional mask slipped back into place, and he turned away from me to start the debriefing.

For more of Gary and Michelle's story check out “[Dropping the Ball](#)”, a midlife workplace romance.

You can read about the other Michelle's adventures falling in love with Derrick in “[Faking It With the Detective](#)”.

Both these books are available now at select retailers. For more information on this and other books, visit my website at bit.ly/AuthorRoseBak.

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About the Author

Rose Bak has been obsessed with books since she got her first library card at age five. She is a passionate reader with an e-reader bursting with thousands of beloved books.

Although Rose enjoys writing both fiction and nonfiction, romance novels have always been her favorite guilty pleasure, both as a reader and an author. Rose's contemporary romance books focus on strong female characters over thirty-five and the alpha males who love them. Expect a lot of steam, a little bit of snark, and a guaranteed happily ever after.

Rose lives in the Pacific Northwest with her family, and special needs dogs. In addition to writing, she also teaches accessible yoga and loves music. Sadly, she has absolutely no musical talent, so she mostly sings in the shower.

Please [sign up for the Rose Bak Romance newsletter](#) to get a free book and keep up to date on all the latest news. You can also follow Rose on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [Goodreads](#), or [Bookbub](#).

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