

A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

the  
LAST SINGLE  
COWBOY



JAIMIE CASEY

# THE LAST SINGLE COWBOY

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*Ain't love grand?*

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## Acknowledgments

# BLURB

*Is my life a Hallmark movie? Nope.*

I quit (okay, maybe got fired from) my corporate job in New York City and headed out to Montana to visit my best friend, Pippa, in Paradise Valley. It's not exactly my number-one vacation spot, but even I have to admit that it's quite picturesque.

Then I met Jack Marley. And when I say met, I mean he almost ran me off the road in his big, red pickup truck. Granted, I may have been looking at my GPS, trying to find my destination, but still, he didn't have to be so rude.

I'm still fuming when I arrive at Pippa's ranch. But my day is only about to get worse. Because guess who pulls up right behind me?

Jack Marley himself. Turns out he's Pippa's boyfriend's best friend. And the local host for my stay. What is this nightmare? I have to live with him now?

Jack thinks he's the hottest cowboy in Montana. He's super proud of the fact that he's a confirmed bachelor. I let him know that I doubt he's single by choice, which I don't really believe. I will never admit it to him, but he is kinda cute. I cannot stand him, but his smile does make my heart flutter. Sometimes.

Now, he needs my help illustrating a children's book he's creating for his niece and nephew, and I start to see a softer side of him. However, that doesn't mean I'm going to ignore the fact that he is definitely not the man for me.

An enemies-to-lovers, standalone, sweet romance, set in Paradise Valley.



## CHAPTER I

# EMMA

“I could have been in Hawaii right now!” I shouted out to the open sky as I drove down the most desolate highway I’d ever seen. “I could have been sitting on a white sandy beach, sipping a mango margarita, and debating if I wanted crab cakes or calamari as an appetizer.” My mouth watered at the thought of crispy calamari dipped in aioli with a side of marinara. I could almost feel the crunch between my teeth as I bit down.

My stomach grumbled as my brain wized up and dismissed my fantasy. There was no calamari in my near future. Nor any white sandy beaches. Or hunky surfers who wanted to make my first trip to Hawaii a memorable one.

“Get with the program, Emma.” I looked over to the plastic bag full of goodies I’d picked up at the gas station. My options consisted of beef jerky, a Twix bar, and salt-and-vinegar Pringles. I grabbed the Twix bar and ripped it open eagerly. Chocolate had helped fix many things in my life. And I needed it to continue doing its job and fix the anxious and near-bad mood that was fast approaching as I meandered down the almost desolate highway.

The chocolate and sugar high hit me almost immediately as I gazed around and took in my surroundings. I had to admit that Paradise Valley was beautiful. Everything was green and lush, just as Pippa had described it. The scenery and town reminded me of *Little House on the Prairie*, a show my mom had made me watch as a kid because she’d loved it as a child.

“You have arrived,” the GPS announced proudly, and I frowned as there was literally no house, or even a driveway, at the spot. It was all grass. I drove for a minute more and then pulled over at my next right. The GPS screen indicated that I’d passed the ranch, but there hadn’t been anything there. At least now I could see some houses. Maybe Google and its satellites had made a mistake.

The tan-gold Honda CRV that I’d rented made its way down the small, bumpy road, and I held onto the steering wheel tightly. It had been several years since I’d last driven a car, and while I wasn’t a beginner, it felt nerve-wracking to be driving in the middle of nowhere on roads that hadn’t been professionally paved.

Montana was beautiful, but I missed the skyscrapers of New York City. It wasn’t that I didn’t like nature, but I was a city girl through and through. I felt like I was in the middle of a *Yellowstone* episode and was just waiting for John Dutton to ride up and tell me to get off his land. That would make my time here worth it. I loved Kevin Costner, and even though I knew *Yellowstone* was just a TV show, a girl could still dream. Maybe I’d even score a date with him. Sure, he was old enough to be my dad, but I didn’t care. Not that I would admit that to anyone. I didn’t want grandpas around the world thinking they could score a date with me. No thanks!

I knew that my best friend, Pippa, loved it here, but I wondered if she would adore it as much if she didn’t love her new boyfriend, TJ. She, like me, had lived her entire life in New York City and hadn’t even been here for a month. Part of me was ready to pack her in my suitcase and make her go back to the city with me.

I hadn’t told Pippa of my plan because I didn’t want to rain on her parade, but I wanted to check out this TJ for myself. If I didn’t like him, I would do everything in my power to make sure that Pippa left. I was going to take action. I wasn’t going to let any bad vibes go like I had with her ex, Stephan. Stephan had been one of the most arrogant, egotistical men I’d ever met in my life. If you looked in the dictionary for “jerk,” his face was likely there. And while I’d made it clear to Pippa that

I didn't think he was good enough for her, I hadn't done anything drastic to try and stop the relationship. I was opinionated, but I wasn't totally overbearing.

I was so thankful when she had called the engagement off. What I didn't like was how she was now talking about staying here instead of coming back home. What would she possibly do in Montana? She wasn't a get-back-to-nature, granola-eating girl, and neither was I. I knew I should have told her to stop watching all those Hallmark movies the year before. They'd obviously indoctrinated her into thinking small-town living was amazing. She probably idealized living in a small community now.

"You have arrived," the GPS announced again, and I looked to the right and saw a tall tree and some wildflowers.

"There is nothing here." I banged my fists against the steering wheel. I wanted to throw my phone out the window, but I knew that would only make my situation more dire. I grabbed it to try and reenter the address when I noticed that there were no bars. My phone had lost service, and I had no idea where I was. Tears simmered in my eyes as I took a deep breath. Everything in my life was going wrong.

I was lost, and I was still in shock that I'd been unceremoniously fired from my job just a few days previously.

"I gave them my life." I squeezed the steering wheel as I thought about all the hours I'd put in at the tech firm. And how they'd gotten rid of me when I'd complained about their unethical practices. It was starting to feel like the universe was against me.

"Where am I?" The words spilled out of my mouth tearfully. The stress from the last week was threatening to explode inside of me as my anxiety grew. I wanted to scream and shout. Every piece of anger, hurt, and fear that dwelled inside of me was ready to burst out of me as I drove further into the middle of nowhere.

I was now driving alongside a river, and there was a cute cottage sitting about fifty feet away. A woman with a large,

wide-brimmed straw hat was kneeling on the ground with a small shovel in her hand. She was digging, and I could see a small bundle of green-leafed vegetables on a red-and-white blanket. I slowed down as I reached her and waited for her to look up at me. I'd waited about thirty seconds before I realized that she wasn't paying any attention to me.

"Hello?" I called out, hoping to garner her attention. I was happy to see another human being, and I was surprised that she hadn't already jumped up and asked me what I was doing here. Wasn't she surprised to see a foreign car on her land?

"Hello, dear." She looked up at me, a questioning expression on her face as she straightened. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so." I put the car into park and jumped out. The ground was uneven, and I realized that maybe I shouldn't have worn heels to the countryside. "My best friend just moved... I mean, she's visiting the area. She's staying at a ranch near here, and I can't seem to find it."

"Oh?" She beamed at me. "Are you friends with Pippa Chase, the bride that came from New York City to visit TJ?" She took her hat off and brushed her wispy blonde hair away from her face. I stared at her in amazement as I nodded slowly. Was this lady a psychic? A friend of Lady Cleo, the famous TV psychic that had graced the TV for so many years? Though I was pretty confident Cleo had turned out to be a fraud.

"I am." How did she know about Pippa? I looked around nervously. Was there anyone else around? What if I'd happened upon the ranch of a serial killer? I wondered if I could run back to the car and gun it out of there before her accomplice arrived. I'd watched far too many episodes of *Big Sky* and *Criminal Minds* the past few days.

"Oh dear, you look nervous." The perceptive lady offered me a warm smile. "I'm Daisy Lassiter. I run the local flower shop on Main Street."

"Uhm, okay." Was she famous? Was there a famous flower TV show that she was the host of? Why else would that information be relevant to me? Pippa had told me that there were some unique characters in Paradise Valley. That hadn't

meant much to me as I'd met several unique characters in NYC.

"My shop is next to the vet's office," she continued. "Close to Mindy's Cupcakes."

"That's very nice." I smiled at her and tried to hide the impatience from my voice. What did any of this have to do with the price of tea?

"Mindy Messina...she's good friends with TJ." Daisy laughed. "Oh, I can see that I'm confusing you." She ran her fingers through her hair again and placed her hat back on her head. "I go to her coffee shop a lot, and well, this is a small town. We all like to partake in a little gossip, and Pippa has been the talk around town recently, showing up as she did in a wedding dress."

"Oh, I see." I joined in with her laughter. "Sorry, I forget that everything operates differently in small towns. Of course, you must have heard of her. The infamous woman that showed up in her wedding dress at a ranch."

"Yes." Daisy brushed a bug off her leg and stomped her feet on the ground. "I'm afraid TJ's ranch isn't back here. You have to go back to the main road and make a right. Continue driving for a couple of minutes, then you'll see a road on the left. Not the first road, but the second. Turn down there, and go down the driveway until you see a red barn. That's how you'll know you're at the right place."

"Hmm." My brain processed her directions, and I hoped I would remember what she'd said. At least she hadn't said something like, "When you see the five sunflowers, take the easternmost route until you get to a fork in the road, and then go south." Then I would have been well and truly lost. "I guess the GPS was a little bit off, then."

"Oh yes, GPS isn't accurate in these parts. It's not hard to miss." She smiled warmly. "You'll find it."

"Thanks, I'll try again." I made my way back to the SUV somewhat reluctantly. I'd kinda hoped she'd offer to drive me over there to help ensure that I didn't get lost. Not that I would

ask her, though. That would be pathetic, and I was not pathetic. I was smart. And capable. An independent woman living her best life. Kinda.

“Have a nice day. It was nice meeting you...” Daisy’s voice trailed off as she waited for me to give her my name.

“I’m Emma, Emma Young. Pippa’s best friend in New York.” I ran my fingers through my white-blonde bob and smiled my most grateful smile. “I’ve just come to make sure she’s okay.” My blue jeans felt tight as I jumped back into the SUV. “And enjoy a little vacation.”

“You’ve come to the right place. Nice to meet you, Emma. Hope to see you soon and meet Pippa as well.” Daisy offered me a small little wave. “I hope you enjoy your stay.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” I started the ignition again and waved as I made my way down the path and toward the main road once more. The car bumped around on the road, and I worried that maybe this hadn’t been the best vehicle to get to drive on the backroads of Montana. I should have got a truck with four-wheel drive. The path ahead of me was slightly muddy, and I worried that I was going to sink into the ground and not be able to get out. I pushed my foot down on the gas, and the car moved to the left. My fingers gripped the steering wheel, and I moved the tires back to the right.

“This is not fun.” I groaned as I spied the main road. I hoped the Honda would make it. “I cannot believe Pippa is staying here,” I muttered and then shrieked as a bushy-tailed squirrel went running in front of me. I slowed down and turned to the right before making my way back onto the main road. I looked back to make sure the squirrel was okay as I approached the turnout spot.

My heart was racing as I made a right, and a red pickup truck went speeding past me. I slammed on the brakes and moved the steering wheel to the right, which caused the SUV to go bumping down the rocky shoulder. I sat there in shock, and my jaw dropped as I heard honking from the truck that had almost run me off the road.

“Oh my days.” I took a deep breath as I thanked God that I was okay. That could have been a bad accident. I looked back at the honking truck and narrowed my eyes as I tried to see the driver. A man in a cowboy hat was looking back at me, shaking his head, laughing, and honking; I glared at him.

I was about to get out of my car to go and shout at him when he went speeding down the road without even checking to see if I was okay. I couldn't believe it. The man had practically run me off the road, and he was honking and laughing at me. What a jerk!

I took a deep breath and made my way gingerly to the main road again and kept my eyes peeled for a road on the left.

“Paradise Valley, my foot,” I grumbled, feeling annoyed. “More like Psycho Cowboy Valley.” I passed a road and slowed down to ensure I didn't miss the second road. I saw it a few seconds before I approached and made the left. The road was dirt and surrounded by grass for about twenty seconds. I was about to start cussing when I finally saw the red barn. I was here, and if I wasn't mistaken, Pippa was standing outside with a handsome man next to her. There was also a small, golden dog jumping up and down next to a gray goat.

“You're not in New York anymore, Emma.” I screeched to a stop and jumped out of the SUV. Pippa came running toward me, her long, dark hair bouncing as she moved. The small dog followed behind her, yapping.

“Emma!” Pippa screamed in excitement as she wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tightly. “You made it!” She squeezed me for a few moments and then stepped back and looked me over. Her brown eyes were happy, her cheeks were flushed, and she was dressed like a country bumpkin. I looked behind her and stared at the man who was gazing at her adoringly, his blue eyes full of love. So, this was TJ. I had to admit, he was a good-looking man. Totally country, but not hillbilly or anything. It looked like he had all his teeth and no tobacco in his mouth. I immediately chastised myself for my stereotypical thoughts. I needed to learn to not judge people before I met them.



“I made it.” I nodded and looked her over. “You look happy.” Which was truthful. She looked amazing; her entire face was glowing. She was so much happier here than she’d been in New York, dating that jerk Stephan. I looked around and took a couple of deep breaths. The air was fresh and cool, and there was a fragrant smell of roses or some other flowers in the air. The property was beautiful. Picturesque, even. But it was so different from what I was used to. “This really is the middle of nowhere, isn’t it?”

“I would hope not.” TJ chuckled as he stepped forward and held out his hand. “Hi, I’m TJ.” I took his hand and shook it. His grip was strong and warm, and as his blue eyes dazzled in the sunlight, I couldn’t help but be taken by his charm and good looks.

“So you’re the infamous TJ.” I scrutinized him for a few seconds and grinned. “I see why Pippa fell for you.”

“Emma!” Pippa’s eyes widened, and I could tell she wanted to kill me. TJ’s eyes looked happy. Typical man. They loved it when women gushed about them.

“I need to catch my breath.” My heart was still racing after my exchange with the guy in the truck. “Some jacka...” I paused as I looked at TJ. I didn’t want him to think that all I did was curse. “Some bad driver pulled out onto the road as I was headed here, and he nearly made me crash.”

