



a Country
CHRISTMAS

THE *Cowboy's*
HOLIDATE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
EVE LONDON

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Cover by Matilda Martel at Cover Girl Design

JAKE

There was a chill in the air as I got out of my truck and headed into the small shop just outside of downtown Broken Bend. I'd been stopping in every couple of days for the past month to check on the progress of the rocking chair I'd brought in. Time was running out if I wanted to have the repairs paid off in time to give it to my foster mom for Christmas.

Lloyd Delwater Junior lifted a hand in acknowledgment from where he stood behind the counter of his one-man store. He used to work with his dad, but at ninety-three, the elder Lloyd finally retired. Now Lloyd Junior was in charge. He'd been creating custom furniture with his own two hands for the past fifty years. The pieces he crafted from the family-owned business in our small Texas town had garnered international praise, and his customers included U.S. Presidents and celebrities.

I looked around the interior of the store while I waited for Lloyd to finish chatting with the woman standing in front of me. She didn't look familiar based on my current view of her backside. Even though I didn't get into town too often, I sure as hell would remember if I'd run across her before. Tight jeans molded to her curves, and her long, blonde hair flowed down her back. She had on a pair of expensive cowboy boots and a suede jacket that appeared to be custom made.

"I'll have those chairs delivered for you the day after Christmas," Lloyd Junior said. "What's the address?"

“The Swisher Ranch off County Road 403. Do you know where that is?” she asked.

I blew out a long breath. Everyone knew where the Swisher Ranch was located. It was one of the largest cattle operations in the state of Texas, several times bigger than the Calhoun ranch where I’d been working for the past eight years.

“I know where it is,” Lloyd confirmed.

“Thank you so much. They’re going to look great in my dad’s office.”

“I’m honored. Do you want to put that on a credit card, miss?”

“Of course. Here, let me get that for you.” She reached into her purse and slid a card across the counter. As she did, her elbow knocked into her bag. It hit the floor, and the contents spilled out over the slate tile.

I bent down to help her pick up her things.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said as she reached for a tube of lipstick resting by the toe of my dirty work boot. “My dad always says I’m so clumsy I could get tangled up in my own shadow.”

She lifted her chin, and I finally got a good look at the woman with the amazing backside. Dark lashes fluttered against her cheeks before her gaze met mine. Then she looked at me with eyes the color of the turquoise water off the coast of South Padre Island. I’d been there once for a field trip in high school. With the soft sand under my toes, the warm water had beckoned. I’d wanted to lose myself in the depths, just like I wanted to drown in this gorgeous woman’s eyes.

“I’ll take that. Thank you.” Her fingers brushed mine as she took the keyring I’d picked up.

I searched for words, but they were stuck in my chest.

“I’m Roxy.” The keys jangled as she shoved them back into her purse and thrust her hand toward me.

“Jake.” I slid my hand into hers. As soon as we touched, I knew I never wanted to let go.

Her lips spread into a shy smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Jake.”

“The pleasure’s all mine.” Truer words had never passed my lips. I immediately wanted to know everything about her, especially when I might be able to see her again.

Her cheeks flushed the perfect shade of pink as she let go of my hand.

“If you’ll sign here, Miss Swisher.” Lloyd pointed at the small terminal where her platinum Amex stuck out from the bottom.

She turned toward the counter, and my gaze followed. Everything about her screamed that she wasn’t just out of my league; we weren’t even living in the same universe. The fringed suede jacket she had on probably cost more than my horse. She probably didn’t even have a limit on her credit card, and I’d been trying to bump my credit score up another hundred points so I could qualify to buy a two-bedroom cottage on a small plot of land.

“Thank you, Mr. Delwater. I can’t wait to see the look on my dad’s face when they arrive.” Roxy tucked her credit card back in her wallet. Right before she turned around to head out of the shop—and bless me with another look at her beautiful eyes—she tilted her head and pulled her bottom lip into her mouth.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Miss Swisher?” Lloyd asked. He’d been married to the same woman since the beginning of time, but even he didn’t seem immune to Roxy’s charm.

She leaned forward slightly and lowered her voice. I strained to hear what she was asking about, but couldn’t make out a word. With my luck, she was probably suggesting to Lloyd that he have me removed from the premises. I didn’t mean to stare hard enough to make her uncomfortable, but

there was something about her that made me want to dip her low and kiss her senseless.

I rubbed at the back of my neck. What the hell had gotten into me today?

Lloyd nodded and made eye contact. “Jake here can probably help your cousin out with that. He practically lives on the back of a horse, ain’t that right?”

The idea of offering Roxy Swisher any kind of help had my heart rattling against the walls of my chest. “What kind of help are you looking for?”

She pinned me in place with those turquoise-blue eyes. Her breath seemed to catch, and she swallowed hard. “I was thinking, if it’s not too much trouble...”

I waited for her to say something. Whatever she wanted, I was all in, especially if it meant spending any amount of time with her.

Her gaze shifted to the floor and color bloomed on her cheeks again. “Would you be willing to teach my cousin to ride? She used to, but it’s been a long time.”

The pressure in my chest intensified. She had to be joking. In addition to a full-fledged cattle operation, the Swisher family was known for breeding some of the best horses around. Anyone having anything to do with that family had probably learned how to ride before they could walk. Something about her request didn’t add up. “I’m sorry, but I’m not interested.”

Her brows knit together like she couldn’t understand why a guy like me wouldn’t be willing to do her bidding. “We’d pay you for the lessons, of course.”

“Pay me?” Now she was talking my language. For a guy who’d never had more than a few bucks left after paying bills, my ears perked up at the offer to pay me for something that came as naturally to me as breathing.

“Yes. I’d make it worth your while.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder. The rich scent of her perfume hung in the air between us. She even smelled like money.

“Why would you pay me to teach your cousin to ride when you have a whole stable of horses up at your ranch?”

“I’ve got my reasons.” Her chin tipped up slightly, just enough to suggest she wasn’t as easygoing as she first appeared. As much as I wouldn’t mind teaching a woman like Roxy to ride—putting my hands on her waist to help her up into the saddle or pressing my front up against her back while we rode double—I had no idea who her cousin was. The prickle in my gut warned me not to get involved. There had to be a reason she didn’t want to ride at her ranch. I’d do best to mind my own business and keep to myself.

I shook my head. “Thanks for the offer, but I don’t think I’ll have the time.”

Lloyd cleared his throat. “Hey, Jake. I’m about to close up. Do you want to make another payment on that rocking chair today?”

Roxy tilted her head, her eyes narrowing like she was trying to figure out how much it would take to get me to cave. “I’ll pay you well. How does a thousand dollars a lesson sound?”

With that kind of cash, I could pay off the repairs on the rocking chair and have enough to pad my savings account. There had to be some kind of catch. “Is your cousin in some sort of trouble?”

“Trouble that requires her to get back up on a horse?” Her eyes sparkled. “I can’t imagine what kind of trouble that would be. How much do you owe on the rocking chair you’re buying?”

I shot a quick look at Lloyd—a silent warning not to say a word. “That’s not really any of your concern, Miss Swisher.”

“Roxy,” she corrected. “Whatever it is, I’ll pay it off and still give you a thousand dollars a lesson.”

Lloyd arched his brows and nodded, encouraging me to take the deal. He knew how important it was for me to get that rocking chair by Christmas. He also knew I’d been strapped

for cash and had knocked a hefty percentage off his usual price for custom repair work.

Every cell in my body urged me to say no. I didn't like to get involved in other people's business.

Then she fluttered those damn lashes against her cheek and shot me a glance with a hint of vulnerability in her eyes that hadn't been there before. "Please?"

It was the "please" that did it. That and the way her voice went all soft, and she looked at me like I was the only person in the whole goddamn world who could help her. Made me feel like I could be a hero. Not just any hero—her hero.

With regret already swilling around in my gut, I held out my hand. "A thousand bucks per lesson, and you pay the balance left on my account."

She didn't hesitate. Within a second, her hand wrapped around mine. In the space of five minutes, I'd already touched her twice, and it had scrambled my brain. There was no way I'd be able to survive a whole hour in her presence.

"Thank you, Jake." Her lips curved up in a wide smile. Knowing I was responsible for putting that look on her face made me feel like a million bucks. Also made me apprehensive about what I'd just agreed to do.

"I can come out to your place in the next day or two to get started," I offered.

"No. We'll come to you." She slipped her hand away from mine to pull her phone out of her bag. "If you'll add your number, I'll text you, so you have mine. Is there a day and time that works best for you?"

"I work sunup to sundown six days a week. The only day off I have is Sunday."

"Great." She shot me another winning smile. "Sunday works for us."

I could already imagine the shit the guys would give me about Roxy Swisher and her cousin parading around the ranch. But the promise of that much money made me bite my tongue.

“Oh, one more thing. No one can know. We’ll need to find a meeting place that’s private. Do you have somewhere you can recommend?” She pulled out her card again and handed it over to Lloyd Junior.

The machine whirled and spat out a receipt. It was too late to turn back. I was committed to a woman who obviously had a secret to hide. With luck, I’d be done fulfilling my part of our deal before I regretted it.

ROXY

On Sunday afternoon, I changed my outfit three times before I finally left home. I settled on a pair of jeans that looked like they'd been broken in, even though I'd probably only worn them once. Paired with a Longhorns hoodie and a pair of scuffed ropers, I hoped I'd achieved a casual look that would hide how terrified I was inside.

I followed the directions Jake had texted me. We'd agreed to meet by one of the pastures away from the big ranch house out at the Calhoun place. Even though I'd spent most of my younger years in boarding schools, everyone knew about the Calhouns. The quadruplets made the paper almost every week in high school since they all played on the same football team. Now they were all grown up and ran the ranch with their dad, the same way my two older brothers were involved in the day-to-day operations of our place.

My tires crunched on the dirt road as I turned off the pavement. It was only a little after four, but the sun was already hanging low in the sky. Hopefully, I'd be on my way home before it set. The only thing I could think of that was worse than getting back up on a horse would be trying to do it in the dark.

I rounded a bend in the road and caught sight of a small horse trailer hooked up to the back of an old truck. At least he was on time, though I wouldn't have minded if he'd been late or even a no show. My nerves had been jumping for the past four days, ever since I ran into the tall, good-looking cowboy

and convinced him to help me conquer my fear of getting back up on a horse.

He tipped his cowboy hat in my direction as I got out of the car and walked toward him. "It's a nice afternoon for a ride."

Forcing a tight smile, I nodded. "If you say so."

"Where's your cousin?" He shot a glance at my car like he was expecting someone else to join us. "Is she running late?"

"Um, about that. There is no cousin." I rubbed my clammy palms against my jeans.

"I don't get it." His eyes narrowed. "You hired me to help your cousin learn how to ride. Is this a joke?"

I shook my head. *Just spit it out, Roxy, before the cowboy gets frustrated and leaves.* Steeling myself for his reaction, I curled my fingers into fists and forced myself to speak.

"The cousin is me. I'm the one who needs to learn how to ride again. Not so much learn to ride, but to get back up on a horse." I waited for relief to wash through me, but it didn't come.

"I don't get it. Why didn't you say so when we met at Lloyd's?" His eyes narrowed even more, like he thought I was trying to pull one over on him.

"Because I don't want anyone to know." I broke eye contact and focused on a spot in the dirt a few inches in front of my feet. "My family rides in the Christmas parade every year. When I was ten, I was on a big chestnut mare. She got spooked and bucked me off."

Memories of that day washed over me. I could smell the cinnamon sugar from the candied pecans and feel the saddle under my ass again. In one moment, everything changed.

"What happened?" Jake asked, his voice soft and gentle.

"I landed in the middle of Main Street and ended up with two broken arms and a concussion. We were supposed to go on a huge family vacation right after Christmas, but had to stay home because of me." I lifted my chin and met his gaze

for a split second before I had to look away. “I haven’t been on a horse since.”

“So, why now?”

I pulled a deep breath in through my nose. “I’m an embarrassment to my family. My dad’s even sending me up to Oklahoma City after the first of the year to work with a friend of his because he can’t stand to have me around. This might be the very last time we can ride in the parade as a family. I lied about my cousin needing lessons because I don’t want anyone to know. I’m not sure I can do it.”

It just about killed me to bare my soul to a stranger like that, but I needed help. I’d tried getting back up on a horse on my own and had never even been able to make it into the stall. Being the daughter of a man who’d turned his ranch into an empire and being too scared to get up on a horse had alienated me from my family. It was time for me to get over my fear.

“I don’t think I’m the right guy for this. Have you tried talking to someone? A therapist or something?” Jake tucked his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans. The poor guy was clearly uncomfortable.

“Yes. My parents tried everything when I was still a kid. Talk therapy, exposure therapy, even anti-anxiety meds to see if that would take the edge off. I made a little progress, but still haven’t been on the back of a horse. Will you help me, Jake?” God, I hated asking people for help, especially a stranger. And especially a stranger who looked at me the same way Jake looked at me now—with pity and compassion in his dark brown eyes.

“I’m just a ranch hand.” He shook his head.

I could sense what was coming next. He was going to let me down easy, suggest I seek professional help, and probably go back to the ranch and warn all the other guys to steer clear of the nutso blonde who had an irrational fear of horses.

“Money’s not an issue. I’ll pay you whatever you want.”

“It’s not about the money.” He sighed and glanced down at his feet. “I’m not qualified.”

“What if we give it a try? You’ve already loaded up the horse and drove all the way out here.” I held my breath, waiting for him to give me an answer. I couldn’t explain why it was so important to me to do this, but I felt it deep in my bones. If I wanted to be a part of my family’s legacy, I needed to be able to work on the ranch. And if I wanted to work on the ranch, I had to be able to ride a damn horse.

“I can’t be held responsible for what might happen.” A muscle ticked along his jawline as he lifted his head and met my gaze.

“Understood. I’m a grown up and will take full responsibility for my actions.” Nodding, I tried to tamp down the nervous excitement building in my belly. If he agreed, I’d be one step closer to mastering my fear. But if he agreed, I’d also be dragging up a hell of a lot of memories from the past that I wasn’t sure I was strong enough to face.

“I guess we can give it a shot. Tonight, let’s just work on getting comfortable around a horse again, okay?” He cocked his head, studying me like he was trying to figure me out. Good luck with that. I’d been trying to dig into my inner psyche all my life and still had no idea about some of the things that made me tick.

“Thank you.” I reached out and grabbed hold of his arm, excited he’d agreed. Even through the long sleeve shirt he had on, I could feel the muscles in his forearm flex. This man was the real deal. He’d probably spent his entire life around horses. If he couldn’t help me, then I’d have to consider myself a lost cause.

“Don’t thank me yet.” The edges of his lips tipped up in a smile as he backed toward the horse trailer. “I brought Trixie with me tonight. She’s as gentle as they come. I’ll get her out of the trailer so the two of you can meet.”

My pulse jumped like a jackrabbit zigzagging across an open field as I followed him to the trailer. He swung the door open, and the hinges creaked. Jake disappeared inside and slowly backed the big horse out until she had all four feet on the ground.

I froze. It had been fifteen years since I'd been this close to a horse. She was huge, much bigger up close than I remembered. Trixie blew out a breath and even from half a dozen feet away, I could feel it. Part of me wanted to reach out and skim my fingers over her soft nose. When I was younger, there had been nothing like snuggling into the neck of my favorite horse and breathing in her sweet scent.

"You okay so far?" Jake asked. He held the lead loosely in one hand and ran his palm over Trixie's neck with the other.

"So far, so good." Melting down in front of a stranger wasn't an option. I tried to break up the huge ball of anxiety gathering momentum in my gut. Trixie shifted her weight from one leg to the other and swished her tail.

"Do you want to touch her?" Jake eyed me with apprehension. I didn't blame him. He had no idea what he was getting himself in for when he agreed to work with me.

I nodded, even though warning bells blared in my head. The best way to get past an obstacle was to blow right by it. Wasn't that what my dad had always taught me? My brothers sure didn't seem to have any trouble with that. I'd always been more cautious, though. More sensitive, my dad used to say. In his eyes, that made me weak. He'd never said as much, but I could tell by the way he treated me. When I couldn't bring myself to get back up on a horse after my accident, he was the one who'd suggested sending me away.

Dredging up the past wouldn't do me any good right now. Not with a huge horse staring at me and a cowboy wondering what the hell was wrong with me.

I forced my foot forward a step. Then another. When I was about two feet away from the gorgeous mare, I reached up to touch her cheek.

"There you go." Jake moved closer and took hold of the halter. "She likes it when you scratch right between her ears." He lifted a hand to demonstrate. Trixie lowered her head to give him better access.

“How long have you had her?” I asked, summoning enough courage to flatten my palm and run it down Trixie’s neck.

“She belongs to Tassy Calhoun and has been on the ranch for the past ten years. Rescued her from a horse auction right before she was about to be put down.”

“Oh no.” My heart ached for the beautiful mare. My dad had talked about those auctions in the past. I’d never understood how someone could give up on an animal and sell them off, knowing what kind of end waited for them. Not all of them ended up being put down, but enough of them did that it made me want to do something about it.

I almost snort-laughed. That would be something... a woman who could barely stand to touch a horse trying to rescue a bunch of them.

“You’re a good girl, aren’t you?” Clearly Jake was talking to the horse, but the gruff edge in his voice made me wonder how it would feel for him to say those same words to me. He wasn’t like the men I typically dated. The term “salt of the earth” came to mind. Jake was a real cowboy—I could tell by the way he handled himself and the way he handled the horse.

Trixie swung her head toward me and I stepped to the side, bumping right into Jake’s chest. He gripped my arm to steady me.

“You okay?”

“Yes. Sorry about that. She surprised me, that’s all.” I could have moved, but being around Jake had a calming effect. This close, I could see the whiskers that made up his five o’clock shadow. Could catch the faint scent of soap that drifted off his skin. Could feel the hardness of his chest pressing against my back.

He stepped away first. “I don’t want to push you outside your comfort zone, Roxy. This is probably enough for tonight.”

A wave of disappointment washed over me, but I nodded. “Okay.”

I'd had enough of Trixie for one night, but was starting to think I might never get quite enough of Jake.

JAKE

*W*ith the holiday parade coming up in just a few weeks, Roxy wanted to set up a few times to get together over the next couple of days. I'd been upfront with her when we met and told her I worked from dawn to dusk six days a week at the ranch. That woman was nothing if she wasn't persistent. Before I loaded Trixie back up in the trailer, I'd somehow agreed to meet up with her over lunch this afternoon and again Thursday night after I wrapped up my workday.

I'd been riding the fence line this morning, checking for damages that might need repairs. Usually, I'd ride my regular mount, but today I'd brought Trixie. My goal was to get Roxy up in the saddle today, even if she only lasted a couple of minutes. I still felt entirely unqualified to help her get past her fear, but she didn't seem to be the type of woman who wanted to take advice from a stranger on that front.

For the time being, I was more than happy to take her money. Knowing I'd have that rocking chair for Mama Mae for Christmas was worth the few hours of my time I'd spend getting Roxy Swisher re-acclimated to riding. I'd told her to meet me off the dirt road near the western edge of the property today. Her fancy four-door sedan was parked right where I'd expected. She leaned against the hood, her blonde hair stirring in the light breeze.

"I was starting to think you might be ghosting me." She pushed off the car and walked toward me.

“No chance of that.” I swung down from the saddle and shifted the reins to lead Trixie closer. “I thought we could try getting you up in the saddle today.”

Her chest rose and fell as she drew in a deep breath. Apprehension filled the space between us, making the air thick and heavy. “I’m not sure I’m ready for that.”

I’d thought about how to respond if she said that. I didn’t want to push her too far too fast, but the sooner we wrapped up our lessons, the better off I’d feel. Sneaking around with Mr. Swisher’s daughter didn’t seem like a good idea, even if I was only helping her get up the courage to ride again. The man had enough influence to crush any dreams I might have if he felt like I was going behind his back.

“What if I ride with you?” I offered.

Her eyebrows arched behind the dark shades she had on. “You’d ride with me?”

Nodding, I reached for her hand. “Only if we get going soon. I’ve got to finish checking the fence line before I head back this afternoon.”

She slid her palm against mine. The same kickback I felt the other day ricocheted through my system. Even though I was only supposed to be helping Roxy ride, I couldn’t deny the way my body responded to her. Being around her felt like basking in the warm rays of the sun. We’d probably spent less than an hour in each other’s presence, but I’d already come to crave her closeness. I wanted to protect her, to help her find her way past her fear. The two of us would never make sense, though. A billionaire’s daughter and a ranch hand who couldn’t even afford a few acres didn’t belong together.

So I gently tugged her closer to Trixie and nodded at the stirrup. “Go ahead and get up in the saddle. I’ll be right behind you.”

She hesitated. Then she reached up and grabbed hold of the saddle horn. With one boot in the stirrup, she started to hoist herself up onto Trixie’s back. I could tell right away she

wasn't going to make it on her own. I put my palm against her ass to give her a boost.

"I guess I'm out of practice." Secure in the saddle, her hands gripped the horn, squeezing it so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

"How are you doing?" Obviously, she was nervous. But with those big round shades covering her eyes, I couldn't tell if she was hanging in there or if I needed to be ready to catch her in case she jumped off the horse.

"I think I'll be better when I'm not sitting up here all alone."

"If you'll pull your foot from the stirrup, I'll get up there with you."

"Oh, sorry." She eased her foot from the stirrup and within seconds, I'd planted my ass in the saddle and settled my thick thighs around hers.

She fit perfectly against me with her back to my front. The heady scent of her perfume mixed with the smell of sunshine and the great outdoors. If I'd died right then, I would have gone a very happy man.

"Am I taking up too much room?" She tried to shift forward.

I didn't want Trixie to read the signals wrong, so I wrapped an arm around Roxy's belly and pulled her into me. "You're perfect. Careful, you don't want Trixie to break into a run. Leaning forward lets her know you want to go faster."

"I definitely don't want to go too fast. Actually, just standing here is totally fine. It's really helping."

Her words seemed to be more about convincing herself she was doing the right thing. Wanting to take advantage of the bright sun and the unseasonably warm day, I squeezed my thighs against Trixie's side to urge the horse into a gentle walk.

"Oh, we're moving." Roxy tensed. Her back stiffened, as tense and straight as a metal rod.

“We’ll just walk around a little bit. It’s nothing you can’t handle.” Distracting her would be my best bet, so I tried to think of a few questions that might take her mind off things. “Tell me about the parade. It’s a family tradition?”

She relaxed a tiny bit. “Yes. It’s always on Christmas Eve. This year, both of my brothers will be there, and my sister is coming home so the whole family can ride together.”