“Oh no. Are you okay?” Pippa gasped, her eyes widening as she took a step toward me and grabbed my hand. I felt bad for making her so nervous.

“I’m fine. I still have my life, even though I did drive off the road for a couple of seconds, and some cowboy honked and laughed at me as he drove past in a big, red, Ford pickup truck. Like how country can you be?” I couldn’t stop myself from going off as I recalled the cowboy in the truck. I would never forget the smirk on his face as he’d sat there judging me.

“This is the country,” TJ said with a laugh. “I’m sure it wasn’t done on purpose.”

“I think it was.” I scowled at him, feeling annoyed and hungry. “Stupid cowboy in his stupid truck. He should lose his license.” I shook my head and looked back toward the main road. My heart thudded as I saw the familiar red truck on the main road. “That’s him. Oh my word, he’s following me!” Maybe I hadn’t been so wrong about the serial killers, after all.

“He is? Should we call the police?” Pippa looked over at TJ, who had a bemused expression on his face. “What’s so funny, TJ?” she asked him, concern in her voice as I looked around for a stick. If this psychopath thought he was taking me, he was sorely mistaken.

“Look who it is,” TJ said, pointing to the truck as it came up the driveway. I was barely comprehending what he was saying. I couldn’t believe this guy had followed me.

“Call the police now! That...that wannabe cowboy is following me!” I screamed as he pulled over and stopped. I wasn’t sure what had come over me, but adrenaline took over my body, and I found myself marching over to the truck with my hand up, shaking it at the man. The truck door opened, and the man got out of the truck as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

I hurried over to him, furious. “What are you doing here?” I glared at him and shook my fists. “You nearly killed me.”

“Sorry, what?” He blinked at me, his cowboy hat low on his forehead, covering his eyes. “Do I know you?”

“You just ran me off the road five minutes ago.” I was huffing now. “And then you started laughing.” I could see Pippa and TJ over my shoulder, whispering back and forth, but I was too annoyed to check and see what they were saying. “You could have killed me,” I reiterated, even though I knew I was exaggerating slightly.

“Do you know what killed means?” He took off his tan cowboy hat, and his green eyes shone like glittering emeralds as he stared at me. His dark-blond hair was cropped close to his head, and I ignored the fact that he was handsomer than

Hades. He took a step closer to me. “You were driving like a crazy woman, darting back and forth on the road...so I don’t think you have anyone to blame but yourself.”

“Oh, oh.” I took a deep breath. “You...” I pointed at him, words failing me, as his lips twisted up in a smirk. He was not blaming me, was he? Of all the gaslighting comments to make. “I was not the one to blame. You were.”

“And I honked to get your attention,” he continued. “To ensure you were okay.”

“You were laughing at me.” My eyes narrowed as I gazed at his large, tanned hands. They shifted upward and I took in his muscular arms in his gray shirt. Why were the rudest men always the hottest? “Why are you following me, psycho?”

“Following you?” He tilted his head to the side and blinked slowly. His eyes roved up and down as he looked at me and then settled on my feet. I could see the judgment in his gaze as he stared at my red heels. “Are you a D-list TV star or something? Out here filming a reality TV show?”

“What?” My jaw dropped. “D-list TV star?”

“Sorry, Z list?” He smirked, and I could see his lips twitching. “*Real Housewives of Billings?* Or maybe *Wannabe Housewives of...*” His own laughter cut off his words. I just stared at him. His words were slightly funny, but I was still super mad at him.

“I don’t watch that trash.”

“Neither do I. But I have a sister.” He shrugged. “She watches that crap, and I feel like only reality show star types show up on a ranch in high heels thinking someone would be wasting their time by following them.”

“I am not a reality TV star, thank you very much. Stalker.”

“Now I’m stalking you?” He shook his head, his laughter louder now. “TJ, get over here.”

He knew TJ? My body stilled slightly, and I shook my shoulders and arms out. Of course, he knew TJ. This was small-town Montana. Everyone knew everything about

everyone. Shoot, if Daisy had known all about Pippa without having met her, then, of course, this rude man would know TJ.

“Jack, this is Emma, Pippa’s best friend.” TJ and Pippa hurried over to us with wide smiles. “Emma, this is Jack, my best friend.” He paused and then grinned. “And my brother.”

“Jack.” I blinked and looked over at Pippa. This was the Jack Pippa had told me about? Ugh, so then maybe he wasn’t a stalker or serial killer. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t a psycho. He very much reminded me of a character on *Criminal Minds*. I turned to look at him and tried not to roll my eyes as he bowed slightly.

“Nice to make your acquaintance, madam. I am Jack Marley.”

“Madam?” I blinked at him, not accepting his offered hand. “How old do you think I am?”

“I don’t think it’s polite to guess women’s ages, madam,” he responded, his eyes twinkling. “I find that when women reach a certain age, they don’t really appreciate—”

“How old do you think I am?” I asked again, my voice high and carrying in the wind. I could see TJ trying not to laugh at our interaction. He thought this was funny? I looked back at Jack and the satisfied expression on his face and felt a fire burning in me. He thought he was riling me up, and he was loving it. I was not going to let him think he was getting one over on me. “Actually, don’t answer that. I know that people of your generation treat hip, modern women like me slightly differently.”

“My generation?” He raised an eyebrow as he leaned forward.

“You know...” I smiled sweetly at him. “The Archie Bunker generation.” My words were smooth, and I wanted to high-five myself at his look of surprise. He hadn’t been expecting that, but I was a woman that was quick on my feet. I had to be, living in New York. And I’d grown to be quick with comebacks after working at a tech firm with a bunch of bros

who thought they ran the world. I'd had to deal with huge egos and passive-aggressive, rude comments every single day. Jack would have to be a lot smarter and quicker-witted to take me down.

"Touché." He chuckled, his eyes alight with something like respect as he hooked his thumb into his belt. I noticed that his belt buckle was a huge, oval metal. He really was a cowboy. "So you're Pippa's friend?"

"This is Emma," Pippa said eagerly, stepping forward. "My best friend from New York, the one that's going to be staying with you."

"What?" I screeched, staring at her in shock. My heart raced at her words. What was she talking about? What did she mean that I was staying with him? "What are you talking about, Pippa?"

"Well, I told you that TJ only has a one-bed cabin, right?" She blushed slightly as she nodded in the distance to a small, wooden log cabin. She had mentioned that, but I'd assumed we'd still be able to make it work. I certainly had not intended to have to stay somewhere else. And certainly not with this rude cowboy with laughing green eyes. This could not be happening.

"You did mention something like that, but I thought we'd be sharing a bed and TJ would be on the couch or something." I glanced at TJ, who was rubbing his lower back. He was tall and muscular. There was no way sleeping on a couch would be comfortable for him.

My heart sank as I pondered my options. I could look for a hotel, but that would cost money, and I didn't really want to waste money on accommodations now that I'd lost my job. Especially since it looked like Pippa was staying in Montana, and I didn't want to get a new roommate to replace her. That meant my rent would be going up.

"We can do that." Pippa nodded quickly. "You're my guest. I want you to be comfortable." She looked over at TJ and gave him a look. I saw the disappointment cross his face and then his slight nod of understanding. It was such a loving

look, something I'd never seen her ex-fiancé Stephan give her. A feeling of guilt flooded me. I didn't want to come between Pippa and TJ. They were obviously growing closer, and I certainly didn't want to be a third wheel.

I glanced over to Jack: strong, sturdy, and smug. I could already tell that he was going to get on my nerves. And as his eyes gazed at me, I could tell that he knew he was going to get on my nerves as well. Unless I was deliberately obstinate and decided to get on his nerves instead. That might be fun.

"No, it's fine," I said, the hesitation in my voice apparent to even the dog and goat who were standing nearby. "I can stay elsewhere." I glanced at Jack. "If that's all right with you, of course?"

"It's fine with me. I just hope you don't think I'm following you as I walk around my own ranch. Or think I'm stalking you when I'm in the kitchen making coffee."

"Very funny." I pursed my lips. "As long as you don't run me off of the road again, I think we should be fine. If you need me to give you a driving lesson, I don't mind. Maybe you've forgotten the rules of the road."

"You want to give me driving lessons?" He raised an eyebrow. "Really?" He looked over at TJ, who just chuckled.

"I mean, it seems to me that you don't really know the rules of the road." I shrugged and gave him my most innocent smile. "Need a recap on how to drive and be a courteous driver?"

"Maybe you need a recap on how to drive, period." He smirked. "I guess I can take time out to help you." He looked over at TJ. "You didn't tell me I'd be a driving instructor this week as well."

"I don't need a driving instructor." My voice grew louder, and I could see the look of concern on Pippa's face. I knew I was overreacting a bit. It had just been such a long couple of months between working a job I'd hated and being nervous that Pippa was about to ruin her life by marrying one of the most horrible men I'd ever met. I was so happy when she told

me that she'd ended the engagement, even if that did mean she was now living in Montana. I chewed on my lower lip as I realized that I'd have to make peace with Jack, at least in front of Pippa and TJ, if I wanted to put Pippa at ease.

"Hey, maybe we got off on the wrong foot." I looked over at Jack. "Let's call a truce, seeing as I'll be here a while and you'll be my host." I swallowed hard, the bitter taste of poison in my mouth as Jack smirked at me. The cocky look on his face made me want to take my words back.

"Your gracious host." He nodded his head. "Are you coming back with me tonight?"

"I hope not," nearly popped out of my mouth. I needed at least one night with Pippa to catch up and make sure she was okay.

"No, Emma and I need to catch up tonight." Pippa shook her head and hooked her arm through mine. "I want to show you the ranch and the cabin. Maybe we can all go for a drink at Montana Knights." She looked over at me. "It's the local bar in town. It's so much fun. They have a trivia night, and well... there's something I want to show you on Main Street."

"Oh?" I waited for her to go on. She knew I hated big surprises and secrets. "What is it?"

"You'll see." She giggled, her brown eyes alight with mischief. "I'm so glad you're here, Emma. I think you will love it just as much as I do."

"We'll see." I looked back over my shoulder and saw that Jack was staring at me as I walked away. I quickly turned to look forward and held my head up high as I walked. *Let him watch me walk away*, I thought five seconds before my heel got stuck in some mud and I fell flat on my face.

Flat on my face in cold, wet mud.

Absolute humiliation.

I lay there listening to someone chuckle behind me.

To add another layer of disgust to my life—the small, golden dog came running up to me and started licking my

face. Gross.

Ten seconds later, Pippa gasped and asked if I was okay. Talk about a delayed reaction. Though I wasn't paying attention to the dog or Pippa. All I could focus on was the feeling of Jack's eyes as he stared at me, a huge grin on his face. I brushed my hair out of my face and groaned as I felt the sticky mud clinging to my skin.

Just great.

"Looks like you were determined to get into the mud one way or another, huh?" Jack asked with a small wink as he headed over to me. All I could do was glare at him as I attempted to get off the ground unsuccessfully.

"Need a hand?" He leaned down and grabbed my muddy hand in his strong one and pulled me up. "See, I'm not so bad," he whispered as I tried to regain my balance. My face was bright red, and I knew I couldn't say what I wanted to as I pulled my hand back from his and stepped away.

"We'll see about that," I mumbled as I brushed my muddy fingers on my now-ruined blue jeans. "You might think you're not so bad, but I have a feeling that nothing about you is good."



## CHAPTER 2

# JACK

If fire were to come out of Emma's mouth, eyes, or nostrils, I wouldn't have been surprised. She looked absolutely furious with me as she stood there, all indignant and proper. She put her hands on her hips, and I could tell she was battling between keeping her mouth shut and telling me off again. I found that I enjoyed teasing her, even though I barely knew her. She was gorgeous, with her short, white-blond hair and big, blue eyes. Her rosy cheeks were covered in mud, and her jeans looked like she'd been in a mud-wrestling contest with a hog. And the hog had won. I looked down at her red heels and shook my head.

What had possessed her to wear high heels to a ranch? Not that I was complaining. She was cute. For a city girl.

"Should we all go to dinner at Sweet Eats and then grab a drink at Montana Knights after?" TJ asked as Pippa grabbed Emma's hand and they headed toward the cabin.

"Sounds good to me." I watched as the ladies moved further away and then sidled over to him. "What a day."

"Sounds like you've been enjoying it." TJ grinned as he gazed at me and then back at the two women. "Something cute catch your eye?"

"I've no idea what you're talking about." My eyes bore into his innocent face, and his expression changed to one of mirth and knowing. "Don't give me that look."

"What look?" He shrugged and headed toward the barn. "Want to help me take some hay down to the stables?"

“Fine.” I nodded as I followed along beside him. “She’s going to be a nightmare. So no, she didn’t catch my eye.”

“Who?” He looked over at me, his blue eyes shimmering. “Pippa?”

“Her friend, obviously. Just how long am I supposed to host her, by the way?” I frowned as we walked into the barn. I was used to living alone now and being in my own space. I didn’t mind quiet guests, but I had a feeling Emma was going to make her presence known. In all the worst ways. “She’s obnoxious, TJ.”

“We don’t know that.” He bent down and grabbed a stack of hay and nodded to the corner of the barn. “Will you grab the rake for me?”

“Sure.” I walked over, watching three of the younger goats as they lay next to each other. “How are the goats doing?”

“Annoying everyone, especially Donkey.” He grabbed another bale and headed toward the door. “I’m not sure what we’re going to do with them.” He looked over his shoulder at me. “Don’t suppose you want them back?”

“They were a gift.” I grabbed a bale and followed behind him. “Plus everyone in town is excited for the next goat yoga class.”

“Very funny, Jack.” TJ groaned, and we both chuckled as we remembered the mess of a first class that Pippa had tried to teach. We walked over to the stables in companionable silence as Apple, TJ’s mini goldendoodle, followed beside us. “What happened on the road with Emma?” He looked over at me with a raised eyebrow. “She was out of her mind with worry, you know.”

“Typical city dweller driving in the country not knowing how to drive or where to go.” I shrugged. “I was just driving down the highway when she pulled out without even looking.” I rolled my eyes at the memory. “Then she overcorrected to avoid being hit and rolled down the side. She was fine, though. I stopped to make sure she wasn’t stuck or hurt.” We stopped outside the stables and dropped the hay bales before heading

to Stella's stall. The horse looked up, her doleful brown eyes looking at our hands to see if we had any sugar cubes or carrots.