“I suppose it will be nice to have everyone home for Christmas.” With no immediate family of my own, I’d gotten used to ignoring the pang of jealousy that sliced through my gut when I heard other people talk about their own traditions, especially around the holidays. Mama Mae had always provided a safe place and treated all the boys she fostered just like they’d been born into the family. Still, growing up in a home where you knew you were wanted and could feel the love was so different from my own experience.

The tension in her back eased, and she relaxed against me a fraction more. “It will be, though no one moved very far away. My two older brothers work on the ranch, but both have their own places. I’ve got an older sister, too, and she lives up in Tulsa now. I haven’t seen her in over a year, so it will be great to spend some time with her.”

I’d met Roxy’s brothers around town. They were a couple of years older than me, so I didn’t have a chance to get to know them in high school. Both of them had gone off to college and come back to work on the family ranch. They’d even had a few meetings with the Calhouns to talk about best practices. Around here, folks in the cattle business didn’t view each other as competitors and were known to help each other out in times of need.

I wondered if they’d look at what I was doing for Roxy that way, or if they’d see me as taking advantage of a woman who was so desperate to regain her father’s love that she was willing to face the demons of her past. Thinking about it like that made my stomach twist into knots.

Trixie ambled down the trail inside the fence line. We’d ridden over it so many times on horses and four-wheelers that

the tall grass that filled the rest of the pasture had stopped growing. I couldn't remember the last time I'd ridden double with a woman. I'd been so focused on putting in the hours at the ranch, I didn't have time or energy for dating. Not that anyone would be interested in dating a guy who shared a bunkhouse with five grown men.

It would be worth it, though. I almost had enough for a down payment on a parcel right next to my foster brother Owen's place. He'd grown up at Mama Mae's as well and had been able to make something out of himself. Seeing my brothers overcome their pasts had inspired me over the years, and I had every intention of joining their ranks.

We shifted slightly in the saddle as Trixie stepped over an uneven patch of ground. Roxy clung to the horn with one hand and wrapped her other around my arm.

"You're okay. I've got you." I was trying to reassure her, but I meant it. Nothing bad would happen to her on my watch.

"Sorry. You must think I'm an idiot."

"I'd never think that." I tightened my grip around her, hoping it made her feel safer and more secure.

"I don't know why not. How can someone who grew up around horses be so afraid to get back in the saddle?" She turned her head to the side. Her lashes fluttered against her cheek before she looked up at me.

"Honestly, I think you're probably one of the bravest people I've ever met," I told her. "Some people let their fear get the best of them. Let it ruin their entire life. You're facing it head on. I can't think of anything that takes more courage than that."

She'd turned her head forward again, but I could see enough of her profile to appreciate the smile spreading across her pretty pink lips. "I never thought of it that way."

"Well, maybe it's time you start seeing yourself the way I see you." The words left my mouth before I realized what I was saying. It was too damn late to take them back. I didn't want her to read anything into my comment, especially since it

came way too close to admitting the kind of thoughts I'd been entertaining about her.

“How exactly is that, Jake?” She twisted at the waist, turning far enough around to look me right in the eyes.

I was a goner. I'd never been a man who experienced a lot of feelings. But looking at Roxy, a tumbleweed of emotions swirled around in my chest. I wanted to protect her, wanted to fight her battles for her and shelter her from anyone or anything that might make her feel less valuable than she was.

I didn't know what to call it, but a tiny voice inside my head whispered that what I was feeling for Roxy might just feel a little bit like falling in love.

ROXY

I took a little extra care getting ready to meet up with Jake on Thursday. After our ride on Tuesday, I'd started looking at him in a different light. I'd felt so safe sitting up on that saddle with his arms on either side of me. Like nothing bad could happen to me while he held me.

He was incredibly good looking—I'd noticed that the first time we met. But there was a lot more to him than broad shoulders, strong arms, and twinkling brown eyes.

As eager as I was to keep working with Trixie and get to the point where I could ride in the parade, I was also looking forward to spending time with him again. I'd even baked him a batch of my grandma's candy cane cookies. Since the kitchen in the cabin I stayed at when I spent time at the ranch didn't have a ton of counter space, I'd come up to the big house to bake in my mom's kitchen.

"Who's the lucky guy?" My brother, Stetson, walked through the doorway and reached for the coffeepot.

"What are you talking about?" I'd been sliding the cooled cookies into a big plastic bag, but his question made me drop the cookie sitting on the spatula. It broke in two when it hit the granite countertop.

"Bummer. I bet you don't want to give him a broken one." Stetson reached out and snagged half of the cookie before I could react.

He and my brother Justin had been teasing me my whole life. I wouldn't let them get to me. The best thing to do would

be to laugh it off. If Stetson found out I was meeting a guy who was teaching me to ride again, I'd never hear the end of it. Especially if I didn't end up with the courage to ride in the parade. The last thing I wanted was for my dad to find out what I was up to. Failing in front of him twice would be devastating.

"What makes you think these are for a guy?" I willed my hand not to shake as I slid the spatula under another cookie and slipped it into the bag.

"Because the last time you made cookies was when you wanted that guy to ask you to the New Year's Eve dance." Stetson shook his head as he sank his teeth into half of the broken cookie. "Mmm. These are good, Roxy."

Despite the circumstances, the compliment made my heart swell. "Thanks."

"So, like I said, who's the guy?" He talked around the other half of cookie he'd shoved into his mouth.

"No one." I refused to give him any ammunition he could use against me. "I just felt like baking, that's all."

"Mmm hmm. Not buying it, sis." He stuck out his pointer finger and third finger and made the universal gesture that indicated he'd be keeping his eyes on me.

"Aren't you supposed to be working right now?"

He snagged another cookie. "Sure. Aren't you supposed to be getting ready for your big move?"

"I took the afternoon off. I've got a few errands to run." He didn't need to know that one of my errands would lead me straight to Jake and Trixie.

"I'm just about to head out myself. I wanted to ask you about something, though."

"What's that?" Figuring he had a question about something to do with my move or the job waiting for me in Oklahoma, I turned toward him.

"You sure you're not making those for the guy you were hanging out with earlier this week?"

My stomach tightened. “What guy?”

“I saw you riding shotgun in some guy’s truck. I think he works out at the Calhoun Ranch. Jay or James or something. Ring a bell?”

I didn’t want my brother to find out I’d been working on conquering my fear. So, I blurted out the only plausible explanation for why I might be riding around with Jake. “Fine. We’ve been seeing each other. Are you happy?”

“Little Roxy’s got herself a boyfriend, huh?” One side of his mouth curved up in a knowing smirk. “Does Dad know about this?”

“No, and don’t you go telling him about it.” My parents shouldn’t have a say in who I chose to spend time with, but my dad had strong opinions. According to him, there was no one good enough for his baby girl, which was why I’d stopped sharing details about my personal life years ago. My brothers didn’t seem to suffer from the same treatment.

“You bringing him to the company Christmas party?”

“What do you think?” None of us had ever brought a date to the annual Swisher Ranch holiday extravaganza. I wasn’t sure what made Stetson think I’d be the first.

“I think he’d have a good time. Maybe I ought to stop by the Calhoun place and invite him myself.”

Why did my brother have to be such an ass? I wouldn’t waste any time trying to come up with a reason. That was a question only he could answer. “We’re not that serious. Besides, if he ended up coming to the party, he’d probably run away screaming after he met you.”

“That’s a good enough reason to invite him, then.” Stetson winked at me before turning to head out of the kitchen. “Jake, that’s his name. I might head over there right now and see if he has plans that weekend.”

I wasn’t supposed to meet Jake for another hour, but I couldn’t risk my brother making good on his threat. If he showed up and started talking to Jake about our budding relationship—a relationship that only existed in my mind

because I'd been put on the spot—I'd be even more screwed. So, I grabbed the bag of cookies and jumped in my car. I'd planned to meet him at a trailhead so we could ride along the river, but I'd head toward the Calhoun Ranch to see if I could catch him there instead.

Stetson's truck was gone by the time I raced down the drive. No telling if he'd been messing with me to get a reaction or if he really planned to invite Jake to the party. My foot pressed down on the gas, urging my car to go faster and faster while my heart skipped around like a pat of butter in a hot skillet.

When I skidded to a stop in the gravel lot of the Calhoun Ranch offices, my brother's truck was nowhere in sight. I let out a sigh of relief, but that didn't mean I was out of the woods yet. Tempted to scrunch down in the front seat so no one would notice me and wait to see if he'd show up, I unbuckled my seat belt.

Then Stetson cruised into the lot and pulled into a spot right in front. I grabbed the bag of cookies and practically sprinted toward the door. Just as I reached it, Jake walked out.

“Roxy?” The surprise in his eyes gave way to a warm smile. “What are you doing here?”

“It's a long story, but I'll give you the super short version. My brother saw us together. I didn't want him to find out I've been riding, so I told him we were dating. He's—”

“Jake!” My brother's booming voice came from directly behind me. “I didn't know you were dating my baby sister.”

Jake didn't miss a beat. He thrust his hand out and waited for Stetson to shake it. “Good news travels fast, I guess.”

“I was driving by and wanted to make sure Roxy had invited you to the company Christmas party. It's in a couple weeks out at the ranch. You'll be there, right?”

Jake's eyes met mine. “Um, yeah sure.”

“Great. I'll let the folks know you're coming. I know they can't wait to meet you.” Stetson tapped his elbow against my ribs on his way out. “See you back at the ranch, Roxy.”

I'd seen my brother pull some crazy stunts over the years, but this one topped them all. A half hour ago, I'd been a girl making cookies for a guy who was helping her out. Now I had a "boyfriend" and was bringing him to meet the family at the company Christmas party.

"Anything else you need to tell me?" Jake asked after Stetson had pulled away. I was about to tell him I'd made cookies when a few guys pushed through the door and joined us in front of the office.

"Hey, Roxy. Did I hear your brother's voice out here, or was I just having a nightmare with my eyes open?" Nash Calhoun tipped his cowboy hat in my direction as a greeting. At least I thought it was Nash. The quadruplets looked so much alike it was difficult to tell them apart.

"He's already gone," I said, grateful Stetson wasn't there to make the situation even more awkward. "Anyone want a cookie?"

One of the guys I didn't recognize nodded. I opened the bag and held it out to him.

"Did you need something, or were you just stopping by with cookies to spread some holiday cheer?" Nash teased.

I looked at Jake, hoping he'd know how to handle the situation. He stepped next to me and draped his arm over my shoulder.

"She came by to see me." He offered a shy smile, one that sent shivers racing down my spine.

Nash helped himself to one of the cookies. "Didn't see that one coming. Y'all have a good night."

I waited until the three of them climbed into their respective trucks before I let the smile I'd pasted on my lips fade. "I'm so sorry to drag you into this. My brother wouldn't let it go. He said he saw us together, and I didn't know what to say."

"It's okay." Jake let his arm fall away from my shoulder. "I can't believe they fell for it, though."

“Fell for what?”

“No one in their right mind would believe the two of us are together.” He let out a laugh.

I didn’t know how to respond. We didn’t know each other well, but from what I could tell, Jake would make some woman very happy someday. “Why not?”

“We just don’t fit.” He shook his head. “Did you really make those cookies for me?”

I wanted to dig deeper to find out what he meant by his comment, but sensed now wasn’t the time or the place. “Homemade candy cane cookies. It’s a secret family recipe.”

“Are you going to let me try one?” The teasing smile was back as he held out his hand.

“You can have them all.” I passed over the bag and waited to see his reaction when he bit into one. He’d been so patient with me, I wanted to do something nice for him.

He bit into a cookie and nodded. “These are delicious. You know, if this riding thing doesn’t work out, you could start a bakery.”

“Right. Too bad candy cane cookies are the only thing I can make.” Knowing he enjoyed them almost made the fiasco with my brother worth it.

“I still need to wrap up a few things before I can leave. Do you want to come back, or...”

“Is there anything I can do to help? As long as you’re okay with pretending we’re dating, the least I can do is pitch in so you can get out of here early.” Now that Stetson was gone and left me in a fake relationship with a very real cowboy, the reality of what had just happened started to sink in. I had a boyfriend. Not only that, I’d be bringing him to my family’s company Christmas party. It might take something a little stronger than candy cane cookies to help me process that.

JAKE

*W*e rode in silence for the first half of our ride. Roxy relaxed into my chest, her hair soft against my cheek. I could get used to this, though I knew better than to take any time I spent with her for granted. She was the daughter of a powerful man, and I didn't even know who the hell my father was. Even so, I'd dress up and try not to embarrass her for the party. Anything to protect her real reason for spending time with me.

In the short amount of time we'd spent together, I'd been able to look past the gorgeous smile, the amazing curves, to see the vulnerable woman underneath. She projected strength and independence, but deep down she needed to be accepted by her family. Seemed ridiculous that they'd hold something so stupid as her fear of riding against her.

I knew what it felt like to be on the outside because that's where I'd spent my entire life. Even with Mama Mae's love, it wasn't enough to fill the chasm inside me. If I could do anything to help Roxy avoid the emptiness I lived with, I would.

Trixie continued along the riverbank in a slow, steady walk. Roxy and I shifted from side to side in the saddle. I would have loved to take her on the winter trail, but the odds of running into someone one of us knew were too high. Maybe after she made it through the parade, we could celebrate and ride the trail together.

“What are you thinking about?” Roxy asked. “You’ve been quiet since we got going.”

“So have you. What have you been thinking about? You go first.” I appreciated feeling like we didn’t have to talk to fill the silence, but I loved learning more about her.

“I was thinking about the party. You don’t need to come if you don’t want to. It wasn’t fair for me to put you on the spot like that.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind going.” I wouldn’t mind going anywhere with her, not even straight into the lion’s den to meet her father face to face. Maybe I was being naïve, but I figured I could handle myself, at least for a couple of hours.

“Are you sure?” She twisted around as much as she could and met my gaze. “We’ll have to pretend to be dating, or my brother will never buy it. You might have to hold my hand or,”—she bit down on her lower lip—“maybe even dance with me.”

I’d never wanted to kiss someone so badly. Instead, I laughed off her concern. “I think I can handle it.”

“You know how to dance?” Her eyebrows rose.

“Heck, yeah. Mama Mae taught all of us how to make our way around a dance floor. You want me to prove it?” I was probably a bit rusty, but I could swing by Mama Mae’s tomorrow night to brush up on my skills. She’d been asking when I’d be able to come over for dinner, but I’d been too busy to squeeze in a visit.

Roxy pulled up on the reins, and Trixie came to a stop. “Yeah, cowboy. I do want you to prove it.”

I slid down from the saddle and reached up to plant my hands on Roxy’s waist. “Just remember, you asked for this.”

“Do we need music?” She let her hands fall away from my shoulders and looked around.

We’d stopped at a wide section of the riverbank dotted with a few scrubby bushes and trees with twisted trunks. I looped the reins over the narrow limb of a small tree to keep

Trixie from straying too far. Then I pulled out my phone and fired up my favorite playlist. The first strains of “Be My Baby Tonight” came through the speaker.

“You ready?” I held out my arms, more than a little eager for Roxy to slide her hand into mine.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this.” She moved closer and put her hand on my shoulder.

“You’re the one who’s making me prove it.” We started slow, and I led her into a typical two-step. She had no trouble following along, so I added a spin, twirling her under my arm before pulling her back up against me.

“So, the cowboy has a few moves.” She gave me a wide smile before I spun her again.

“You ain’t seen nothing yet.” Laughing and having more fun than I could remember having in a long damn time, I tightened my grip.

We made it to the end of the song with only a few missteps. As the music faded, I pulled her into my chest. The next song was a slow one, and if she’d let me, I intended on taking advantage of holding her in my arms for another few minutes.

“I guess you proved your point.” Roxy looked up at me, her eyes sparkling. “You’re a better dancer than I am, and I even took four years of ballet and tap before I convinced my mom to let me play soccer instead.”

She rested her head on my shoulder, and we swayed in time to “Made for You” by Jake Owen. I couldn’t help but think how appropriate the lyrics were. The more time I spent with Roxy, the more I felt like we really could be made just for each other. I wasn’t usually such a sap, but she brought something out in me. Something that I didn’t recognize and wasn’t prepared for. Something I didn’t know I was missing until she’d walked into my life.

The song came to an end, but I didn’t want to let her go. Not even when the next song started, a fast-paced tune by Luke Bryan that was never intended for a slow dance. With the

beat driving faster and faster, our movements seemed to slow. Then we stopped swaying.

I pulled back just enough to look down at her. She gazed up at me, her eyes bright and full of something I didn't recognize.

At the moment, all I wanted was to touch my lips to hers.

So, I did.

She tasted like sugar and peppermint. Her arms circled my neck and tugged my head lower. I lost myself in that kiss. Everything else faded away: the soft noises Trixie made as she searched for something sweet to nibble on, and the bubbling of the river as it flowed over the shallow bed of rocks. My focus zeroed in on the feel of Roxy's fingers sliding into my hair, how her body aligned perfectly with mine, and the intoxicating taste of her lips.

I deepened the kiss, wanting everything she had to offer, even though I knew whatever was happening between us would never last. How could it when I had nothing to give her? Still, that only added to my need. Knowing this was a fleeting moment that would never happen again, I wanted to make it last as long as possible.

Her palms gently pushed me back. I broke contact and reluctantly opened my eyes. She stared up at me, her eyes full of surprise. "Where did that come from?"

"Sorry if I overstepped." I shook my head, regretting my lapse of self-control.

"Do it again," she said, already pulling me down for another kiss.

She didn't have to ask twice. The songs continued to play, but I barely heard the music. I was too focused on what was happening between us.

We could have stood there for days, lost in each other's arms, high on each other's kisses, but the sound of a car door shutting pulled me out of the haze I'd fallen into.

“We should probably get going. This is a popular spot for fishing this time of evening.” I didn’t want someone to recognize her and for word to get back to her family that she was out on a ride with a cowboy who couldn’t keep his hands to himself.

Roxy nodded and wiped her finger across her lip. Then she walked over to Trixie, put her foot in the stirrup, and pulled herself up into the saddle.

A mixture of pride and sadness twisted together in my chest. She was making quick progress and wouldn’t need my help much longer. That meant I’d have to lean into being her fake boyfriend for as long as it lasted.

I got up on the horse behind her, enjoying the new level of closeness we shared. Roxy leaned back against me, completely relaxed.

“I might be going about this a little backward, but can I take you out to dinner tonight?” I whispered against the shell of her ear. “If we’re supposed to be dating, it might not be a bad idea to be seen out in public once or twice.”

She nodded. “I’d like that, but only under one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You come back to my place for dessert.”

ROXY

I left Jake at the ranch so he could get cleaned up and headed back to my place to do the same. He'd be picking me up in an hour and planned to take me out on a real date—the first one I'd had in well over a year. Something had shifted between us this afternoon. I hadn't wanted to put him on the spot by asking him to pretend to be my boyfriend, but since he agreed, it was like the barriers between us had disappeared.

It wouldn't be difficult at all for me to pretend to be dating him, especially not after he'd taken my breath away with that kiss. I touched my finger to my lips. They still tingled. Checking my reflection in the rearview mirror, I looked like I'd been kissed. My lips were full, and my cheeks flushed. Funny things were happening inside my chest too.

Jake was only supposed to provide a means to an end. In the hours we'd spent together, he'd become so much more. I got home and ventured into my closet to try to find something to wear. He didn't strike me as the type to get all dressed up, so I set out a pair of dark blue jeans and a low-cut sweater that made me feel good about myself.

I'd barely had time to shower and dry my hair before someone was knocking on my front door. Barefoot, in my fluffy pink robe, and with a face free of makeup, I pulled open the door to find Jake standing there with a bouquet of red and white roses.

“You brought me flowers?”

“Candy cane flowers since you made me candy cane cookies.” He handed over the bouquet.

I buried my nose in the red and white blooms. The scent of peppermint mingled with the sweetness of the roses. “Thank you. Come on in. I’m not quite ready, but give me five minutes.”

“Nice place you’ve got here.” Jake followed me into the converted barn my dad moved to one of the outer corners of the ranch. My brothers thought it was an eyesore, but I loved how open and airy it felt compared to the ancient ranch houses they’d both chosen.

I moved into the kitchen and reached for a vase on the top shelf. Most of the time, I didn’t mind being on the short and curvy side, but a few extra inches would come in handy now and then.

“Need some help?” Jake came up behind me and easily reached up to grab the vase. “Here you go.”

I turned around in his arms, my ass backed up against the counter. He didn’t move, just looked down at me with his arms caging me in. Need pulsed through my veins as his gaze raked over me. My robe had slipped as I’d tried to reach the vase. I grabbed the sides to pull them together, but Jake’s hand came up and wrapped around mine.

“We don’t have to go out if you don’t want to. I could order in.” There was no mistaking the invitation in his eyes, and the surprising thing was, I was ready for it.

“Oh, yeah?” I teased. “What would we do if we didn’t go out?”

His mouth ticked up on one side. “We could watch a Christmas movie.”

“Mmm.” I circled my arms around his neck. “Or you could help me put up my tree.”

“You haven’t put up a tree yet? And here I thought you were like the queen of Christmas.” His grin widened.

“The only thing I’m queen of is falling off a horse,” I joked.

“You could be my queen, Roxy.” The teasing spark vanished from his eyes, and he looked down at me the way I’d dreamed a man might someday.

The mood had gone from teasing to a tad too serious. I wanted what he was offering, but it was too soon. We were supposed to be pretending to date, not really falling for each other.

Still, I wondered. What would it feel like to have a man like Jake Robinson treat me like a queen?

“And what would that entail?” I asked, trying to infuse my tone with a lightness I didn’t feel.

“I can show you.” His voice came out rough and low.

I nodded, ready to give over control.

Jake slid his palms under my ass and hoisted me up onto the counter, not an easy thing to do. Then he gently nudged me backward until my back rested on the granite countertop. He slipped his hand under my robe and his rough fingertips skimmed over my belly. I didn’t know what he wanted from me, but I was more than willing to give it to him.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous, Roxy.”

My cheeks heated, and I turned my head. I’d always been okay with my body. Sure, I’d rather be a size four than shop in the plus section, but after trying every diet craze I could find and not budging a pound, I’d embraced my curves. Still, I’d never considered myself gorgeous.

“Look at me.” He put his hands on either side of my face and turned my head to face him. Our eyes met. Truth shone bright in the depths of his gorgeous brown eyes.

Tears built behind my eyelids. I was determined not to let them fall.

“You’re so beautiful, inside and out. I don’t deserve to kiss the ground you walk on, much less touch my lips to any part of your amazing body.”