"I'm sure she'll get over it." TJ stared at me thoughtfully before opening the stall. Every time he looked at me, I saw a younger version of my father. It was uncanny how much TJ resembled him. It was weird knowing that he was my brother. I was glad that it was a secret I no longer had to keep.

"What is it?" I asked, prodding him as he just stood there. "And is it about Emma or Pippa or..." My voice trailed off as he frowned slightly. So it was definitely about something else. He and I hadn't had time to have a proper conversation, just the two of us, in a few days. "Are you mad at me?" I asked, leaning back against the wall. "You can tell me if you are."

"I want to be mad at you." He gripped the rake handle and sighed. "You dropped a bomb on me, Jack, and it was something you'd known about for so long."

"I'd wanted to tell you." I tried to explain the gamut of fears and feelings I'd experienced when debating when the best time was to let him and my dad know about their relationship. A part of me wished I wasn't the one to find out about their bond, but I couldn't take back the past. "But—"

"Hey, you don't have to explain again." He pushed the rake back, leaned it against the wall, and held his hand up. "I can't imagine how you must have felt holding that secret. I'm not mad. I'm processing." There was a light in his eyes that I'd never seen before, and he slapped his hand against my shoulder. "I mean, it's crazy knowing you're my brother. I always wanted a brother."

"So did I." We hugged for a few seconds, and I grabbed his shoulders. "You would tell me if you were mad at me, right? I won't be offended or hurt."

"I'm not upset." He shook his head. "It's weird knowing that we share the same dad, and yeah, I kinda envy you for the happy family you had growing up. And it's crazy knowing Jennie is my sister." His eyes widened. "And I have a niece

and nephew. I never thought I'd have nieces and nephews since I was an only child."

"They already love you." I grinned at him. "Mom and Dad are so excited for Sunday lunch this weekend."

"So am I." He grinned. "I hope Emma enjoys it as well."

"Yeah." I thought about the cute blonde and smiled. "What's her story, anyway? Is she dating someone or what?"

"Why?" He cocked his head to the side. "Are you interested?"

"In a woman from New York? Nope." I shook my head. "No real housewives for me."

"You're too much, bro. I can't believe that you asked her if she was a D-list reality star." He snorted. "You know Pippa loves all those trashy shows. She has me watching them every other night." He made a face. "They are as bad as you think."

"Trust me, I know. Jennie used to watch *The Bachelor* all the time." I rolled my eyes. "Women competing for roses and backstabbing each other for a man. I do not get the fascination with having to be in a relationship."

"You don't miss being in a relationship?" he asked me, his face keen as he stared at me. "Like a long-term thing?"

I groaned at his question. I should have known that, as soon as he started dating Pippa and expressing his feelings, he'd be wondering about me and my relationship status. The fact of the matter was that while I loved women, I loved my solitude more.

I enjoyed going on dates and spending time with women, but I avoided the emotional traps that came with long-term relationships. I'd been burned one too many times. Life was a lot easier when focusing on the family ranch and growing it for the next generation. Even though I didn't have kids, I wanted to pass it on to Sam and Stasia, my niece and nephew, and TJ's kids when he and Pippa had them. I had a feeling they'd be popping out a lot once they got married.

“So you’re not going to answer me?” He folded his arms, his face stern as we stood there. “I’m your big brother, Jack.” He winked, and we both laughed.

“I’m not interested in ever getting married. Or having some woman question my every move.” I shook my head. “I shall be the last single cowboy in Paradise Valley. You wait and see.”

“Well, Brandon, Ethan, and Aiden don’t seem to be in a rush to get into relationships, either.” He pursed his lips. “You guys are dead set on being bachelors for life, eh?”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with that.” I grinned. “You used to be one of the most eligible bachelors in Paradise Valley, too, before Pippa got here.”

“Well, there was no way I was going to stay single with Pippa in my life.” He tapped the wall a couple of times and grinned. “Once love slaps you in the face, there’s no going back.”

“You sound like a sap.” I pretended to vomit. “Not interested in acting a fool over a woman. I’d much rather take a pretty girl to dinner every week and continue on with my life peacefully.” I groaned as I remembered that Emma was going to be staying with me. “Do we know how long Emma is staying?” I asked him casually, not wanting him to think I was getting nervous.

“No idea.”

“Well, Thanksgiving is in two weeks.” I kicked some dirt as I stared at his neutral face. “And then Christmas is coming up.”

“Oh, she’ll be long gone by then.” He nodded. “I think she’s interviewing for jobs right now. I bet she gets a job soon and will be back in New York before we can even blink.”

“Is that a bet you really want to take?” I asked him, suddenly nervous. What had I gotten myself into? Emma obviously didn’t like me that much. We’d gotten off on the wrong foot. And I had to admit I wasn’t making it any better by teasing and taunting her.

“Do you want her to stay longer?” he asked as he winked slowly. “She is awfully pretty.”

“She was wearing heels. On a ranch. Walking in the mud. She might be pretty, but she’s not very practical. Where does she think she is? On the catwalk in Milan?” I thought back to her walking away with Pippa, head held high as she sashayed away right before she fell in the mud. It had been one of the most comical things I’d seen since Pippa had held her goat yoga class. That had filled me with merriment as well. Maybe I was a bit of a jerk after all.

“Be kind, Jack. She’s Pippa’s best friend, and I want her to feel welcome here in Paradise Valley. I don’t want her to go rushing back home and make Pippa feel pressured to go back with her to make her feel better.”

“I thought Pippa was staying here. Didn’t you buy her the playhouse?”

“Yes, I did.” He grinned. “She’s not going to move back there, but I don’t want her going back anytime soon. Not while we’re still in the beginning of our relationship.”

“Worried she’ll go back to that fiancé?” I asked, my eyes wide, thinking about Pippa in her wedding dress the first time I’d met her.

“Nope.” TJ laughed. “I have no fear that she’ll go back to Mr. Snothead.” There was an air of calm and happiness surrounding him, and I could tell that he wasn’t just saying that to make himself feel better. He really wasn’t worried about her going back to her ex.

But then I’d known as soon as I’d seen them together that they were made for each other. Their chemistry was magical. Even my mom had made a comment about how perfect they were for each other after they’d been around for lunch. Sometimes I wondered how I’d feel if I ever met a woman that completely filled my brain and heart, but then I dismissed the thought. It just wasn’t possible. I didn’t allow myself to get that close to anyone to warrant an intimacy like that. I enjoyed my life as it was. I didn’t need a great love. Sometimes I felt

like great loves weren't worth the hype. Not that I would tell TJ that. I didn't want to rain on his parade.

"That's good," I said finally. "Shall we clean out these stalls and then go back to your cabin? Who knows what Emma's up to now?"

"Not me," TJ responded with a sly smile as he looked at me with a wink. "I see you're thinking about what she's doing already?"

"Not thinking about anything." I grunted, walking back to the front of the stable. "The only thing I'm thinking about right now is how many beers I'm going to drink at dinner."

"Sure thing." TJ's chuckles followed me. "If you say so, Jack."



## CHAPTER 3

# EMMA

“So what do you think?” Pippa’s eyes were excited as she offered me a glass of water and an apple. I took them both from her gratefully. I was thirsty and hungry, and even though I was craving a juicy steak and fries, the golden delicious would do for now.

“It’s cute.” I looked around the log cabin, my eyes taking in the cozy feel of the space. It was definitely small, just one large room really. “I can see why—”

“No, I’m not asking about the cabin. Thank you, though. I think it’s cute as well. But there’s no space for my clothes.” She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t think TJ has any idea just how many boxes of stuff I have to send when I go back to New York.”

“He always has the barn to store it in.” I grinned as I bit into the yellow apple. It was crisp and tart, and I enjoyed the sound of the crunch as I took a bite. “What were you talking about, then?” I cocked my head to the side as I observed her. “TJ seems sweet. Very handsome. I can see why you like him.”

“Again, thank you, but that’s not what I was asking you about.” She shook her head and lowered her voice. A wicked smile crossed her face, and I knew what she was going to ask me before she did. Warmth filled me as she prepared to ask her question. Sometimes I wondered if Pippa was naive or if she just asked questions to stir up drama. “What did you think of Jack?” The question lingered in the air, and she giggled

nervously as I took another bite into the apple without answering her.

“Emma?” she prodded.

“I think you know the answer to that.”

“He’s a hottie, right?”

*Crunch.* I took another big bite and chewed it loudly as I imagined a hungry rabbit would do. My eyes shot sparks of annoyance and anger at her. I couldn’t believe she had the gall to ask me about Jack when she’d just witnessed the two of us going at each other like two gladiators in the Colosseum. If we could have ripped each other’s throats out, we would have. At least I would have ripped the smirk off his face if I’d been given the chance.

“Emma?”

“Your question doesn’t deserve an answer.” I gave her the look I normally reserved for rude store assistants that treated me like crap in boutiques when they realized I was window shopping and not about to spend \$5,000 on a handbag or designer suit.

“He’s single, by the way.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” I sipped from my glass, walking over to the small living room at the front of the cabin, and looked out the window. I could see the mountains in the far distance, beckoning for me to visit and paint them. I considered asking Pippa to get TJ to lend me a tent and sleeping bag. I would tell them I’d rather rough it in the wild than sleep at Jack’s house. I looked back around the cabin and stared at the full-size bed at the back. I certainly understood why I couldn’t stay here with Pippa and TJ. There was barely enough room for two people and a dog, let alone three.

“Do you really hate him that much?” There was a look of contrition in Pippa’s eyes that caused her eyebrows to furrow in worry as she headed toward me. “I’m positive he didn’t really try to kill you. He’s not a bad guy.”

“I mean, I don’t think he really tried to kill me,” I admitted ruefully. “He was just super rude when I ran off the road. What

sort of man laughs at someone who is lost?”

“Did he know you were lost, though?” Pippa was ever the voice of reason, and while I knew that she was correct, I wasn’t ready to forgive and forget just yet. I took a seat on the couch, which was surprisingly very comfortable. I stared down at the rawhide rug on the floor and idly wondered if it was real. And if it was real, had TJ hunted the animal? The thought made me shudder. I knew hunting was a reality of life, but it wasn’t a reality I’d ever been a part of before.

“Maybe not.” I shrugged as she sat on the couch next to me. “So have you and TJ...” I wiggled my eyebrows and winked. Pippa’s face went bright red as she shook her head. I laughed at her uncomfortable expression. Pippa was the only friend I had that was still a virgin. I thought it was admirable that she’d made a vow to herself and had kept it. Though I was pretty sure that if I’d been dating Stephan, I would have become a born-again virgin. Shoot, I’d even have thought about joining a nunnery.

“No, and he’s okay with it.” There was a loving tone to her voice that made me slightly envious. She was well and truly in love. And I knew from the way TJ looked at her that he felt the same way. I was happy for her. Pippa deserved the best. I was only slightly jealous for myself. I wanted to find love. Even if I hid that fact behind an exterior that told the world I was more interested in my career. I think part of the reason I’d hated Pippa’s ex was because he reminded me of many of my exes: gaslighting narcissists.

“I’m glad.” I sat back on the couch and studied her face. “You really do look happy.”

“I am.” She nodded. “I love it here. It’s a different pace of life, but everyone is so nice. I can’t wait until we go into town later. Main Street reminds me of Stars Hollow.”

“From *Gilmore Girls*?” Pippa and I had watched the entire series two times, and we both loved it. “That’s kinda cool. We should rewatch the show,” I added, nostalgia hitting me. “And then I can decide whether or not I feel the same way about Paradise Valley.”

“I’m always up for some Rory and Lorelei.” She grabbed the remote control and turned the TV on. “Let me see if it’s on any of the services that TJ has.”

“Oh, you want to watch it now?”

“No time like the present, right?” She grinned as she searched for the show. “It’s like old times. Do you remember our freshman year, how everyone was studying all the time, and we were watching—”

“*The Bachelor*.” I groaned at the memory. “We were so addicted to the show.”

“I don’t know how women go on a show fighting for roses.” She paused. “Though there’s a new season of *Bachelor in Paradise* that started recently.”

“Oh, we’re so watching that.” I giggled. “I missed you, Pippa.”

“How long will you stay?” she asked as she tapped the remote against her thigh. “I’ve missed you as well, and I’d love your help with the theater I just bought. I’m trying to finish the screenplay I’m writing in the next week and then revise it.” She ran her fingers through her curls as she talked, a sure sign that she was nervous. “It would be amazing to have our first show in December, but that’s so close. I just don’t know if that’s realistic.”

“When in December?”

“Second week.” She laughed. “Maybe December 10th through 24th? Right before Christmas.”

“That’s not even two months away, Pippa.”

“I know. But it’s not a long play, and everyone is excited.”

“But the rehearsals and the sets and the wardrobes and advertising and…” My voice trailed off as her face fell. “But I think you can do it, if you really put your mind to it.”

“You’re so sweet, Emma.” She placed the remote control back on the coffee table and gazed at me, another look of concern on her face. I was about to tell her not to ask me about

Jack again when she leaned forward and grabbed my hands. “And how are you feeling about being fired?”

The door to the cabin opened at that exact moment, and Apple, the dog, came bounding in, followed by TJ and Jack, who were both standing there looking sheepish. So they’d obviously heard what Pippa had just asked me. Not that it was a secret, of course. I fully expected that they both already knew the reason why I’d hightailed it to Montana from NYC, but it was still embarrassing. I’d never been fired before in my life. What made it burn even more was the fact that I didn’t even like the job or my younger-than-me boss.

“I was ready for a change,” I answered loudly, so everyone could hear me. “I’ve already received several messages from headhunters on LinkedIn and have several phone interviews lined up, so I’m not worried.” I looked over at Jack as if to say, “Don’t even think of making a smart comment. There are many companies that want me.” I wasn’t sure why I wanted to make that point to him in particular, but I knew I wanted to hit it home. “So I’m not sure how long I will be here.”

“So you’re saying I shouldn’t invest in new sheets?” Jack smirked, his eyes laughing at me as he spoke.

“Why would you have to invest in new sheets? You don’t have a washer and dryer?”

“Are you volunteering to do my laundry?”

“I don’t think so.” I paused. “And by ‘I don’t think so,’ I mean ‘in your dreams.’”

“Oh, my dreams are a lot more exciting than that.”

“Doubt it.”

“TJ, guess what?” Pippa jumped off the couch and ran over to the two men. I could tell she was most probably panicking that Jack and I wouldn’t stop squabbling, but at least that would stop her from any possible matchmaking.

“What, darling?” He kissed her on the nose, and I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. I was glad they were in love, but I wasn’t really in the mood to be a firsthand witness.

Unfortunately, Jack caught the movement, and I could see him suppressing a grin.

“Emma and I are going to watch *Gilmore Girls* again. Do you want to join us?”

“What are you watching?” He looked at her blankly. “*The More Girls?*”

“*Gilmore Girls*,” Jack spoke up. “A sappy, dramatic show about a mother and her daughter. Don’t do it, TJ. The show sucks.”

I stared at him in surprise. He knew *Gilmore Girls*? Had he watched it with a previous girlfriend?

“You’ve seen it?” TJ glanced back at his friend.

“Jennie made me watch it when we were younger.” Jack pretended to retch. “I’m sure she’d love it if you’d watch it with her now. I told you how excited she is about having another big brother.”

“Jennie is Jack’s sister,” Pippa explained. “And I guess TJ’s now as well. She’s married to Josh. He’s a local cop in Paradise Valley. They have two cute little kids.” She tapped TJ on the arm. “You should get them some toys before we go over to Sunday lunch.”

“Good idea.” He nodded. “We can go to the store tomorrow and find something.”

“I think I see a new favorite uncle on the horizon.” Jack laughed, and I had to bite my lip from snapping back with a snarky response. Jack’s eyes were also on me, and it struck me that he was waiting for me to say something. Was he enjoying our repartee? Was I enjoying it? In a secret, I would never admit it to myself way, I was. Even though I would go to my grave before admitting that fact. Jack was one of those men that thought he ran the world. With his green eyes and blondish hair, he resembled a hunkier Ryan Reynolds, though I would never say that to him.

“So are we ready to go eat?” I rubbed my stomach. “I could eat a horse right about now.”

“Don’t let Stella or Nightstar hear you say that.” Pippa giggled, her eyes meeting TJ’s before she turned back to me. “Sorry, inside joke. I said the same thing when I got here but then apologized to TJ’s horses, Stella and Nightstar. We’ll have to go riding next week.”

“Hmm,” I responded in a noncommittal tone. I was not a rider. I’d never been on a horse before in my life. And if I was quite honest, I was scared of riding. I’d watched *Gone with the Wind* as a kid, and the movie had scared me from ever riding, even though I knew it wasn’t likely that I’d be in a similar accident.

“Let’s go grab some food. Non-horse meat related.” TJ grabbed Pippa’s hand. “We can all ride in my truck and then come back here. That cool with you, Jack?”

“Sounds good.” There was mirth in his voice, and I couldn’t stop myself from looking at him again. Was he loony tunes? Why was he always laughing? It unnerved me. I wasn’t used to men that were constantly smiling. Most of the men I knew in the city were stressed out, smirking, or snapping. And when they weren’t snapping, they were talking about spreadsheets and ROI and user engagement. I felt like I’d entered a parallel universe where money and stats didn’t exist.

“You’ll love Sweet Eats,” Pippa said as we walked out of the cabin and toward TJ’s pickup truck. “They have delicious appetizers there.” She looked over at TJ and continued, “Shall we stop off at Mindy’s first, so Emma can meet her?”

“Mindy? Is that the lady that showed up that first day when you arrived?”

“Yup.” Pippa nodded. “I think I told you she has a cupcake and coffee shop, and it’s on Main Street as well, just a couple of doors down from Sweet Eats. And then maybe after dinner, we can go by the Playhouse, and you can tell me what you think.”

“Sounds good.” I hopped into the back of the truck and tried not to groan when I realized how tight the space was. I closed the door, buckled my seatbelt, and shifted closer to the door as Jack got into the back of the truck and seemed to



dominate the entire space. I could smell hay on his shirt as his scent invaded my nostrils. His body heat seemed to radiate off of him, and I practically jumped out of my seat when his thigh brushed mine.

“You okay?” He looked over at me, concern in his expression. “You look like you saw a ghost.”

“I’m fine.”

“You sure?” His thigh pressed against mine even harder, and if I was a betting woman, I would have said he was doing it on purpose. “You jumped about a mile high.”

“Hardly. I would have bumped my head if I’d jumped that high.”

“True.” He winked, reached over, and ran his fingers across the top of my hair. “I don’t feel any bumps.”

“Of course there are no bumps.” I almost growled at him. “You can get back into your own seat now.”

“I didn’t realize I was in your lap.” His green eyes danced in merriment. “But I can be, if you want me to be.”

“I don’t want you to—”

“Okay, everyone ready?” TJ hopped into the driver’s seat and started the ignition. A few seconds later, Pippa jumped into the passenger seat.

“Sorry, I wanted to give Apple a treat before we went out.” She buckled her seatbelt and turned to look at me. “She loves her treats.”

“Don’t we all?” Jack responded and shifted back a few inches so he was no longer all up on me. I smiled at Pippa, who had a slightly anxious expression on her face again. The thing about Pippa was that she was good at sensing my energy, so it was likely that she could sense that I was annoyed again. Jack was the sort of guy that liked to push boundaries. We’d gotten off on the wrong foot, but I knew if I was going to stay with him, I would have to learn to put up with him. Or just ignore him completely.

“So, TJ, when did you realize you had a thing for Pippa?” I asked, curious if his feelings for Pippa were genuine or not. The way they interacted showed me that they had a very real and meaningful relationship. I had a bad feeling that Pippa was never coming back to New York.

“Since I was ten.” He pulled out of the dirt driveway and back onto the main road. “I’m sure Pippa has told you we were childhood best friends, and I guess I always kinda knew she was the one, as weird as it sounds.” Pippa reached over and stroked his leg, and I tried not to roll my eyes. I looked over at Jack, who also looked like he wanted to throw up, and we shared a bemused smile. So he also wasn’t one of those people who believed in “the one.” I wondered what his story was and why he was as cynical as I was. It wasn’t like I’d never had hopes and dreams about true love.

I’d grown up believing in one true love and soulmates. I’d fully believed that there was a perfect partner for me out there in the world. And then I’d started dating. Ben, Stuart, Ali, Josh, and finally Derek. And all of them had broken my heart and made me want to feed it to the wolves. Not only did I not believe in true love anymore, but I also didn’t know if I wanted to keep getting back on the horse. There were only so many times you could be met with disappointment before you stopped trying.

“Emma, did I tell you that TJ got a tattoo of our names on his chest?”

“Already?” I wasn’t trying to be a hater, but I didn’t think it was a good sign for a man to get a tattoo of your name after a short period of dating.

“Not recently. He got it when he was eighteen.” She giggled. “You should see your face, Emma.”

“You remind me of my Sunday School teacher,” Jack interjected. “All judgment and derision.” His voice was low as he looked me up and down. “Now you look like you want to take a ruler to my knuckles.”

“Trust me, it wouldn’t be your knuckles you’d be worried about,” I shot back, and I couldn’t stop myself from smiling as

he burst into laughter. It was a nice sound. Husky and deep. Our eyes met, and while we didn't exactly beam at each other, for a few seconds there was a moment of mutual appreciation for our quick wits. Maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't want to kill him by the end of the week, after all.

## CHAPTER 4

# JACK

“Welcome to Mindy’s—” Mindy stopped her obligatory welcome as she looked up and noticed that it was TJ, Pippa, and myself entering the store. She looked at Emma for a few seconds and burst into a wide smile as she came from behind the counter. “Howdy, y’all. Hi, you must be Emma. I’m Mindy. Nice to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Hi.” Emma held her hand out formally, and Mindy ignored it and went in for a hug. I watched as Emma’s eyes widened imperceptibly, and then she hugged Mindy back. Her short, blonde bob a stark contrast to Mindy’s long, black hair. Her blue eyes found mine, and I grinned at her before turning around at the sound of familiar, loud footsteps.

“Rafael Messina, I would know your obnoxious steps anywhere.” I held my hand out to Mindy’s brother. “How are you, old man?”

“Surviving.” He grinned, his light brown eyes smiling as we shook hands. “How are you, old man?”

“Doing good. We’re just headed to Sweet Eats to grab dinner.” I nodded toward the others. “How long are you in town?”

“A couple of months?” He shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet.” He ran his fingers through his short, black hair and looked over at Pippa and Emma. “Looks like we have two new additions to Paradise Valley.”

“The brunette is Pippa, TJ’s girlfriend, and the blonde is her best friend, Emma, visiting from New York.”

“She single?” he asked in a low, appreciative voice. “She’s very cute.”

“I don’t think she is,” I lied as I watched him watching her. I frowned slightly as she offered him a flirtatious smile that she’d never given me. I didn’t question my lie. I was doing it to protect her. Rafael Messina was known as a heartbreaker. He was the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome and had charm that could break down even the sternest of women. He’d even gotten a kiss from my younger sister, Jennie, at the local fair years ago. I loved the guy, he was good fun, but he wasn’t the sort of guy that you’d want pursuing someone you liked or even didn’t like.

“Pity.” He looked back at me. “She’s a looker. I like blondes.”

“You like brunettes and redheads, too.”

“True.” He grinned. “I don’t even mind the grays.”

“Rafael.” I chuckled. “You dirty dog.”

“Takes one to know one.” He winked and then headed over to TJ. I didn’t bother correcting him. It was true that I hadn’t been in a serious relationship in years, and it was also true that I did date, but I didn’t date the same woman more than five times. And I didn’t sleep around. I’d gone through a crazy stage in college and right after, but after a few women had called me crying in the middle of the night, I’d realized I didn’t want to be the sort of guy who slept with women that were hoping for more. Not that I was a monk. I’d had a couple of one-night stands but hadn’t hooked up in over a year now.

“TJ! Good to see you.” Rafael shook his hand and then bowed his head toward Pippa and Emma. “And it is a pleasure to meet such beautiful women like you.”

“Give it a break, bro.” Mindy hit her brother on the shoulder. “Pippa, this is my older brother, Rafael. He’s back in town for a couple of months. And Rafe, this is Pippa, TJ’s

childhood best friend and sweetheart, and her best friend Emma.”

“Emma, you must be a model.” Rafael looked her up and down. “Yes, a supermodel from Europe.”

“No.” She blushed slightly and giggled in that girlish way that shy women did when they were complimented and didn’t know what to say in response. It irked me that her face was fire-engine red as he heaped insincere compliments on her. Why wasn’t she shooting back terse comments to his crap? Were her snapbacks only for me?

“Actress?” He shifted closer to her. “Artist’s muse?”

“If I am, they never told me.” She laughed. “I’m in marketing. You?”

“I’d like to be the product you market.”

“Rafe, stop it.” Mindy glared at her brother. “Ignore him. He can’t resist flirting with a pretty woman. He’s a horse trainer who also makes documentaries.”

“You forgot to add that I also like flirting with women named Emma with big, blue eyes and—”

“Hate to break this up,” I cut him off and looked at my watch. “But I’m hungry and have work to do tonight, so maybe we should get going?” I tapped the heel of my boot against the floor and looked around the empty store. “I’m sure Mindy wants to pack up for the day now as well.”

“Actually, we were just about to close up. Maybe we can join—”

“You guys ready?” I cut Rafael off again. I loved the guy, I really did, but I didn’t want to spend my dinner time with him. “Maybe you, me, TJ, and some of the guys can meet for basketball tomorrow morning?” I looked over at TJ. “What do you think?”

“Sure.” He nodded, a thoughtful look on his face. I ignored the way he wiggled his eyebrows and looked over at Emma. Didn’t he see that I was trying to protect her from becoming Rafael’s victim? We didn’t need another crying woman in

town. I certainly didn't want a wallowing woman at my ranch staying with me.

"Sounds good," Rafael agreed, his eyes narrowed as he gazed at me. Why was everyone so keen to observe me today? "I'll see you guys tomorrow. I'll let Ethan, Aiden, and Brandon know and see if any of them want to join us."

"Perfect. Good seeing you." I headed toward the front and looked back at the others. "Let's go and get a table. We can show Emma around Main Street later."

I opened the door and waited for TJ, Pippa, and Emma to walk out before letting it go and stepping into the street. It was only then that I realized how tense my shoulders had been. I frowned as we walked down the street, Pippa pointing out the different stores to Emma as they walked ahead of us.

"You okay?" TJ glanced over at me. "I think Rafael wanted to join us for dinner. I didn't realize you were so hungry."

"I'm starved." I stared straight ahead. "I didn't want us to get caught up in small talk for an hour. I don't want it to be a late night because I have some admin to do later for the ranch. You know Sweets takes forever to serve the food, and then if we go for a drink at Montana Knight's, it's just going to be—"

"It's okay. I get it." There was a knowing smile on TJ's face as we walked, and I just ignored it. I had no idea what he thought he was "getting," and I didn't care. I was grateful when we reached the entrance to the restaurant because I'd been entirely too mesmerized by the swing of Emma's hips as she sashayed down the street. She was definitely strutting in her heels, and her blue jeans clung to her in just the right way. I understood why Rafael had been flirting with her. She was gorgeous. Not that I cared about the fact that she had a beautiful face and curvy body. I'd barely even noticed.

Emma was already proving to be a distraction in my life. One that I didn't need and certainly didn't want. She was already affecting me, and I hadn't even known her for five hours. If our encounters kept up like this, then I was in for a rollercoaster ride these next couple of weeks. I just couldn't



tell if the thought scared or excited me. She was cute, but I wasn't looking for anything. There was a reason why my friends had nicknamed me the Last Single Cowboy in Montana.

And being around her wasn't going to change that.

## CHAPTER 5

# EMMA

**M**y stomach was full of garlic mashed potatoes and the most delicious ribeye steak I'd ever eaten in my life.

A food coma the size of Texas loomed in my very near future, and I was grateful for the ability to stretch my legs as we left Sweet Eats. The food had been phenomenal, and the service was amazing. Even Jack had been quiet, allowing Pippa and me to catch up and talk about her ideas for her theater without much interruption.