I shook my head. “That’s not true at all. You’re the one who’s building his own future, step by step, brick by brick. I didn’t do anything except luck into this family. You’ve worked hard for everything you’ve gotten.”

“We don’t make sense together, do we?” Heat simmered in his eyes. “Doesn’t mean I don’t want to ruin you for anyone else. Come here.”

He leaned down and buried his head between my thighs. His soft beard tickled my already sensitive skin as he planted soft kisses just above my knee. I squirmed underneath him, fighting the urge to pull away with my desire to see how far he’d go. My need built, growing stronger and more demanding with every single kiss. Finally, his lips reached the edge of the red lace panties I’d pulled on after my shower.

Slipping them to the side, his tongue circled my clit. My fingers curled into fists, trying to find something to hold on to.

His tongue was gentle, but firm. Shivers raced up and down my body like little flames licking my skin from my hair to the tips of my toes. Then he added a finger to his efforts, slipping it into the wet heat of my core. Pressure built inside me. I wanted to arch my back and lift my hips, but my legs dangled over the edge of the counter. Trapped between the counter and Jake Robinson’s tongue, I was blissfully at his mercy.

Jake doubled down on his efforts, plunging his tongue deep inside me. Crap on a candy cane, I was so close to losing myself. My fingers slipped into his hair, gently encouraging him. One of his hands cupped my ass. He squeezed my butt cheek and angled my hips up so he could thrust even deeper. The man was literally fucking me with his tongue, and I couldn’t get enough.

I hovered on the edge of release, ready to swan dive into the abyss. All I needed was a little nudge. Jake reached up and circled my nipple before pinching it between his finger and thumb. Oh Holy Night, I was done. I didn’t swan dive into a graceful release. I belly flopped instead, face forward, hurtling

directly toward an earth-shattering orgasm and came so hard my entire body trembled.

Jake pressed his hand to my belly, pinning me in place while he continued to do things with his tongue that were probably illegal in at least a few countries. Aftershocks raced through me, causing my muscles to spasm until my body felt so wrung out, there was nothing left.

“Where did you learn how to do that?” I cracked an eyelid and glanced down at Jake who lifted his head from between my thighs. “Wait, I don’t even want to know.”

He wiped his hand over his beard. “Let’s just say, you inspired me.”

“I don’t think I can go out tonight seeing as how I’m not sure when I’ll even be able to walk again.”

He chuckled, though I didn’t miss the pride shining in his eyes. “That’s okay. I’ve got you, Roxy.”

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders as he picked me up.

“Now, where do you want me to take you, my queen? The couch or the bedroom?”

JAKE

Watching Roxy as she came on my tongue had me harder than a block of steel. She'd opted for the bed, so I set her down in the middle of her quilted bedspread. With her golden hair spread out around her head, she looked like a fucking angel. I didn't have any expectations, but when she patted the spot next to her and rolled over to face me, I couldn't scramble onto the bed fast enough.

"I suppose fake dating should come with some benefits, right?" She loosened the tie on her robe. It fell open, exposing one perfect breast.

"Are you saying you'll be my girlfriend for the holidays?" I skimmed my fingertip over her nipple, taking great pleasure in watching it turn into a hard peak under my touch.

"Only if you promise to do what you did in the kitchen again."

I leaned forward and sucked her nipple into my mouth. "Is now too soon?"

"Yes, now's too soon. I didn't mean immediately. Besides, I think it's your turn, and you've got way too many clothes on, cowboy." Her fingers fumbled with the top button of my long-sleeve shirt.

"Just so you know, I'd be happy to do it again. Every day if you want me to. You taste so good, Roxy." I pushed her robe over her shoulder, giving me access to both of her breasts. The woman had the most amazing rack I'd ever seen. Full, round globes with perfect, pink, rosy buds right in the center. She

was amazing, and for the next couple of weeks, she'd promised to be mine.

I already knew that wouldn't be enough. Without meaning to, Roxy Swisher had carved out a special place in my heart, beyond thick, strong walls that no one else had ever breached. When our time together ended, she'd leave a hole so wide and deep that it would wreck me. Still, I couldn't resist her.

She slipped my shirt off my shoulders and tugged the white tee I had on underneath up and over my head. I wasn't cold, but goosebumps pebbled my skin as her soft fingertips swept over my chest. Our lips met, and I took charge, sliding my tongue into her mouth, claiming her—at least for now—with a searing kiss.

My cock begged to be freed. Roxy obliged, undoing my belt and button, and pushing my jeans down far enough that I could kick them off and onto the floor. Then she wrapped her hand around my shaft. Pre-cum beaded at my tip. I distracted myself by repeating the names of every horse we had on the ranch—anything to keep from exploding into her hand. I wouldn't let myself go until I'd buried my cock deep inside her. Until I'd sent her sailing again. Until I'd done just what I told her I was going to do and ruined her for anyone else.

“Condom?” she mumbled against my lips.

“No. You?”

She pulled away and reached for the drawer. Then she handed me an unopened box. Jealousy twisted in my gut. I didn't want to think about her with anyone else. So, I didn't. Forcing the green monster out of my head, I unrolled the condom onto my dick.

Roxy bit down on her bottom lip, so damn beautiful it hurt to look at her.

“Are you sure about this, sugar?” I'd never push her farther than she wanted to go, even if it meant limping home with blue balls and settling for relieving myself while I fantasized about sliding into her sweet heat instead of my own rough palm.

She rolled over and straddled me, lining her hips up to take the tip of my cock. “I’m sure.”

The sight of her hovering over me, her tits in my face, the lips of her pussy surrounding me—it was almost enough to make me clamp my hands onto her waist and buck my hips to thrust right into her. I held back, waiting for her to make the first move. She seemed to want control, so I gave it to her.

With her palms braced flat on my chest, she lowered her hips, easing onto me. Fuck, she felt so good. Too damn good.

Slowly, she took me, inch by inch, until I was seated all the way inside her. Then she tightened the walls of her pussy, clenching around me, milking my cock. I bit the inside of my cheek, hellbent on holding on.

Roxy lifted her hips, pulling almost all the way off. I missed her heat like I’d lost a part of myself. Then she lowered herself again, clenching around me. Over and over, she repeated the process until I was on the verge of blowing my top.

When I couldn’t take a second more, I flipped her onto her back. “You’re a tease, Roxy. And now you’ve pushed me too far.”

Her nails dug into my shoulders, and she pulled me down until there was nothing but a breath of air between us. “What are you going to do about it?”

The woman drove me mad. I plunged into her with abandon. She moaned, urging me on, moaning into my mouth like she couldn’t get enough. “I’m there, Jake. Right there.”

Over and over, I thrust into her, my balls smacking into her ass so hard, the sound echoed around her bedroom. She clenched around me, her breath coming in short gasps, her muscles taut, until she came again.

Knowing she’d been satisfied, I stopped holding back. My release built, gathering momentum until my balls tightened and I gave myself over to it.

Neither one of us moved. We clung to each other while we came down from the highest high I’d ever experienced. The

sliver of light coming in through the bedroom door let me study her face. Her cheeks were pink like she'd been out in the cold, and her hair was a tangle of blonde waves. I'd never seen anything so beautiful.

"You okay?" My fingers grazed her belly. I still couldn't believe she'd given me permission to touch her.

Blue eyes stared up at me. A smile spread across lips I already wanted to kiss again. "Definitely. You?"

"For sure." There were no words for the feelings that filled my chest. Even if there were, I wouldn't be able to say them out loud. We had an arrangement. One that would end on Christmas Eve when she took her place among the family she belonged to and rode in the parade. The only consolation I had was knowing that until then, she'd be mine.

Her stomach gurgled, a low rumble that I could feel under my hand. She lifted my hand and twined our fingers together. "Sorry about that. I guess I haven't eaten much today."

"We need to get you some food then. Especially if you want to have enough strength for what I've got planned for after dinner."

Her eyes twinkled with mischief. "And what exactly is that?"

"You'll have to wait to find out." As much as I wanted to lie there with her all night long, she needed to eat. "Come on, I'll go pick something up and we can watch your favorite Christmas movie while we eat. Sound good?"

"That sounds great, as long as you're a Bruce Willis fan."

"You know some people say 'Die Hard' isn't a Christmas movie," I teased.

Her hands went to her hips. She didn't look too fierce since she faced me topless. "And what do you say? Careful, your answer might dictate the future of our fake relationship."

I let out a laugh. "I'm firmly on the yes-it's-a-Christmas-movie side."

"Close call. Now, what are you feeding me for dinner?"

Leaving her even just long enough to run into town and pick something up felt impossible. “Would you be interested in me fixing you something here instead?”

“Are you going to cook naked?” She cocked her head, studying me with the kind of look that told me she might be enjoying herself just as much as I was.

“If you’ll be my nude sous chef,” I volleyed back.

“As long as you’re not planning on making anything that might splatter.”

“Come on, sugar. Let’s go see what we can pull together.” I held out my hand and with her fingers twined in mine, we headed toward her kitchen.

ROXY

Jake left on Saturday morning to head to work but came back that night and we spent the next thirty-six hours exploring every inch of each other. I'd never been so exhausted. Even though we barely left my bed, neither one of us slept more than an hour or two. By the time he headed back to the ranch on Sunday night, all I wanted was to take a quick shower, heat up some leftovers, and hope the giddy feeling blooming in my chest would be gone by the time I woke up on Monday morning.

It wasn't.

He came by every night over the next week, and we even fit in two more riding lessons. I was getting more and more comfortable with Trixie. After another weekend spent ignoring the rest of the world, Sunday night arrived. Jake pulled me out of bed and told me it was time for me to practice riding alone if I wanted to be ready in time for the parade.

I wasn't ready to pop the protective bubble we'd surrounded ourselves with, but he was right. So, I climbed into his truck and we headed toward the Calhoun ranch. This late on a Sunday evening, there wasn't anyone around when we entered the barn. I was confident enough with Trixie to saddle her myself. Jake saddled up his own horse before coming over to check my progress.

"Make sure it's nice and tight there." He tested the strap that went under Trixie's belly. "Looks good. You ready for this?"

“Yes, but also no.” I smiled and shook my head at the same time. My fear held my heart in an icy grip that melted with one look from Jake.

“You’ve got this, and I’ll be right there with you the whole time.” He nodded toward the saddle. “Up you go, Queen of Christmas.”

Once I was up in the saddle, I grabbed hold of the reins. Running a hand along Trixie’s neck, I leaned forward and whispered in her ear. “There are a couple of carrots waiting for you if both of us make it back in one piece.”

She stomped her foot and nodded her head like she understood my promise.

“Ready?” Jake looked every inch an authentic cowboy as he flung a long leg over the midnight black horse he usually rode when he was working on the ranch.

“Let’s get this over with,” I said, eager to be back under the covers with nothing to worry about except for how many times Jake would be able to make me come.

“Such an eager beaver.” His lips split into a wide grin.

“You have no idea,” I teased.

He led the way out of the barn, and I directed Trixie to fall into step next to him. With a cold front heading our way over the next week, the temperature had started to fall. I flexed my fingers inside the fleece-lined gloves and tried not to think about the fact I was sitting on a horse all by myself.

Trixie ambled along, strong and steady. I trusted her, just like I trusted Jake. As we turned off the gravel and followed the fence line, I even relaxed a little. The gentle sway of her even steps filled me with confidence.

“How are you holding up over there?” Jake asked.