"You're going to love Montana Knights." Pippa grabbed my hand as we sauntered down the street. Main Street reminded me of every small-town Hallmark movie I'd ever watched and a sense of comfort and warmth filled me. It was nice here. Really nice. "The bartender, Brandon, is super cute, though kinda gruff. He and Mindy spar all the time. Her best friend, Charlotte, is a bartender here, too, and runs the weekly trivia night. We haven't won yet, but maybe with you on our team next week we will have a shot."

"Me?" I looked to the left and then right. "Are you talking to me?"

"Yes." She giggled as I pointed to myself and raised my eyebrows high into my forehead. She burst out laughing and squeezed my hand tighter.

"You think I'm going to help your trivia team go from losing to winning? I know you're in love, Pippa, but has that made you crazy? What on earth am I going to contribute to the team? My knowledge on *Rick and Morty*?"

“You watch *Rick and Morty*?” Jack sounded surprised as he gazed at me. It was only then that I realized he’d been listening to our conversation.

“Not willingly.” I shuddered at the thought of the cartoon that had been on every TV screen at my last job for what felt like months. It wasn’t that it was a bad cartoon; in fact, I’d laughed loudly at several of the episodes. However, I was against it on principle due to the fact that every tech bro at my last company had watched the show religiously. If I heard one more person talking about transforming, creating, and destroying for a living, I would pull my hair out. “Don’t tell me it’s your favorite show.” I could hear the accusation in my voice, but I didn’t try and disguise it.

“Of course not. I much prefer *SpongeBob*.” He said with such a straight face that I almost believed him until I saw his eyes crinkling in the corners. My heart jumped at his joke. Jack constantly surprised me. He looked so serious when you stared at him, but his sense of humor was one that I loved.

“Isn’t that a bit mature for you?” I asked before glancing at the building in front of me. Pippa let go of my hand and opened the large, dark wood door, and the sound of a group of men laughing caught my attention. I looked inside the packed bar and followed Pippa in as she headed toward the bar top. Jack chuckled as he walked in behind me, and I could feel him close to me. My heart skipped slightly for a few seconds before I took in the large, and quite rowdy, bar space.

Men far outnumbered women in this establishment, and most of them were wearing cowboy hats and plaid shirts. I also noticed that many of the men were very handsome as well. It was nice to be around testosterone that wasn’t work-related every once in a while. It reminded me that I was a woman and had needs, which included being flirted with and appreciated. I thought back to Mindy’s brother, Rafael; he had been a tall glass of water on a dry, hot day. I’d enjoyed his good-natured flirting, even though I was sure he was that way with every single woman he met.

Pippa stopped next to a stunning woman and gave her a big hug before turning back to me. She held her arms wide

open and nodded towards the trendy woman.

“Emma, this is Brielle. She works at the newspaper. Brielle, this is my best friend, Emma.”

“Nice to meet you.” Brielle smiled warmly at me, her green eyes almost catlike as she swung her long, silky, light-brown hair across her shoulders. “I’ve heard so much about you. I just love your haircut. So trendy.” And she was nice. I loved meeting women who were friendly and complimentary to other women. I’d noticed in New York that while many women were sweet to men, they were quite distant and cold to other women.

“Thanks.” I touched my bob self-consciously. I didn’t love it. It had been a move made to exude power at my last job, and now I was desperate for it to grow out. Pippa liked to tease me and tell me that I looked like a librarian, which was not the look I was going for. But still, I appreciated Brielle’s sweet words. “I love your coat.” I gazed at her beige peacoat and smiled. “Burberry?”

“Knock-off.” She threw her head back and laughed, an infectious sound that had me laughing as well. “I wish I could afford Burberry.”

“Me too.” I liked her already.

“I looked online, and they were \$2500,” she continued. “All my dreams and hopes went up in smoke then. Maybe if I meet some rich guy that wants to spoil me, but I don’t see that happening anytime soon.”

“Join the club. If I met a billionaire that wanted to spoil me, I’d be at a five-star resort in Hawaii right now, or maybe in Paris.”

“Oh yes, dinner on the Seine, please.” She joked and we both giggled. There were times when you met new people and knew immediately that you were going to get on, and this was one of those times.

“So what do you do at the newspaper?” I asked her curiously. I had never met a journalist before. I felt like

technology and low sales were kicking out those in the traditional industry.

“I write a love advice column.” She wrinkled her nose and took a sip from her wineglass. It looked like she was drinking a merlot and very much enjoying it. “Which is ironic because my love life sucks.”

“I feel ya there.” I looked around the bar. “Though there are plenty of hotties in here.” I could see a couple of hunky cowboys checking us out, and while I wasn’t really one to be attracted to cowboys, there was something about their muscles and handsome faces that told me I could be a convert.

“Don’t let their looks deceive you.” Brielle shook her head. “Most of the men here are not to be trusted or dated. That’s one of the problems with living in a small town: you learn everything about everyone very quickly.”

“That must be a perk as well, though?” I laughed. “If I’d known about my exes’ histories before I’d dated them, I never would have wasted my time.”

“You and me both, sister.” She giggled and took another sip of her wine. “Come, let’s get you a drink. What’s your poison?”

“I’m not fussy.” I shook my head as we stepped closer to the bar top. “I like wine, vodka, rum, tequila, and beer.”

“We are going to be good friends.” She waved her hands at another woman who was chatting to a tall, good-looking man. “Charlotte, we need drinks,” Brielle called out, and the woman walked over to us, a huge grin on her face. She had long, curly black hair and the most dazzling blue eyes I’d ever seen. They seemed to glow brightly against her darker skin. “Charlotte, this is Emma, Pippa’s friend from New York.”

“Oh, awesome, hi!” She beamed at me. I suddenly understood why Pippa loved it here so much. The people were so friendly and welcoming. It was a bit weird to me, but I kinda liked that I didn’t feel judged. “What would you like to drink? First one is on me.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that, but thanks. I guess I’ll take a glass of red wine, please. A pinot noir, if you have one.”

“We sure do. Coming right now.” She moved back and grabbed a wineglass when I suddenly felt a warmth behind me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I shivered slightly as I turned around and made eye contact with Jack. He stared down at me, and I wondered how tall he was. I had to crook my neck to look at him. Standing this close to him in a crowded bar also made me realize just how sturdy he was. He was a solid, muscular man, and being next to him made me feel dainty, and I wasn’t exactly a size zero or eight.

“I’m getting a drink,” I said finally as he was making me feel uncomfortable by not talking. What was he thinking? Was he deliberately trying to keep me off balance? “Wine,” I said again, hoping that Pippa would come to my rescue.

“It’s a good thing you’re not driving, then.” He smirked. “If you were a mess driving sober, I could only imagine how bad you’d be after a glass of wine.”

“You really want to do this right here, right now?” I poked him in the chest, my own chest heaving as my face flushed. “I was going to give you the benefit of the doubt, but—”

“It was a joke.” He looked down at my hand. “But obviously it was too soon.”

“You think?” My hands were on my hips now. “The event literally happened this morning.”

“And to think I feel like I’ve known you for half my life already.” He chuckled slightly. “How can that be?”

“Because of my dazzling personality and wit?”

“Those aren’t the reasons I would list, no.” He licked his lips and then shook his head as if to say he wasn’t going to tell me the words he would use. Not that I wanted to know anyway. He really was an insufferable jerk.

“Stop trying to flatter me. It won’t get you anywhere.” My heart thudded as I smiled sweetly at him. I could tell that I had him slightly off-kilter with my comment. “I’m just not interested in you in that way, Jack, but thanks for trying.” I

shrugged nonchalantly and stifled my giggles as his jaw dropped, and I could tell that he was wondering what I was going on about. I knew he hadn't been flirting with me, but I had no problem reverse-gaslighting him into thinking that I thought that.

"Huh?" I could tell that he was wracking his brain to figure out what he'd said that would have given me that idea. I hoped it would keep him up half the night.

"I'm going to go and get my drink now." I paused deliberately, leaned forward, and whispered into his ear, "Oh, and just in case I'm a bit tipsy tonight, it's not an indication that I've changed my mind. I don't date the crusted with dirt and smells like a pig sorta guy." I leaned back and gazed into his eyes. "I hope you understand." His green eyes were blazing as I finished my sentence, and I was about to turn around when his arm snaked around my waist, and he pulled me back into him.

"Looky here, Ms. Emma," he drawled in a deep, husky tone that made my insides flutter. "I don't know what game you're playing, but I do know that even if I smelled like cow patties and was slicked down with mud, I'd still be able to hazard a date with you." He smirked. "Ain't no woman alive can resist all this." He held his hands up and looked down at himself like some sort of Class-A frat brother, and I was about to laugh in his face when he burst out laughing himself.

"Okay, that sounded a lot more assholely than I thought it would." He shook his head. "But I think we can both agree that neither one of us is interested in anything more happening. You think I smell like a pig, and I think you're probably the worst driver on this side of the country." He pulled his phone out and gave me a small nod. "Feel free to go and have your drink now, Emma." He spoke slowly and deliberately, then looked around the bar. "Feel free to drive another man crazy tonight."

I was about to respond that he was the one who drove me crazy when he abruptly turned around and headed back out of the bar. A slight frisson of disappointment filled me as I wondered if he was done for the night. Was he calling some



woman that he *did* like to come and join him? Or maybe he was going over to her place. Not that I cared. Frankly, I was glad to be rid of him. He thought he was so funny, but to me he was just a big annoyance. I would enjoy my night with the girls and try to forget the stress of the day.

## CHAPTER 6

# JACK

The night had been longer than I'd expected, and I'd spent half of it standing next to TJ, drinking beers and watching Emma joke around with the girls. The ride back to TJ's ranch was uneventful. Both Pippa and Emma were exhausted and slept like babies as we drove back. TJ hummed along to a Reba song on the radio, and I just stared at Emma as she shifted in her seat, trying to get comfortable. I couldn't believe that she was going to be my houseguest in less than twenty-four hours. I really wasn't sure how that was going to work. I had a feeling we were going to drive each other crazy, and by "we" I meant that she was going to drive me crazy. Though I had to admit that I was looking forward to having her in the house.

We pulled up to the ranch, and I lightly tapped her on the shoulder to wake her. I braced myself for her to snap at me, but she offered me a small smile as she opened her eyes. TJ hopped out of the truck and rushed over to the passenger side to open the door for Pippa. She beamed at him as he undid her seatbelt and lifted her up into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck before he slammed the door shut, and I wondered how long they'd be able to keep their hands off of each other.

"Did I fall asleep?" Emma yawned as she sat up and stretched. Then she seemed to remember who I was, and she scowled for a couple of seconds before yawning again. I kept my laughter to myself. She was cute, even when she wasn't trying to be.

“I think so.” I nodded seriously. “Or rather, I hope so.” I widened my eyes and stared at my hands. “Otherwise this is going to be really awkward.”

“What’s going to be really awkward?” She undid her seatbelt and leaned closer to me. “What are you talking about?” Her voice sounded agitated, and I looked back at her, an innocent and slightly worried expression on my face.

“Well, you told me you fell in love with me at first sight and wanted to have my babies, so I really hope that was you sleep talking and not expressing your true feelings for me.”

“What?” Her jaw dropped, and she rubbed her eyes. “I did what?” Her voice sounded shrill and unsure as she stared, assessing me. “There is no way that I said that.”

“I never would have believed it if I hadn’t heard it with my own two ears.” I held both of my hands up and backed away from her, moving closer to the door. It took everything in me not to burst into deep laughter. She looked more agitated than I’d ever seen her, and I’d already had her mad at me several times. I knew I should feel guilty, but this was payback for the way she’d teased me in the bar, telling me she didn’t date men that smelled like pigs. As if. I prided myself on showering twice a day.

“You’re a cute girl, but I’m not looking to be your baby daddy.”

“Baby daddy?” Her eyes narrowed. “Who uses that term any more?”

“You do.” I shrugged and pointed at her still-confused face. “You whispered in your sleep, ‘Please be my baby daddy, Jack. You’re just so—’”

“You’re such a liar.” She glared at me. “There is no way I said that.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” I chuckled as I opened the truck door. “But I had you going there for a few moments.”

“No, you didn’t.” She opened her truck door as well, and we both jumped out of the back. I headed around to the front, and we both stared at Pippa and TJ kissing under the

moonlight. Emma gazed at me then back at her friend, and I could see her sighing, even though I couldn't hear it. I felt bad for her. I wouldn't want to be the third wheel going into that small log cabin.

"Hey, TJ, I'm going to head out back home. Always good seeing you, Pippa." I waved as they broke apart and turned to look at me. "You have a good evening, Emma." I smiled at her and made my way over to my truck. "Y'all have sweet dreams."

"Wait," Emma called after me, and I stopped at my truck door and turned to look at her. I didn't speak, waiting for her to continue. "Maybe I should just come with you tonight." She said the words as though she didn't want to, and I knew that she was battling between the devil and the deep, blue sea.

"Oh, is that what you want?" I raised a single eyebrow as I opened the truck door. "Are you trying to sleep in my bed tonight? I mean, sleep in one of my beds?" There was something about the way she looked at me when I teased her that delighted me. It was like I knew the switch to a button that no one else knew about. I'd noticed her all night at Montana Knights, even though I'd kept my distance, and she didn't react to anyone else the way she reacted to me. I didn't know if that was a good thing or not, but I liked it.

"I would like to stay over at your ranch, in my own bedroom, so that Pippa and TJ can enjoy their night together." Her voice was stilted, and she held up her hand as Pippa broke free of TJ and protested her not staying over. "It will just be a lot more comfortable for all of us. And I was only staying here one night anyway. I'll see you tomorrow." She looked back at me. "As long as delusional Jack doesn't mind."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," I said sarcastically.

"You two." Pippa looked at us nervously. "Are you sure that you can survive in the same house?"

"Oh, Emma won't be in the house. I was going to let her sleep in the pig pen, seeing as she loves the smell so much."

“Oh, I thought that was where you slept,” she shot back, twitching her nose and then waving her hand back and forth. “I wouldn’t want to take your spot.”

“You just want to be a part of the pack, though, isn’t that right?” I winked at her, and she rolled her eyes. “Seriously, though, I’ve got a room made up for her. It will be easy for me to take her back with me tonight, and then we’ll meet up tomorrow so she can grab her suitcases and stuff. And her car.” I looked over at the Honda. “I don’t think you should try driving to my place now. If you had a hard time driving in the day, night won’t be any better. Especially if we see some deer or elk on the road.”