“So far so good. Tell me how you ended up at Mama Mae’s.” During our previous rides together, he’d kept my mind from straying by filling the silence with stories about him and his foster brothers. I’d learned all about the time he spent at Mama Mae’s and the experiences he’d had since he

started working at the Calhoun Ranch. The one area we'd never talked about was his family. The closer we became, the more I wanted to know.

"It's not a happy story. You sure you want to hear it?" His lips still curved into a smile, but the light fizzled from his eyes as he looked at me.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. Why don't you tell me about the rocking chair you ordered from Lloyd Junior instead?"

"I'll tell you about both." He faced forward, his jaw tight. "My mom passed when I was about ten. Drug overdose. She'd been using as long as I could remember, and I'd already been in and out of foster care a few times before she finally left me for good. I've never met my dad, so I entered the system."

"Oh, Jake. I'm so sorry." My heart cracked listening to how the adults in his life had failed him.

"Don't be. Her dying was probably the only thing that saved me. Even at ten, I'd gotten involved with the guy she'd been shacking up with. He had me running drugs and making deliveries to people in our apartment building. I guess he figured no one would think to bust a kid."

"What happened to him?"

"I don't know. That was up in Dallas. I stayed with a few different families but kept getting sucked back in. They finally transferred me down here. I guess they thought I'd be safer out in the middle of nowhere than living in the city. Mama Mae took me in, straightened me out, and gave me a second chance." He glanced over at me and rolled one of his big shoulders. "She was the angel I needed."

I hadn't had a chance to meet Mama Mae, and since Jake and I were only fake dating until Christmas, I probably never would. "She sounds like an amazing woman."

"You'd like her. She reminds me of you in a way."

"How's that?" I didn't think I had anything in common with a woman who seemed to possess the strength of an entire army.

“Neither one of you gives up easily. Both of you make a man feel like his worth has more to do with what’s inside him than what you can see on the surface. It’s a compliment, Roxy. I hope you’ll take it as such.”

My cheeks tingled. Hearing him compare me to the foster mother he revered filled my heart with wonder. “Maybe I’ll get to meet her someday.”

“I’d really like that. The chair I was paying for... her husband gave it to her when they got married. One of the boys living out at her place now got mad and took out his anger on it with a hatchet.” Jake stopped next to a gate leading into a huge empty pasture.

“Those chairs cost a small fortune.”

“That’s right. So, even though the kid feels bad, there’s no chance he’s going to be able to get it fixed. It means the world to her.”

The selflessness of his gift weighed down on me. “You’re amazing.”

“I’m just trying to do right by her since she did right by me.” He turned, sweeping his gaze over the empty pasture. “You’ll probably be going at a faster clip during the parade than what you’ve been practicing. How do you feel about pushing Trixie into a trot?”

My heart jumped into my throat, but I nodded anyway. “Let’s do it.”

“That’s my girl.” He nodded and unfastened the gate.

I wanted to be his girl. Not just for a few weeks, but for a long time to come. Wanted it so badly, I could picture a future together. We’d have a barn full of horses, a garden of red and white roses, and a little boy who looked just like his daddy.

Jake hadn’t offered me forever, though. He might be taking advantage of the fake dating with benefits, but he’d given no indication that he’d be interested in pursuing a real relationship after our arrangement ended.

“Just follow my lead, okay?” He’d secured the gate behind us and climbed back up in the saddle. His legs squeezed against the big stallion’s flanks, spurring him into a quick trot.

Trixie kept up, her head held high as I tried to adjust to the new pace.

“You’re doing it, Roxy. Look at you.”

He was right. I was riding all by myself. After spending so many years afraid, I was finally doing it.

We spent the next half hour trotting across the pasture, until the sun started to dip below the horizon, taking the warmth of the day with it.

“We should probably head back. You want to lead the way?” Jake had stopped next to me, close enough to reach out and grab onto if I wanted.

“Sure.” My success was overshadowed by what it meant. He’d done what I’d hired him to do. Our time together would start winding down. A heavy sadness filled my heart.

I was quiet on the ride back to my place. Jake didn’t press me to engage. He probably thought I was lost in my thoughts about the past and silently celebrating overcoming my biggest setback. When we got there, I invited him in, but he begged off saying he had to be up so early that it didn’t make sense to stay over. He was right, but it still stung a little.

“Do you want to meet up one night this week after I’m done at the ranch?” He’d left his truck running in the driveway when he walked me to the door. One hand lingered on my hip, and he brushed my hair back over my shoulder with the other. “You probably ought to practice riding solo again before the parade.”

“Sure. How about Thursday?” That would give me a few days to work him out of my system and come up with a plan on how to stage our breakup. The best place to do it would be at the party. That way everyone could see it happen in real time.

“Thursday works for me. Maybe we can go out for a bite after.” He slid his hands down my back and pulled me into his

chest. “You should be proud of yourself, Roxy. You did great out there today.”

I wanted to sink into him, but I resisted. It was going to take every ounce of willpower I had to let him go. There was no use becoming even more attached.

My resolve weakened when he lowered his head and slanted his mouth over mine. Heat simmered low in my belly. It probably wouldn't take much to convince him to come back inside, at least long enough to tangle together under the sheets one last time.

He pulled back and knit his brows together. “Everything okay, sugar?”

“Of course.” Forcing a smile, I stared back at him. “I'll see you on Thursday.”

“I'll see you then.”

After another kiss that left me longing for much more, he was gone, taking my heart with him.

JAKE

Thursday finally rolled around, and I worked through lunch so I could finish my to-do list early. I was supposed to pick Roxy up at seven which gave me just enough time to swing by Lloyd's and load the rocking chair into the back of the trailer before I showed up at her place. I didn't know what was happening between us, but I didn't want it to end.

Word had gotten around to Mama Mae that I was seeing someone, and she insisted I bring Roxy over to meet her. Since Roxy was the one who made it possible to get the rocker in time for Mama Mae's special day, I thought it would be nice for her to come with me when I dropped it off.

"Hey." She answered the door ready to go.

"I missed you this week." With one arm behind her back, I pulled her into me and captured the lips I'd been dreaming about since Sunday.

"I missed you too." She kissed me back, but it felt different.

"Everything okay?" I leaned down and looked her straight in the eyes.

Nodding, she pulled the door closed and took my hand. "Where are the horses? I thought we were riding tonight."

"I've got a surprise. Lloyd called this afternoon and said the rocking chair was ready. We can squeeze in one more ride

tomorrow night or Saturday before the party. I thought you might want to go with me when I give it to her.”

“You want me to meet Mama Mae?”

“Actually, she wants to meet you. She made me promise to bring you over.” Roxy hadn’t reacted the way I expected. Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea. “We don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

“I’d love to meet her.”

“Great.” I opened the door to the truck and waited for Roxy to get settled inside before rounding the back and sliding in behind the wheel. “We’ll probably only need to stay for a few minutes. If you still want to get out for a ride, we can run by the ranch after. Sound good?”

“Sure.” Roxy nodded, but something was off. Her smile didn’t shine as bright as it had last week, and her eyes didn’t hold the same sparkle. We needed to talk about what the future held after the parade on Sunday, but it could wait. My top priority was getting the two women I cared about most together.

We pulled into Mama Mae’s long drive and my stomach dropped. She must have invited a dozen of my foster brothers to come over. Trucks and cars lined the drive. I reached for Roxy’s hand and gave it a squeeze.

“Is she having a party?” Even in the dim light from the console, I could make out the worried look.

“Probably just a few of my brothers.” I’d asked Owen to stop by since he lived just up the road and could help me unload the rocker. No telling who the rest of the vehicles belonged to. I recognized Brody’s truck and maybe Kane’s bike, but the rest were unfamiliar. Not a great sign.

Owen stepped out onto the porch as I got out of the truck. “Hey, brother. I didn’t think you’d ever get here.”

I clapped him on the back as we gave each other a half hug. Roxy had already climbed down out of the truck and walked over to stand next to me. “Owen, this is my girlfriend, Roxy.”

“Girlfriend, huh?” Owen held out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Roxy. ‘Girlfriend’ is one word I never thought I’d hear coming out of this guy’s mouth.”

She looked so damn pretty as a deep shade of pink swept over her cheeks and she shook my brother’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you, too.”

“Mama Mae’s in the kitchen. Should we get the rocker into the family room before she realizes you’re here?” Owen asked.

Made sense to me. The two of us unloaded the heavy, hand-carved rocking chair and carried it up the few stairs onto the porch. Roxy held the front door open so we could maneuver it into the family room. Once we crossed the threshold, a few of the other guys cleared away the hand-me-down recliner she’d been using since her rocker was attacked.

“Why’d it get so quiet out there?” Mama Mae called out from the kitchen. “Y’all know I get suspicious when the noise dies down.”

“Come on out and see,” I said as I looped the big red bow Lloyd Junior gave me over the arm of the chair.

“Jake, you’re here. How come nobody told me?” She came down the hall, wiping her hands on her apron. Her eyes lit up when she saw me, and a huge smile spread across her lips as she turned to look at Roxy. “Come here and give me some sugar, son.”

I pulled her into a warm hug then introduced her and my brothers to Roxy. Everyone always said Mama Mae had never met a stranger. She welcomed Roxy like an old friend, and I was glad to see the two of them hit it off just like I knew they would.

“What’s with the chair?” One of the younger guys came down the stairs and squinted across the room at the rocking chair.

Mama Mae nudged me to the side so she could see around me. “Good gravy, Jake. What have you done?”

“Happy Anniversary, Mama Mae. I know it’s not exactly the same as it was when your husband gave it to you on your wedding day, but—”

“Where did you get the money to pay for something like that?” Mama Mae wagged her finger in front of my face while her eyes filled with tears. “You should be saving for that ranch you want to buy, not wasting your hard-earned money on an old woman like me.”

“I’m not wasting a dime.” I took her hands and led her over to the chair. “No matter how long I live, I’ll never be able to repay you for the love you’ve shown me and all of my brothers.”

“Pshaw. Now you’ve done it. You’ve gone and made me cry, and I’ve got chicken and noodles bubbling away on the stovetop.”

“I’ll stir the noodles.” Owen headed to the kitchen.

“Try it out,” I urged.

“I suppose it won’t hurt to sit down for a second.” She eased into the chair, her eyes closing as she leaned back. “I was barely eighteen years old when we got married. Everyone said we were too young to make a big decision like that, but we knew we were doing the right thing. When you love someone as much as we loved each other, there’s really no decision to make. Your heart makes it for you.”

“You have a beautiful family, Mama Mae.” Roxy put her hand on top of my foster mom’s.

Mama Mae opened her eyes. “Indeed, I do. Let’s see about serving up the chicken and noodles. Care to help me in the kitchen, hon?”

“I’d love to.” Roxy glanced up at me before following Mama Mae back toward the kitchen. Watching her go, I knew exactly what Mama Mae meant. My heart had fallen for Roxy the day we met. There was no taking it back now.

“I know that look,” Owen said as he returned to the family room. “You’re a goner, aren’t you?”

“What are you talking about?” I pulled the bow off the chair and flung it over the top of Owen’s head. It settled around his shoulders, though there was only one person who’d want him for a gift—Kira—the woman who’d won him on the bachelor auction block for that fundraiser back when Mama Mae retired.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. There are fucking hearts floating out of your eyes every time you even look at her.” He landed a playful punch on my shoulder. “You stick with Roxy Swisher and you won’t need your own place. Her dad would probably set you up as a V.P. of something or other in the family business.”