“I wasn’t trying to drive right now, anyway.” She gave Pippa a quick hug and then headed over to my truck. “See you tomorrow, Pippa.” She opened the door and jumped in before I could even respond. I waved at Pippa and TJ and then got into the truck. I looked over at her to see she was staring at me with a determined look on her face. “Don’t even bother trying to say something smart to me.” She held her hand up. “I’m tired. I’m tipsy. And I’m not in the mood.”

“Not in the mood for what?” I wiggled my eyebrows as I started the ignition. I could see that she was about to start huffing and puffing, so I switched the radio on. I tapped my fingers against the steering wheel and sang along to the James Bay song playing on the radio, pretending that I hadn’t just teased a blushing Emma for what was like the fiftieth time in our short acquaintance.

“Are you going to be like this the entire time?” I could tell she’d turned to look at me, even though my eyes were peeled on the road ahead of me. I hadn’t been joking about the deer and elk. Even some of the local bison took night treks, though they were far more active in the day.

“Be like what?” I snuck a look at her right as I pulled onto the main road. Her face was tired, and her eyes were struggling to stay awake, though her lips were in an *O* shape that told me she still had plenty of energy to tell me off. “If you don’t want me to tease you, I won’t.” I leaned back into

my seat as I headed toward home. “I don’t want you to think us Montana folk are mean to tourists.”

“That’s good. I’d hate to think that and tell everyone in New York and then watch it spread across social media that everyone in the whole wide world should avoid the Big Sky State because of a cowboy named Jack.”

“There are plenty of Jacks in Montana, so as long as you don’t include my last name, I don’t mind.” I grinned as I looked over at her and was happy to see that her demeanor had relaxed. “What time do you wake up in the morning, by the way?”

“Why?” She was struggling to keep her eyes open now.

“Just trying to figure out what time you’ll be making my breakfast.”

“Making your what?”

“Or feeding the cows. Which would you rather do?”

“How’s about neither for \$100, please, Alex?”

“You do know that he passed away, right?”

“I do.” Her voice sounded sad, and I glanced over at her. She was snuggled back into the seat now, and her eyes were closed. “I felt so bad for his wife and daughter. He was such a great guy and an amazing host and...” Her voice trailed off as she yawned again. I decided to keep my mouth shut and let her sleep. It wasn’t a long drive back to my ranch, but it was a peaceful one. The huge horseshoe sign was unmissable from about a hundred feet away, and I made the familiar right onto the large driveaway that would take us to my family ranch. The ranch that had been my great-grandfather’s, the same man that was also TJ’s great-grandfather. As I made my way toward the house, it struck me how lucky I was to have grown up here, knowing this history.

It wasn’t Dad’s fault that TJ didn’t know, but there was a sense of loss there that I knew both of them felt. I couldn’t imagine finding out I had another family at twenty-eight. I stopped and turned off the engine. Emma was snoring lightly in the passenger seat, so I just looked at her for a few

moments. It made me feel a little like a creeper, studying her face, but this was the first time I'd got to watch her without anyone else observing me.

She looked so sweet and innocent as she slept. Her hair covered her face like a mask. Her nostrils moved slightly as she snored, and her lips trembled in a slight whimper. She held her hands together under her chin, and a warm feeling enveloped me. She shifted, and her head fell to the side. "I don't think so, Jack," she mumbled, and I froze. Was she messing with me? Or was she really dreaming about me? Not that I could call her out on it now. Not after I'd already pretended that she'd said my name. My heart raced as she mumbled something else and groaned slightly. Was she doing this on purpose? I knew it would bite me in the butt if I nudged her shoulder and asked her why she was saying my name. Especially if she was doing this in her sleep.

"Emma," I said her name loudly and cleared my throat. "We're here." I waited for her to jump up and snap at me, but instead she continued snoring. "Hey, Dozy, we're here," I murmured. "Or was it Dopey? No, maybe it was Sleepy? Or was it..."

"What?" She blinked at me and sat up abruptly. "Are we here?"

"We've been here, Dozy."

"Dozy?"

"The seven dwarves." I grinned. "Or would you rather me call you Snow White?"

"I'm no princess." She yawned and took off her seatbelt. "I'm more like the warrior queen your momma warned you about."

"Oh yeah?" I opened the truck door and jumped out. I was surprised at how quickly she was able to think of quips after just waking up. I headed around to her side of the truck and waited for her to get out. "Does that mean that you want to go hunting with me tomorrow?"



“Hunting?” She slammed the truck door shut, and we headed toward the front of the house. We took the two steps up to the wraparound porch, and I watched as she looked around. Her eyes were appreciative as she took in the two rocking chairs and the little statues that filled the floor. “You really like farm animals, huh?” She looked up at me in surprise.

“No.” I laughed. “I have a niece, Stasia, and a nephew, Sam, and every holiday they love to give me a new statue for the porch.” I pulled my keys out and went to the door. “I guess it’s a Marley tradition now.” I opened the front door and ushered her inside. “My porch will be filled with pigs and cows.” She walked into the foyer, and I turned on the hallway light. She smiled as she looked around, and I could tell that she liked my home.

“This is way bigger than TJ’s cabin.” There was relief in her voice. I wondered if she’d thought I lived in a log cabin with one bed as well. I wondered if she would have shared the bed with me. I didn’t wonder for very long, though, as my inner voice screamed at me. I knew there was no way that Emma would have done it.

“Just a little.” I closed the door and headed toward the kitchen. “I’ll show you where the kitchen is, and then I’ll take you to your room. I’m sure you must be exhausted.”

“Thanks, I am a bit tired.” She followed behind me as we walked down the hallway, past the family photos on the walls. We entered the large kitchen, and I turned on the light and pointed out the fridge.

“Drinks and food are in there. Feel free to help yourself.” I walked to the fridge and opened it. It was pretty empty. “I don’t have much in here right now, but I can head to the—”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m really tired, and I can’t concentrate on anything right now, not even food, and I love food. You can ask Pippa. I’m like the food monster. When I was at a work event a couple of weeks ago, I single-handedly ate, like, ten salmon and caviar blinis.” She giggled. “Maybe that’s another reason why they fired me.” She looked at me and shook her head. “It wasn’t funny, of course. I think I’m a

bit delirious because I'm sleep-deprived." Her lips trembled, and she looked vulnerable as she stared at me. "I can't believe they fired me."

A part of me wanted to make a joke that I wasn't shocked she'd been fired, but I knew inherently that a joke was not needed or appropriate at that moment. In fact, I now believed that the reason she'd been so tense and snappy all day was due to her own personal stress and strife and not because of the incident we'd had this morning.

"Come, let me show you to bed. I mean your bed. Not my bed. Of course." I reddened slightly as I imagined her in my bed, her blonde hair tousled on my pillow. I needed to get that thought out of my mind. Emma was here as my guest. My platonic guest. Neither of us wanted, or needed, the complication of our relationship going any further. "This is your room." I stopped outside of the room next to mine, not even thinking about why I'd changed her room from the one at the end of the hallway to the one next to me at the last minute. "There's a bathroom in your room." I opened the door for her and ushered her in. "Have a good night, Emma. I'm right next door if you need anything. Just knock and holler."

"Thanks." She yawned loudly and walked into the bedroom. "Night, Jake."

"It's Jack," I corrected her as the door slammed in my face. "That's how much she wants you, Jack." I grunted to myself as I made my way to my room. "She can't even remember your name." I took my boots off as I walked into my bedroom and stretched my arms before jumping into the bed. It had been a long and interesting day. And the most interesting part of it was sleeping in the room next to mine. I wondered if I should have told her that the private bathroom was shared with this room. I grinned as I turned on the TV. She'd figure it out soon enough.

## CHAPTER 7

# EMMA

Slobber rolled out of my mouth and onto my chin as I slowly woke up. My body felt heavy and my skin hot as I opened my eyes. I still had my clothes on. No wonder I was so hot. I looked around the room and tried to remember where I was. My phone beeped as I sat up, and I pulled it out of my bag.

“Hello?” I yawned as I answered the phone.

“Morning, Emma.” Pippa chirped. “Did you sleep well? Are you still tired?”

“Morning. I guess I’m not in TJ’s cabin right now.” I jumped off the bed and headed toward the window. I pulled the curtain open and looked outside. “Whoa.”

“What happened?” Pippa worriedly asked. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just woke up and looked out the window. The view is amazing. A literal million-dollar view.” I gazed at the large expanse of blue sky with nary a cloud in sight. There was a mountain range in the far distance and hundreds of cattle grazing on the freshest green grass I’d ever seen in my life in fields to the right. Bright yellow and purple flowers took up the field next to it, and I could see a couple of men working. “I feel like I’m in a postcard or something.”

“It’s pretty there, isn’t it?” Pippa exclaimed happily. “Did you sleep well? Did you and Jack argue more last night or...?”

“I don’t think we argued.” I looked down at my rumpled clothes. “I guess he just showed me to my room and left. I slept in my clothes.” I looked around the room for my suitcase. “I don’t even know where my bag is.” I frowned as I tried to remember the previous evening. I’d had drinks with Pippa and the other girls at the bar. TJ had driven us back. I was pretty sure I’d fallen asleep in the back of the truck, and then I remembered Pippa and TJ kissing, and Jack had said I could stay with him. And hadn’t he said something about me sharing his bed? I rubbed my forehead as I tried to remember what he’d said and what I’d said in response.

“You left your bags here,” Pippa said. “TJ and I can bring them over for you, if you want.”

“Yes, please. I have nothing to wear, and I don’t want to ask Jack.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t mind,” Pippa teased me, and I rolled my eyes. “I bet he has some real comfy shirts.”

“No, thanks.”

“I’m sure he won’t mind. Then you can smell—”

“Pippa, are you out of your mind? I hope you’re not trying to matchmake me and Jerkface McGee. I’m not interested in him, and I’d rather walk around naked than wear one of his shirts.” I froze as I heard a knock at the door. “Hold on,” I whispered as I walked toward the knocking and tried to smooth back my hair. I glanced in the mirror attached to the vanity desk and groaned at my appearance. My hair was standing on end, and I had dried drool all over the side of my face. “Hello?” I opened the door and stared into Jack’s grinning face. Why did the man always look like the cat that had got the canary and the cream and the mouse and basically everything that he’d ever wanted?

“Sorry to disturb you, Ma’am, but Jerkface McGee was wondering if you wanted breakfast?”

“You heard me?” I could hear Pippa laughing on the other side of the phone, and I wanted to strangle her. This was all her fault.

“Thin walls.” He stepped into the bedroom and tapped the wall. A hollow sound reverberated back at us. “I even heard you snoring last night.”

“I don’t snore.”

I glared at him and pushed my phone into my stomach as I heard Pippa shouting, “Yes, you do!”

“Listen to Pippa.” He gestured toward the phone. “She knows the truth.” He looked at the still-made bed and then back at me. “Not comfortable?”

“I guess I was so tired, I didn’t bother getting under the covers or taking my clothes off.”

“I could have helped you take your clothes off,” he teased me, and I gave him my death stare. He held his hands up and laughed. “Don’t kill me. It’s not like I did take your clothes off. I was a perfect gentleman.”

“Somehow I doubt anyone has ever called you perfect or a gentleman before,” I retorted before I could stop myself. Jack’s eyes glimmered as he took in my words. It was as if he fed off of my insults and barbs. I tried not to stare at his still-damp blond hair or the way his white shirt clung to his muscles. He’d shaved this morning, and he looked awfully handsome.

Not that I was noticing him because I liked the way he looked. No, I was studying him purely as someone who appreciated fine art and had a keen eye.

“Earth to Emma.” His teasing voice alerted me to the fact that I’d totally spaced-out staring at his biceps. Embarrassing. I’d been wondering if he was strong enough to lift a cow, but I wasn’t going to ask him that.

“What’s up?” I asked him as I heard Pippa laughing on the phone that was still pressed against my belly. I was obviously still sleep-deprived if I wasn’t able to focus.

“Breakfast, yes or no?”

“Here or at Mindy’s?” I asked, wondering if that was a stupid question. He was a bachelor. Was it likely that he was

going to cook for me? Could he cook? He was also a rancher, and I assumed that meant he had to know something about food and preparing it. I just wasn't sure if he was actually considering preparing it for me. That seemed like such an intimate act.

"I was thinking here. I could whip up some bacon and eggs. Then I can show you around the house so you know how to get around. Then I have to go out to check out some Border collie puppies." He paused. "And maybe play some basketball with the guys."

"Okay." I nodded. "Pippa said she and TJ can bring my clothes over later this morning as well." I paused for a few moments as I processed what he'd said. "Border collie puppies? You're getting a dog?" Jack didn't seem like a dog guy. I didn't know him well, but he didn't seem the sort of man to be all sappy and sweet with puppies.

"Several." He raised an eyebrow and gave me a, "Can you believe it?" look.

"Wow. So the Grinch has a heart?"

"It's barely beating." He winked. "They're not going to be sleeping in my bed. They're going to be shepherders. Got to train them while they are young."

"Shepherders?" I couldn't stop myself from laughing. "That's not a phrase I ever thought I'd hear in my life."

"Maybe not in New York, but I think that plenty of people in Montana talk about shepherding dogs. They help us do our job." He tapped his finger against the side of his face thoughtfully, and I wondered what he was thinking. Was he going to make another comment about me being a city girl? If he did, I would tell him to get over it. Yes, I was from the city, and yes, I wasn't used to being in a pastoral location like this, but that didn't make me less than him.

"Emmmaaa!" Pippa screeched my name, and I put my phone to my ear.

"Oops, sorry. I'm chatting with Jack."

“Lover boy.” Pippa giggled, and I blushed as Jack grinned. He’d obviously heard what Pippa had said. I needed to turn my volume way down.

“I will call you back later.” I hung up quickly and looked back at Jack. “Breakfast sounds good.”

“Do you want some toast as well?” he asked, his eyes gleaming. “Also, do you want to come and check out the puppies with me?”

“Me?” I gazed at him in surprise. “You want me to come and help you pick out puppies?”