“That’s not why we’re together.” I wouldn’t betray her and tell anyone she’d hired me to help her get back up in the saddle. It didn’t even matter to me that’s how we met. What mattered was that we were together, and I was prepared to do anything to keep it that way.

“Dinner’s ready. Come on, y’all. It’s time to eat.” Mama Mae rang the dinner bell that had been calling her boys to the table for decades.

I joined my brothers—the ones I’d lived with at Mama Mae’s and the ones who’d taken our places and lived in the big house in the country now. We were all part of the same big family.

Roxy sat next to me as everyone dug into their dinner. We passed a big bowl of salad around the table, along with homemade yeast rolls fresh from the oven. It was impossible to keep track of all the conversations. Jokes flew, laughter filled the air, and a roll sailed from one end of the table to the other. Mama Mae had gone soft since I’d lived with her. A stunt like that would have earned me an hour of time out and forfeiting the rest of my dinner.

After we’d enjoyed apple crumble with cinnamon ice cream on top, Mama Mae walked us to the door. “Thanks so much for having my chair repaired.”

“You’re welcome.” I kissed her cheek. The scent of baby powder tugged at faded memories of her hugging me every

night before tucking me into bed. I'd felt safe in this house. I'd also felt loved. That's the feeling I wanted to create for the family I hoped to start someday. Hopefully, with someone like Roxy.

"Thank you for dinner. It was lovely meeting you." Roxy hugged my foster mother then twined her fingers with mine.

"You're always welcome here, hon. If you don't have plans for Christmas Eve, I'll be serving enough ham and potatoes to feed a small country," Mama Mae said.

"You know I'll be here, but I'll have to see about Roxy." We said our final goodbyes, then I led Roxy back down the drive where I'd parked my truck.

"You have an amazing family," Roxy said as I pulled out of the drive. "I felt more love in that house full of strangers than I ever have in the home I grew up in."

"It doesn't have to be that way, sugar." I glanced over, wondering if the same sort of feelings had been stirring in her chest. I'd never been good at expressing my emotions, but for Roxy I was willing to try. I wiped my clammy palm against my jeans as I worked up the courage to tell her how I felt about her.

"We need to talk about Saturday." She wrapped her arms around her middle and stared straight ahead.

"What about Saturday? Do I need to wear a suit? If so, I'll see if Owen has one I can borrow. Brody might be a better bet."

"No, you don't need to wear a suit." Her voice had gone soft. Something was bothering her. "It's about the lies we've been telling our family and friends. It's not fair to lead them on anymore. We need to break up."

"Break up?" I took my foot off the gas and swerved onto the shoulder.

"How long do you think we can keep this up? You did what I hired you to do. I can ride in the parade now." Her voice cracked, but she didn't look at me.

“You’re saying you don’t need me anymore, so you’re done with me.” Damn, the truth hurt. Especially when she said it so matter of fact.

“It’s not like that, Jake.”

“Then what’s it like? Tell me all about it.” I couldn’t keep the anger from leeching into my tone. I’d been so stupid to think a woman like Roxy would want to continue slumming with a guy like me.

“Just take me home, please.”

“You’re the queen of Christmas. Your wish is my command.” I pulled back onto the road and punched the gas, already regretting the way I lashed out. It was my fault for letting myself make more out of our time together. She’d been upfront about what she wanted. I was the one who’d let my feelings get in the way—a mistake I wouldn’t make again.

ROXY

With the way we left things on Thursday, I wasn't sure if Jake would even show up for the party. So, when he walked through the front door of the country club in a dark gray suit and candy cane striped tie, I excused myself from the conversation I was having with a couple of my dad's colleagues and rushed over to greet him.

"You look especially scrumptious tonight," I whispered as I linked my arm with his. "Thank you for coming."

"I'm a man of my word. I said I'd see this through to the end, and I will." A muscle ticked along his jaw. His body felt full of tension.

I hadn't meant for things to end like this, but it was probably for the best. We were from two different worlds. Two people who'd joined together for a brief period of time. What happened between us was never meant to last. I was being sent away to work for the family business up in Oklahoma City, and Jake belonged here in Broken Bend. He'd told me himself that he dreamed of buying his own place and building a ranch of his own. He'd never build a future with a woman who could barely ride a horse. It just wasn't meant to be.

"Can I introduce you to my parents?" I asked. "My dad might be a good contact to have when you start your own ranch."

"You think I agreed to work with you so I could add your dad's phone number to my contact list?" Jake flinched.

“No, I’m just saying it might not hurt to have him on your side if you ever need him.” I hated being responsible for the hurt in his eyes, but I could at least leave him with something besides the money I’d paid him. “He’s got connections.”

“I bet your dad will be thrilled to help out the guy who broke his daughter’s heart.”

My lungs were caught in a vise. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t draw in a full breath. “Jake, please.”

“Please, what?”

I pulled myself together. “This can go either way. I thought it would be easier if you ended things, but if you’d rather I break up with you—”

“So, then he’ll feel sorry for me for being a loser?” He shook his head.

“Then what do you want to do?” We’d spent too much time in the foyer and needed to get into the party. My brother had already told our parents I was bringing my boyfriend tonight. Whether Jake wanted to meet them or not, at least he could get a minute of face time with my dad. It might go a long way somewhere down the road.

“Is this the man responsible for you not showing up for family dinner twice in the past month?” My dad’s voice came from behind me. The blood drained from my face. This wasn’t how I wanted them to meet. Not with Jake so angry with me that he couldn’t see straight.

“Mr. Swisher, it’s nice to meet you.” Jake dragged his gaze from me to face my father.

My dad clasped his outstretched hand. “And you are?”

“Jake Robinson. He works on the Calhoun Ranch,” I said.

“Let the man speak for himself, Roxanne. That’s quite a grip you’ve got there. Feels like you must spend a lot of time fixing fences.” My dad smiled, but it was the one he offered to people he considered beneath him.

“Yes, sir. I know how to get the job done.” Jake’s jaw clenched as he let his hand fall back to his side.

“How is it the two of you met? Roxanne’s only been back in town for a few weeks between jobs, and I know she hasn’t been spending time at the Calhoun Ranch.” Dad tilted his head, studying Jake with eyes that never missed a thing.

“I told you, we met in town. Jake was standing behind me in line when I stopped in to order those two chairs you wanted for your office. I knocked my purse off the counter, and it spilled everywhere. He was kind enough to help me pick up my things, then asked if I wanted to grab a cup of coffee.” I shot a glance at Jake, hoping I’d stuck close enough to the truth that he wouldn’t contradict me.

“You did tell me that, sweetie. I’m just wondering what a ranch hand was doing in a store where the furniture costs more than his monthly paycheck.”

“Dad, don’t.” I reached for his arm, pleading for him to not belittle my guest.

He clasped Jake on the shoulder. “I see a few of my business associates I haven’t welcomed yet. Make sure you try the lobster tails. We had them flown in from Maine this morning.”

My dad stalked away, leaving the two of us standing in the plush entryway of a club I’d been coming to since I was a kid.

“I’m sorry. That was uncalled for. He’s just stressed about the party and wanting to make sure everyone is having a good time.” My excuse sounded as flimsy as a house of cards, even to my own ears.

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s where it’s coming from.” I wouldn’t have blamed Jake for walking out the door and never looking back, but he crooked his elbow and arched his brows. “Let’s get this over with, but I want to make one thing clear. You’re going to have to cut me loose, Roxy because the last thing I want to do is put an end to what’s started between us. The woman I’ve gotten to know is willing to face her fears and stand up for herself. I don’t know who you are when you’re around your father. You say you don’t want to go to Oklahoma, then don’t. What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

The threat of tears prickled my eyes. “I can’t.”

“You’re right, then. I don’t know you at all. Let’s go. This is your show, sugar. I’ll follow your lead.”

His willingness to see our charade through to the end proved what kind of man he was. My heart broke apart, piece by piece, with every step we took into the dining room. I pasted on a smile and introduced Jake to my mom and my sister. Stetson and Justin came over to shake his hand and I wondered what it would be like if we didn’t break up, if I stood up to my dad and refused to go to Oklahoma.

I’d hoped that when he saw me riding again, Dad would change his mind and let me stay on the ranch. I wanted to build something that would last and work alongside my family. But based on his reaction to Jake, if we stayed together, my dad would cut me off. Maybe not at first, but he’d never give his blessing for me to marry a man he considered so far beneath me.

My head spun trying to sort out my options, and two glasses of champagne didn’t help. Jake stayed by my side through dinner though I noticed he didn’t touch the lobster.

Once the dishes had been cleared and dessert was being served, he leaned over and whispered against my ear. “You’re running out of time, sugar.”

Nodding, I reached for my water. My mouth was so dry that swallowing felt like chugging down sandpaper.

“Is everything okay, Roxanne?” Dad leaned forward.

“I think I just need some fresh air.” Pushing back from the table, I lost my balance.

Jake jumped up and steadied me. “I’ll go with you.”

The two of us wound through the maze of tables toward the front of the club. As we passed by unfamiliar faces, I realized how many people I didn’t know. The invitations went out to people my father handpicked, people he wanted to impress or colleagues he wanted to strengthen his business relationship with. The dinner at Mama Mae’s house stood out

in a stark contrast. She'd filled her table with the people she loved—the ones who meant the most to her.

Jake pushed the front door open, and we stepped out into the cool night air. He shrugged off his jacket and draped it over my shoulders.

I looked up at him. Thousands of twinkle lights sparkled behind him.

“So, this is it. What are you going to tell your family, sugar? Don't make me sound like a complete dick, okay?” His chest rose as he drew in a deep breath. The chest I'd spent hours pressed up against.

I couldn't do it. Staring into his eyes, I saw the love I wanted—a love that came without strings attached. A love that I could feel deep down in my bones. He didn't love me because of my last name or for what I could do for him. He loved me for who I was. I'd be a complete fool to let him go.

“I'm sorry I put you through this, but I don't want to break up. I love you, Jake. I don't want to move to Oklahoma, and I don't want to leave you.”

His hands came up to cup my cheeks, his thumb brushing along my jawline. “You mean it, sugar? Choosing me might mean turning your back on your family, and I can't ask you to do that.”

“You're not asking. I've felt more love over the past few weeks with you than I have in twenty-seven years with them. It'll be rough, but you're worth it. The life we'll build together will be worth it.”

He rested his forehead against mine. “I love you too, Roxy. I'm pretty sure I fell for you the second you bent over in Lloyd's shop. You've had my heart on a string ever since.”

“Will you take me home now? I don't want to go back inside. I'm ready to live my life on my own terms and that doesn't include sucking up to a bunch of my dad's friends.”

“Text your mom so your family knows you're safe. Tell them you'll see them at the parade tomorrow.”

“We don’t have to go to the parade. I don’t need to prove anything to my dad anymore.” I slid my hand down his arm to twine our fingers together.

“You’re right, sugar. You don’t have anything to prove to your dad, but I want to be by your side when you prove to yourself that you can do what you set out to do. Will you ride next to me tomorrow?”

“Yes.” I wrapped my arms around his neck as he pressed his lips to mine. The kiss held so much promise—promise of unconditional love, promise of the future, promise of a life that would be full of memories we’d make together.

“Now, let’s get you out of that gorgeous dress. I’ve been walking around with a hard-on all night.” Jake gave the ticket to the valet, and I squeezed my legs together, trying to put a damper on the heat building in my core as we waited for his truck to be brought around.

I’d made my choice, and no matter what happened, I wasn’t going back.