“Well, no. I don’t need you to help me pick them out. I don’t think you’d know what to look for when choosing dogs for a working ranch. Or do you? Don’t tell me you’re Doctor Doolittle all transformed into another body.”

“Very funny.”

“I jest.” He bowed his head, his green eyes twinkling. “I thought you might like to see a litter of puppies as it sounds like you’ve had a hard couple of weeks with your job and all.” His voice drifted off. Embarrassing. I couldn’t believe it. Did he know I was really upset about being fired?

“You mentioned something about it last night when I was getting you...” He looked around the room, and I realized that I couldn’t even remember walking to the bedroom. I wondered if I’d said anything to embarrass myself.

“I guess I said a lot of things last night.” I didn’t even want to think about the job I’d lost. My life was not going as planned. I knew that you couldn’t plan for everything, but nothing was going right for me. If I thought about it too closely, I’d burst into tears. I’d lost my job, I had no boyfriend, and my best friend was moving to Montana. In actuality, she had probably already moved here. I was glad she was in love, but I couldn’t help but feel sorry for myself. Loneliness had hit me hard after my mom died five years earlier, and now I was resistant to any sort of change. I didn’t want to pass on my feelings of abandonment to Pippa, though. I wanted her to be happy.



“So breakfast?” Jack must have sensed my subtle mood change. “I’ll even let you rank me, *Top Chef* style.”

“You watch *Top Chef*?” I was surprised at the admission. He seemed to be one of those guys who was too busy and too cool for TV.

“Younger sister, remember?” He grinned. “She dictated what we watched at night. Plus, she and I had a date night every week until recently, and she always got to choose.”

“You had a date night with your sister?” I didn’t want to judge, but that sounded weird and creepy. And I was trying very hard to not think of Jack as a creep. Okay, maybe not that hard, but I didn’t want to be right.

“Obviously, not real dates.” He smirked, and I tried not to stare at his lips. He was attractive, and I had to stop noticing that. I would admit that he was cute and try to forget about it. Sometimes when he spoke, a certain thrill filled me, which was crazy because I barely knew him. I had to remind myself of the men I’d dated in the past. The men I’d thought were great guys in the beginning, who had only let me down.

“Okay, sure...”

“When Jennie was in high school, she had a hard time. She didn’t really get asked out, and she had low self-esteem.” He looked sad as he thought back to that time. “One night I caught her sobbing in her room. She told me that she thought she was fat and ugly and that boys weren’t interested in her. It broke my heart.” He sighed. “So I said she and I would go on a date every week because I wanted to spend time with her and that the right guy would as well.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t expected that. That was sweet. Thoughtful, even. I hadn’t thought he was capable of either of those emotions.

“So weekly date night started. And continued, even after she met Josh, who is now her husband.”

“Do you still go on date nights?”

“Once a month. She has kids now. She’s busy. I’m busy. And oftentimes, we just watch TV shows of her choice. It’s

our time for us, just the two of us.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “She’s mad at me right now, though.”

“Oh? She heard about your poor driving?” I teased him, and he laughed loudly, his eyes alert on my face. I kinda liked the way he looked at me when I made him laugh. It made me feel like I was Sarah Silverman or Chelsea Handler or some other funny comedian that everyone loved.

“Touché. Not quite.”

“So then why is she mad?”

“Because I didn’t tell her TJ was our brother.” He scratched his head and let out a deep sigh. “I don’t know if I handled everything correctly. Maybe I should have told everyone right away. I don’t know.”

“You can’t go back,” I said softly. “So no point having too many doubts. Try and move forward.”

“Very true, oh wise one.”

“I’m just quoting my therapist.” I smiled weakly. “I have my own regrets.”

“I hope you’re over them?” he asked softly, and I just shook my head and looked away. I didn’t want to talk about it. It was off the table from being something we could joke about. “Well, I’ll go and make breakfast and then you can let me know about the puppies.”

“Sounds good. I’ll wait to shower until Pippa gets here, so I’ll have something clean to wear.”

“I can give you something to wear, if you want?”

“No, that’s fine, thanks.” There was no way that I was going to wear his clothes. That was far too intimate. I didn’t want his woodsy smell next to my body, intoxicating my senses. I didn’t need any more complications in my life. Especially with a man like Jack. I knew men like him. The life of the party. Always laughing. Always with a comeback. They were scared of commitment. Scared of anything real. I’d already been in a relationship like that before. Several. “I’ll

just have a look outside and around the house, if you don't mind?"

"I don't mind at all." He bowed his head slightly and headed back down the hallway. "It'll be ready in thirty minutes, so make your way back by then."

"Will do." I closed the door and walked back into the room. I dropped onto the mattress and stared up at the ceiling. Was my opinion of Jack changing? Did I actually think he was a good guy? "Nah," I growled into the room as I remembered the way he'd laughed at me yesterday and all the little disses he'd thrown my way.

I was not going to accept any of it. He reminded me of Adam, the guy I'd been dating when my mom died. I'd thought he was a great, caring guy, and then my whole world had collapsed when he'd told me he couldn't deal with my grief and that he hadn't signed up to be an emotional support to me. Then, he'd ghosted me.

I could still remember the conversation from when I'd told him my mom had died. "Hey, sorry to hear that, Emma, but can we talk later? I'm going to meet the guys for a beer, and I don't want to be late." I'd been less important than his nightly time out with the guys. It had hurt. Really hurt. I'd lost my mom and my faith in mankind at the same time. Aside from Pippa. Pippa had been great. Really great. She'd held me so many nights and just let me cry. She'd known that my tears had been for many reasons.

"Enough of this depressing trip down memory lane, Emma," I lectured myself as I jumped off the bed. I debated calling Pippa back, but decided to just wait until she got to Jack's ranch. I headed back to the door and opened it slowly before looking left and then right.

The hallway was long, and there were a lot of doors on the right, but I assumed they went to other private rooms, and I didn't want to be super nosy. I closed my door and made a left, heading toward the main section of the house. I looked into Jack's room as I passed it since the door was open. It was double the size of the room I was staying in and very

masculine, with a king-size bed dead center with gray sheets. Why did men love gray sheets so much? I thought they were so ugly. There was a black leather recliner in the corner and a nightstand with several colognes on it. A part of me wanted to venture into the room and explore more, but there was no way I wanted him to see me in his room.

Instead, I continued down the hallway. Directly across was a large living room, and I entered it, looking around eagerly. There was a large fireplace with logs to the right of it. Atop the fireplace was a mantelpiece filled with photos and some candles. I walked over to study the photos. They were mainly of Jack and people I assumed were his family. His sister, Jennie, was blonde with a wide smile, and her husband looked to be very handsome as well. They had two adorable kids, and I had to admit that the photos showed a picture-perfect family.

“Must be nice,” I murmured as guilt hit me. I needed to call my dad. He didn’t know I’d been fired or that I was in Montana. I knew he’d be upset that I hadn’t told him. And he had every right to feel that way. I’d sure felt hurt when Pippa had come to Montana without telling me. I thought about calling him then and there, but I knew I didn’t have the energy to talk to him at the moment.

I looked over to the large bay windows overlooking the wraparound front porch. The view was gorgeous from this room as well. There was a large, floral couch centered in front of the window and a huge, wooden coffee table in front of the couch. I looked around the rest of the room, surprised to see several bookcases full of books. Did Jack like to read as much as I did? I walked over to see what books he read and was pleasantly surprised to see a wide collection, including many classics. I wondered which ones were his favorites.

I could hear him clattering around in the kitchen cooking and singing a song I didn’t recognize. He had a nice voice, and the melody made me smile. I continued to look around the room and wasn’t surprised when I saw a guitar and music book in the corner. I wondered what sort of music he played and if he played well. Maybe he’d been in a band when he was young? He seemed to be the sort that would have been in some

sort of rock band in high school and college. He had the confidence of a man who was used to being popular. Maybe that was one of the reasons why he grated on me. The world was his oyster and he'd always been the pearl in the center. Though, I had to admit to myself that I didn't know if that was actually true or not.

I headed toward the front door so I could get some fresh air. As soon as I stepped onto the front porch, I felt a sense of calm and well-being. I made my way to the rocking chair and had a seat, lifting my legs up as the chair swung back and forth. I could see some cows in the distance, and I wondered if he was a dairy farmer or if he used them for beef. Or maybe he did both. I really had no clue how ranching worked. Though, I could tell from my vantage point on the porch that this was an expansive ranch, much bigger than TJ's piece of land. This ranch was money. Did that mean that Jack was well-off, then? He had to be, if this was his home. Not that I cared, and I certainly wasn't going to ask him.

I decided to venture further away from the house and made my way down the stairs toward one of the fields. Two young men were walking about fifty yards ahead of me, and I wondered if I should say anything.

"Good morning, ma'am." One of the men stopped and smiled at me. "You lost?"

"No, I was just exploring." I held my hands up and gestured around. "I'm staying here for a few..." I realized I wasn't sure how long I'd be in town. "I'm staying for a bit. I'm Pippa's best friend. She's dating TJ. He's Jack's best friend."

"We know TJ." The man grinned. "And his Russian bride."

"Huh?" The two men burst out laughing, and I had no idea what was so funny or who TJ's Russian bride was. Did they mean Pippa? She had said there was some drama when she'd got to town. Hadn't she been wearing her wedding dress? "Oh, I get it," I said quickly, even though I didn't really get it. "I'm

just checking out the ranch. This is my first time in Montana and on a ranch.”

“Then you’ll love Horseshoe Ranch.” The man gestured around. “The Marleys have a great place here.”

“No gunfights or anything?” I asked facetiously, thinking of *Yellowstone*. The two men looked puzzled as they shook their heads, and I wondered if they’d ever seen the show. Maybe it was like people who lived in Beverly Hills not actually watching *90210*. “Just a joke from a show,” I said quickly. “I hope you both have a nice day. I think I’ll head back to the house now. My breakfast awaits.”

“You have a good day, ma’am.” They both lifted up their cowboy hats and kept walking as I stepped away. My stomach growled, and I realized I was really looking forward to this breakfast. I wondered if Jack was a good cook, though it would be hard to mess up bacon and eggs. I made my way back to the house and inside. As I walked toward the kitchen, I felt a nervous tic in my throat. Why was I so nervous about seeing Jack again? Or was it excitement? I didn’t want to think too much about how I was feeling.

“Can I help you with anything?” I asked as I entered the kitchen. I took in the mess and tried not to laugh. The place was a disaster. Eggs and eggshells were all over the butcher-block countertops. There were two loaves of bread on the kitchen island, which was filled with different pots and pans. Jack was standing next to the large stove with flour on his face, and I wasn’t sure if I should laugh or cry. “Are you baking the bread?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Because you have flour on your face and I don’t know why you’d have flour anywhere to make eggs and bacon.”

“I was thinking of making pancakes, but then I remembered I don’t make the best pancakes, but your timing is great because your breakfast is ready. Why don’t you have a seat at the table?” He nodded to a circular table near the back of the kitchen. “I’ll bring everything over.”

“Okay.” I headed to the table, and instead of taking a seat, I continued walking past the table to the French doors at the back. I peered outside and into the backyard. It was large with a small pond and lots of wildflowers. Yellow, pink, purple, and orange petals glimmered in the sunlight. The foliage was more sunburnt orange than green. There was a swing set next to a small slide, and it hit me that Jack really was a doting uncle. “Is this your childhood home?” I asked suddenly as I turned around. “Did you grow up here?”

“No.” He shook his head. “The main ranch is where I grew up. That’s on a different part of the property. My parents still live there. You’ll see it when we go for Sunday lunch.” He picked up two plates and headed toward the table. “Grub’s up.” He laid the plates down and waved me over. “I have a breakfast fit for a queen waiting for you.”

“Oh wow, thanks.” I headed back to the table, trying not to sound too eager. I watched as Jack sat, his eyes on me as I pulled out one of the white, wooden chairs and took a seat. My eyes took in the plate, and I frowned as I observed its contents. The toast and bacon were black, and the eggs looked dry and brown. Jack offered me a proud smile, and I looked away quickly. The food looked inedible. I picked up my fork and scooped up some eggs. Jack leaned forward.

“Okay, Gordon, I’m waiting for my score.”

“Gordon?”

“Ramsey.”

“He’s on *MasterChef*, not *Top Chef*.” My fork hovered in midair. I didn’t want to be rude, but I really didn’t want to eat this. I didn’t want to say it looked like the remains of cat litter, but it looked like the remains of cat litter.

“Same difference.” He grinned. “I’m guessing this is worthy of a Michelin star.”

“What?” I gazed at him in shock. “Are you crazy?”

“I don’t think so?” He grinned. “So have a bite and tell me what you think.”

I put the fork into my mouth and chewed on the eggs. They tasted as disgusting as they looked. “One star,” I said, putting my fork down.

“Wow, thank you, Emma.” He grinned. “I’ve never felt so proud.”

“Not one Michelin star. One star out of one hundred.” I made a face. “This is disgusting, and honestly, you have to be out of your mind to bring this to the table and think that it looks good.”

“Tell me how you really feel.”

“I’m not trying to be rude, but really?” I looked down at the plate. Who served someone burned bacon? What sort of host did that? I was about to make another comment when I heard muffled laughter. I looked back up, and to my surprise Jack had the widest grin on his face I’d ever seen. “What is going on?”

“That was just a joke breakfast. I’ll go and get the real thing now.” He jumped up, hurried over to the countertop, grabbed another plate, and handed it to me. This plate had three juicy strips of bacon, two fried eggs over medium, two slices of golden-brown toast, and some pieces of fruit. It looked delicious.

“You trying to be the next Dave Chapelle or Kevin James or something?” I took a bite of the buttery toast and tried not to groan at how good it tasted. “Why on earth would you serve me a crappy breakfast before the real thing?”

“Maybe I just like seeing you get all worked up.” He leaned back in the chair. “Maybe it’s fun.”

“You’re weird, Jack Marley. Do you know that?”

“If by weird, you mean hot, sexy, and hilariously funny, I think I do. So thank you for noticing.”

I ignored his words and cut into my eggs, continuing to eat my breakfast. It was tasty and hit the spot, though I wasn’t going to tell him that. He didn’t deserve to hear that I’d rate this breakfast a ten out of ten. I’d rather not eat than have to tell him that.