JAKE

J handed Roxy a paper cup full of hot cocoa. She looked adorable in her red and white knit cap. While we'd been tangled up in her soft-as-silk sheets last night, Mother Nature had defied the odds and covered our little town with a blanket of snow just in time for the Christmas parade. Most of it would melt away by noon, but for a brief period, it had turned Broken Bend into a picturesque holiday setting.

"Was there a long line?" Roxy asked. She'd stayed with the horses while I'd gone in search of something to warm us up.

"Not too bad. I saw your brothers on my way back. You're right. Your whole family is saddling up and getting ready to ride. Are you sure you don't want to join them?" As much as I loved her and wanted her to be mine, I didn't want her to regret her decision.

"No regrets. Like Mama Mae said, when you love someone as much as I love you, there's no decision to be made. Your heart makes it for you." She rose to her tiptoes and planted a chocolate-scented kiss on my cheek.

"I love you, Roxy Swisher."

"I love you, too. Were you able to get us a spot in the line-up?"

I'd been prepared to crash the parade so Roxy could have her moment, but thanks to the Calhoun family, we'd been invited to ride with them. "Yep. We're official."

“Good. I’d hate to start off our future together by being banned from the Christmas parade.” Her lips curved into a teasing grin.

“Be a good girl and drink your cocoa, sugar. I’ll get the horses saddled up so you can prove to yourself how far you’ve come.”

“Mmm. Say that again?” Heat simmered in her eyes. My body responded by sending a rush of blood straight to my crotch.

“What part? That I’ll get the horses saddled?” I didn’t realize that would be her idea of a turn-on, but there was so much we still had to learn about each other. I was looking forward to every single second.

“No, silly. The good girl part.” She pressed against me, molding her soft curves to my chest. “I kind of like you calling me that.”

A deep laugh bubbled up through my chest. “First, we ride. You’ll get your ‘good girls’ after we’re done. Got it?”

“You’re no fun.” She let out an overly dramatic sigh.

I backed her up against the horse trailer and pressed my hard-on into her belly. “Careful, sugar. Talk like that is going to get you thrown over my shoulder and ravaged inside the cab of my truck.”

“Promises, promises.” She kissed the corner of my mouth. “At least I know what’s waiting for me after I make it through the parade. Talk about an appealing incentive.”

This woman was going to be the death of me if I wasn’t careful. She’d already ensured I’d be extremely uncomfortable sitting in the saddle for the next two hours. I’d take it, though. My future had started looking bright again thanks to Roxy.

“Come on, let’s get saddled up and into position. We don’t want to miss our start.” I held out my hand, and we walked over to where we’d tied up Trixie and my regular mount. It only took a few minutes to saddle them and lead them over to the group from the Calhoun Ranch.

Roxy swung herself up in the saddle. With her head held high, she scanned the groups ahead of us. I could tell the moment she found her family. Her lips turned down and the light in her eyes dimmed. I could also tell the moment her dad found her. He wheeled his horse around and made a beeline straight toward us. I had my horse sidestep to put me closer to Roxy and braced myself for the anger flashing in his eyes.

Mr. Swisher smiled as he lowered his voice and shot daggers at his daughter. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m riding in the parade.” Roxy held her ground, meeting his dark look with one of her own.

“Get down before you make a fool out of yourself.” And out of him. He didn’t say it out loud, but clearly that’s what he meant.

I was ready to step in and stand up for the woman I loved, but only if Roxy needed me. She was more than capable of taking on her father. Always had been, she’d just lost the confidence to do it somewhere along the way.

“I’m going to ride in the parade. Jake’s been helping me.” She turned her gaze on me. My chest warmed and my heart swelled. I was so fucking proud of her.

“Then you’ll ride with us. What the hell are people going to think when they see my daughter riding with the Calhoun Ranch?” He turned his horse around to head back to where his wife waited for him. “Come on, Roxy. Let’s go.”

She shook her head. “I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Does it matter? Either way, I’m not riding with you. From now on, I’m going to live my life on my own terms and that means being with Jake. It also means I’m not going to Oklahoma.” Roxy held her ground, the only sign of the toll it took was the tremble in her hand as she reached out to take mine.

“Don’t you let her do this. You know my daughter deserves a hell of a lot more than what you can offer her.” He turned his venomous sneer toward me.

“I’m not letting her do anything. Roxy makes her own choices. I’m just honored she thinks I’m worthy of her love, and I’m going to do everything possible to give her the kind of life she wants. With all due respect sir, you’re the one who’s forcing her hand. All she wants is to be loved for who she is, not for benefitting your image.”

“Damn you, Robinson.” He shook his head and returned to his place in the lineup.

“Are you okay, sugar?” I pulled off my glove and wiped away the tears on her cheek.

“Yes. For the first time in my life, I really am.”

The parade kicked off and Roxy found her smile. We waved to the kids lining the route and tossed candy canes and sprigs of mistletoe into the crowd. When we reached the end of the route, I put my hands on her waist and lifted her out of the saddle.

“You looked amazing up there. How does it feel to have conquered your fear?” If the look on her face was any indication, my girl was flying high after slaying her demons. I only wished her family was there to congratulate her, too.

“It feels pretty damn good.” She flung her arms around my shoulders and buried her cold nose into my neck. “Thank you, Jake.”

“Yeah, thank you,” Stetson said. He stood behind us along with Justin and Roxy’s mom and sister. “Roxy, I never thought you’d get back up on a horse again. You did it, sis.”

I let her go so her family could surround her. Roxy lifted her head and mouthed “I love you” over her mom’s shoulder. Seeing her get the love and recognition she deserved from her family filled my heart.

“Your dad will come around,” her mom said. “His pride took a hit, but he loves you too much to let there be a rift between you.”

“I hope so.” Roxy wiped at her cheeks again.

“We need to get the horses loaded up and back to the ranch,” Justin said. “Will you come to Christmas dinner?”

“We’ve already got plans, but how about we get together on New Year’s Eve? Assuming you’re building another ridiculous bonfire, I’d love to bring Jake. I think he’d enjoy it.”

Justin nodded. “See you then.”

“Merry Christmas,” Mrs. Swisher said with a final hug. “I’ll work on your dad.”

“Merry Christmas, Mom.” Roxy pulled her sister in for a hug, then the two of us were left alone with the horses. “We’d probably better get these two loaded up and back to the stables so we can head over to Mama Mae’s for Christmas Eve dinner, right?”

I’d been waiting for the right moment to share my surprise. “We’re not taking them back to the stables at the ranch.”

“We’re not?”

I shook my head. “Trixie is yours. I used the money you paid me for lessons to buy her for you. If you’re going to stay in Texas, you’re going to need a horse you can trust.”

“But I don’t even have anywhere to live, much less somewhere to keep a horse.” Roxy cupped my cheeks. “Unless you’ve got that figured out too.”

“I do.” I’d been biding my time working for the Calhouns, telling myself I’d get around to buying that parcel of land someday, but I hadn’t had much of an incentive until I met Roxy. “I took out a loan from my brother Grant and made a cash offer on the ranch next to Owen’s. We’ll close in a couple of weeks, but since it’s empty now, the sellers agreed to rent it to me until I get the title. There’s a barn and a spring-fed pond along with some riding trails that will be perfect for continuing to work with Trixie.”

“You did all of that? For me?”

“For us, sugar. I can’t imagine a life without you. Do you think you could be happy there? It’s not much, but we can

build it together.”

“Yes. Whatever you’re asking, the answer is yes.” She stared into my eyes, the honesty in her baby blues telling me everything I needed to know. “My heart chose you the first time I saw you, and I’ll continue choosing you as long as you’ll have me.”

“Is forever long enough?”

She smiled and nodded as I slanted my mouth over hers. My heart had chosen her, too. Maybe before we’d even met. She was the one I’d been waiting for, and I’d make sure she never doubted my love for her as long as we lived.

EPILOGUE

ROXY

“Tell Grandpa to hurry up. Dinner’s going to be cold by the time he gets inside and washes up.” I sent my five-year-old son out to the backyard to chastise my dad. He’d given the kids a miniature pony for Christmas. Just what we needed... another horse to feed. I already had my hands full with the two mares I’d begged Jake to pick up at the auction. They were both in bad shape, but I couldn’t bear to see them go to someone who’d put them down just because life had been a little hard on them.

Luckily, our little ranch was in the black. Jake had spent the past five years putting in the hours to make sure of that. Instead of raising Longhorns, Angus or Herefords, he’d focused on building our herd with Wagyu cattle. That meant we could focus more on quality than quantity. He’d even talked to my dad about sectioning off a couple hundred acres to expand our operation. Now that the two of them had mended fences, they realized they had a lot in common when it came to ranching.

My dad wiped his boots on the mat by the back door as he entered the kitchen with my three-year-old in his arms. Both of my brothers followed, along with their kids. If anyone in the family had any more babies, we’d have to add onto our house again if we wanted to host another Christmas dinner.

“Can I ride Rudolph again after dinner?” My five-year-old asked.

“If Grandpa promises to make sure you have on a helmet,” I said. Dad thought helmets were for sissies, but I wasn’t taking any chances with my kids.

“Your house, your rules,” Dad said. Mom had been right. It hadn’t taken much time at all for Dad to come around. He’d realized he’d been putting way too much emphasis on the things that he thought would make everyone happy instead of worrying about making sure everyone felt loved. I blamed it on the way he was raised and was grateful he’d been willing and able to change his ways.

“Are you almost done carving the bird?” I turned toward Jake.

“Just wrapping up now.” He set down the electric knife and carried the overflowing platter into the dining room.

Everyone I loved sat around the table. Mama Mae was on Jake’s right. She couldn’t get enough of her grandkids and spoiled them every chance she got. My mom and dad were sandwiched between my brothers. Their wives and kids sat next to them, some of them in folding chairs we’d had to borrow, so we had enough seating for everyone. My sister was expecting her first, and her husband filled her wineglass with sparkling apple juice.

Jake sat at the head of the table, just as handsome as the day we met. His hair had started turning gray at the temples. Raising three kids and hundreds of farm animals could do that to a man.

He reached for my hand and held his glass up to offer a toast. “To family. The one we were born into, the one we chose, and the one we made along the way.”

“To family.” A chorus of voices and the sound of glasses clinking together filled my lower lids with tears.

“What’s wrong, sugar?” Jake leaned over, his nose nudging into my hair.

I shook my head. “Nothing’s wrong. Everything is so right.”

He chuckled, his hand still gripping mine. “You’re the reason it all works, Roxy. Without you, none of us would be here today.”

“That’s not true. You’re the one who holds us all together. Without your faith in me, I never would have been brave enough to stand up for myself.”

“Then to us.” Jake tapped his glass against mine.

“To us,” I agreed.

I took a sip of wine while I held his gaze. My life hadn’t turned out how I’d imagined it would and thank goodness for that. Christmas was a time to count my blessings and thanks to Jake and the life we’d built together, I had so much to be grateful for.

But most of all, I’d always be thankful my heart had chosen him even before I realized he was the man I needed. He was my everything, and because of his love, my life was fuller and more wonderful than I ever could have imagined.

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ABOUT EVE LONDON

When Eve London was a girl she wanted to be a trapeze artist. Instead, she grew up to be like most women—a juggler—trying to keep bunches of balls in the air.

Now she's a *USA Today* Bestselling Author who spends her days writing about the kind of men she likes – sexy, shameless, and just a little bit sarcastic.

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