## CHAPTER 8

# JACK

Emma finished every morsel on her plate and then looked over at me with a slight frown. “I guess I can give you a three-star review.”

“How very generous of you.” I jumped up and headed to the coffee machine. I needed another espresso to get me through the day. “Would you like a coffee?” I asked as I pressed the coffee grinder button to grind some beans. “I’ve got some Ethiopian beans that I’m using right now. They might not be as good as what you’re used to, but I think they’re pretty darn good.”

“I’d love a cup of coffee.” She stood up, picked up her plate, and walked over to the sink. She turned on the faucet, grabbed the liquid soap, and squeezed some onto the plate.

“No, you don’t have to do that.” I shook my head. “Just leave it in the sink. I’ll put everything in the dishwasher later.”

“Are you sure?” She looked hesitant as she held the plate in her hand. “You made breakfast for me, and I don’t want to \_\_\_”

“You don’t have to do the dishes on your first morning here.” I turned the espresso machine on and grabbed a cup. “There’s plenty of time for you to start doing chores around here.”

“Chores?” She ran her fingers through her messy bob. “What chores?”

“Milking cows, raking cowpat, feeding the chickens, doing my laundry.” I grinned as she shook her head. “Which one of those tasks would you like to do the most?”

“How about none of them?” She placed the plate into the sink. “I think the light is green.” She pointed at the machine in front of me, and I placed the cup underneath and turned the knob to brew the coffee. I watched the coffee drip into the cup, and the dark color turned light as it changed to cream. The drip stopped, and I held up the cup.

“Milk and sugar? Or do you like it black?”

“I’ll have some milk and sugar, please.”

I handed her the cup and the dish of sugar cubes before opening the fridge door and taking out a bottle of milk. I placed it on the countertop in front of her, pulled open the cutlery drawer, and took out a small spoon, placing it in her hand.

“Enjoy,” I said before grinding some more beans for my own coffee. “How do you like it?” I asked as she took her first cautious sip. Her eyes widened slightly as her first mouthful glided down her throat. I knew she was enjoying it. If she knew anything about coffee, she’d appreciate the smoothness of the bean. She took another sip, this time less cautiously, and I could see her fingers gripping the cup. “Nice, huh?”

“Better than the breakfast.” Her eyes sparkled as she took another sip, and I made my own cup. Only I drank mine black. I was finished within ten seconds and put my cup in the sink as she was still sipping on hers. “That was good,” she admitted finally. “Thank you. It was probably one of the best cups of coffee I’ve ever had.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.” I was surprised that she’d admitted that, but I was glad she liked it. “So I was thinking that—”

*Ding dong.*

“I think someone’s at the door,” Emma said as if I hadn’t also heard the ringing. “It might be Pippa with my clothes.”

“Yes, probably.” I stifled a sigh and headed toward the front of the house. I’d been about to ask her if she wanted me to take her on her first horseback ride. I wasn’t sure why, seeing as I had so much to do today. I still hadn’t caught up on the accounts from the night before, and I needed to place an order for more water troughs for the cattle. And we needed a couple of new balers. I had things I needed to get done, and none of them included taking Emma out on a horse.

TJ and Pippa were standing outside the door with a large, pink suitcase. Emma stepped outside and gave Pippa a big hug.

“Morning, sleepyhead.” Pippa smiled as she stepped back from the embrace. “How did you sleep?”

“Well,” Emma admitted. “But I have to admit that I feel groggy and dirty. I’m in desperate need of a shower.” She went to pick up her suitcase, but I stepped forward quickly and grabbed it for her. “I can carry it.” She tried to push my hand away, but that just made me tighten my grip on the handle.

“I’ll bring it inside for you.” I hoisted it up and carried it into the house. “So how’s everything going, TJ? Do you know when you’ll break ground on the new construction?” I asked as we all walked inside. He was going to build several small cabins down by the river on his property that he would use as guest houses for tourists. Then he was going to build a larger cabin for himself and Pippa. He’d had to take a loan to finance it. Well, he’d taken a loan to finance Pippa’s theater, and then her mom had given them money for the ranch, but they still had to make a monthly payment. I’d wanted to offer him Marley family money to help pay for the construction, but I knew he wanted to do it on his own. Even though he was family, everything was still too new, and his pride wouldn’t let him take financial help from us.

“The plans are going to the county next week. I’m hoping to get the permits within thirty days.” He shrugged. “But who knows how long it will take? They are slow as molasses down there at the county office.”

“True.” Bureaucracy in small towns was just as bad as in the cities. “Have you thought about asking Kacie Donato to put in a word with her dad?” Kacie’s dad was James, and the mayor of Paradise Valley, though I wasn’t really sure how he’d gotten elected as no one in town really liked him. He’d made his money in tech and then moved to town with his wife and daughter, the latter being a huge fan of TJ’s.

“Nope,” he said bluntly. “I don’t need that drama in my life.”

“Who is Kacie Donato?” Emma asked as we stood in the foyer.

“She’s this woman who has a thing for TJ.” Pippa pursed her lips. “And her mom owns the bookstore but is always traveling for Botox and crap, so the bookstore is never open.” She looked over at me and frowned. “I don’t know why you’re encouraging him to go speak to her when you know she’s been trying to get her hooks into TJ for years.”

“Just because she’s trying to get her hooks into him doesn’t mean she can reel him in.” I shrugged. “I just thought it could be helpful.”

“Well, I’m just as likely to ask for her help as you are to ask for Kaye’s,” TJ said, and I tried not to groan.

“Got it.” I tried not to roll my eyes. I still couldn’t believe that I’d ever dated her. It seemed like another lifetime.

“Who’s Kaye?” Emma asked, and I just looked over at her. Emma was so different from Kaye in every way. I didn’t even know her that well, but I knew that she’d never have done to me what Kaye had done.

“She’s Jack’s—” Pippa started, and I cut her off.

“She’s Kacie’s best friend and a girl I dated a long time ago when I was in high school.” I grabbed her suitcase. “Okay, I’ll roll this into your room, and then you should have your shower. I’ve got things to do today.” I didn’t wait for anyone to respond as I made my way to Emma’s room. I pushed open the door, placed the suitcase next to the bed, and turned back

around. Emma walked through the doorway, her eyes studying me as she stopped next to the vanity table.

“Where’s the bathroom?” she finally asked, and I pointed to the door on the other side of the room. “Thanks.” She nodded and then continued, “If you have things to do, please feel free to do them. Pippa and I will likely be hanging out today, so don’t feel like you have to entertain me or anything.”

“Are you dismissing me?” I raised an eyebrow and crossed my arms. I should have been pleased with her words. She wasn’t wrong. I had tons to do. I really had no time to be messing around with Emma and Pippa, yet a part of me wanted to spend the day with them.

“I would never think to do such a thing.” She picked up her suitcase and placed it on the edge of the bed before unzipping it.

“Really?”

“Really.” She unzipped the case and started pulling clothes out. She grabbed what appeared to be a skirt and a white top before pulling out some underwear, which was my sign to look away. I did not want to think about anything like that while thinking about Emma.

“I hope you brought some sneakers with you.” I looked down at her bare feet. “I don’t think you’ll be comfortable going around in those red heels.”

“Oh, would it be better if they were black heels?” she asked innocently. “I have a pair of them as well.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I looked at her and gawked as she waved a pair of black stilettos in the air. I stared at them in disbelief. What on earth had possessed her to bring stilettos to Montana with her? Where did she think she was going to wear them? “Where did you intend to wear those?” I couldn’t stop myself from voicing my thoughts.

“To the line-dancing bar,” she said with a straight face. I wasn’t sure if she was joking or not. “Do you line dance?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I think Montana Knights does have a line-dancing night every couple of weeks. I can ask Brandon for you.”

“Cool, thanks.” She smiled, and I realized she was definitely being serious. “What about the other bars in town? Do any of them have line-dancing nights?”

“What other bars?” I laughed. “Paradise Valley doesn’t have any other bars. Montana Knights is it.”

“No way.” Her jaw dropped. “One bar?”

“It’s not so bad. They have pool tables, darts, shuffleboard, trivia night, TVs to watch football.” I laughed as she made a face as I mentioned football. “Plus Brandon has a lot of beer on draft. You can’t go wrong.”

“I guess it’s just different from back home,” she said softly. “There are more bars than people.”

“Well, that must be a sight to see.”

“I’m just joking,” she said quickly as if I’d believed her.

“I’m not a country bumpkin, Emma, no matter what you think. I’ve been to New York. I’ve traveled quite extensively. I’ve even left the country a few times,” I teased her. “I live here in Paradise Valley because I love it, not because I don’t know anything else. I’ve visited beautiful cities, but there’s no place as special as it is here,” I said sincerely. “I hope that you come to see how magical it is here.”

“Magical as in fairies and unicorns?”

“Magical as in it’s one of the most beautiful places you could ever travel to. Trust me when I say there is no beauty like there is here in Montana.”

“Not even in Hawaii?”

“Hawaii is gorgeous,” I said with a small smile. “If I didn’t live in Montana, Hawaii would be high up on my list. However, there’s nothing that can beat a Montana summer or fall night.”

“What about winter?” she asked. “Is it freezing?”

“It’s beautiful,” I said softly. “If you decided to stay for longer, I think you will see just how amazing it is here. I think I heard a rumor that Santa Claus would love to move here.”

“Oh yeah?” She smiled. “Him and all his reindeer?”

“We’ve got the space.” I walked over to the window and looked out at the land. I was proud of Horseshoe Ranch. I was proud to continue the tradition of the Marley men and tend to the land. It was glorious here. I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. I looked back over my shoulder at Emma. She was looking at me with an assessing expression on her face. I wasn’t sure what she was thinking, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to know, either. I knew I’d gone off on a diatribe about my small town, but I was passionate about where I lived. And for some reason, I wanted Emma to come to love Paradise Valley as well. I wanted her to see the beauty that I saw. I wanted her to appreciate the small things that made this town great. “I should let you get in the shower.” I backed away from the window and then winked at her. “I don’t want you begging me to join you so I can scrub your back.”

“What?” Her jaw dropped, and I grinned as I made my way to the door. I closed it behind me before she could say anything else. I could hear Pippa and TJ talking about something as I walked back toward them. There was a small smile on my face as I entered the living room. I felt a new energy in my bones, and I was suddenly excited about what lay ahead. I didn’t want to think about it too much. Maybe it was because Emma was here, or maybe it was because TJ finally knew that he was my brother and I no longer had to keep lying about our real relationship.



## CHAPTER 9

# EMMA

“Last night was fun, wasn’t it?” Pippa and I sat on Jack’s leather couch in the family room at the back of the house. It was a cozy and fun space with a huge TV hanging on the wall and several seating arrangements around the room. The walls were full of paintings of Montana, and it was apparent to me that he was proud of where he was from.

“Honestly, I can’t really remember that much,” I admitted to Pippa. “I think I was running on adrenaline and carbs all night. It’s all a bit of a haze.”

“So you don’t remember spending all of yesterday arguing back and forth with Jack?”

“Oh, I remember that.” I sat back on the couch and wrinkled my nose. “How could I forget him and his obnoxious comments?”

“Oh, boy. So do you think that you will be okay here, or would you rather us figure out something else?” Pippa’s eyes surveyed my face anxiously, and I reached forward and squeezed her hand to reassure her that everything was okay.

“I’m fine. It’ll be fine. Jack seems to love going back and forth. In fact, I think he even instigates it sometimes.” I thought back to the burned breakfast this morning. It had been kinda funny but definitely a bit immature. I wasn’t sure how to think about him. And when I was in situations like that, the best course of action was always to ignore it and push it into a corner of my brain so I didn’t have to think about it.

“If you’re sure.” Pippa sounded like she was the unsure one. “It’s not an inconvenience or anything. I know TJ can figure something else out.”

“It’s fine, Pippa. TJ has other things to worry about.” I stared at her for a few moments. “How is he feeling about the fact that he has a long-lost father and siblings and that his brother knew all these years and didn’t tell him?”

“I think he’s still in shock, if I’m totally honest.” She lowered her voice. “That’s a huge bomb to be dropped on you when you’re just living your life. Especially with him finding out when I came back into his world. I think he’s been so happy about us and so happy to have some answers that he’s not thinking about the other emotions that I know are back there. Sometimes, I see him staring at a photo of him and Jack from some mountain climbing they did in Colorado that he has in the living room, and I see this look on his face...” Pippa held her hands to her heart and half-smiled. “And it’s so poignant, so full of questioning, and I want to ask him what he’s thinking, but he switches it off almost as soon as the thoughts hit him.” She let out a deep sigh. “It’s not something they’ll get through and process overnight. I get that. I just want to be there for him if he needs me.”

“I think Jack feels badly about everything as well.” I thought back to his face the couple of times his and TJ’s relationship had come up. He held guilt. He was still unsure if he’d done the right thing. I wasn’t sure what I would have done if I was in his position. How did you even process such a thing? “Though, it seems like TJ is not holding it against him. They did just go to play basketball with the other guys, so that’s good. It must be kinda cool to expand your family.”

“Oh, Emma.” Pippa’s face changed to one of contrition, and she shifted over to hug me. “I’m sorry, I didn’t even think about how this must make you feel.”

“It’s fine.” I shoed her away. “Everything isn’t about me.”

“But I’m sure hearing about their family dynamic makes you think of your mom, right?”

“A bit,” I admitted with a nod. “It’s still hard, though I suppose it will always be hard. Grief is a bit like a rollercoaster. Somedays you almost forget you’re on the ride. Then, suddenly, you’re at the top, and it just hits you and everything goes crashing down.” I pressed my lips together. “I’m okay right now, though. I’m not in the depths of despair.”

“Everything in your life is changing, though. Emotionally you’ve gone through a lot, what with the job and everything.”

“Does it feel like my life is crashing around me? A little bit,” I admitted. “But I’m not in the same space I was when she first passed or even a year after she passed because that was when it really hit me. I have to say that there are days that I forget she’s not here. Like when I got to Montana, I reached for my phone so I could call her and ask her to guess where I was, but then I remembered that I couldn’t.” I could feel tears in my eyes. “I feel lost, Pippa. I feel like I don’t know what to do in my life anymore. I have no job. I have no boyfriend. I have no you in New York anymore.” I gave her a look. “And don’t get me wrong, this isn’t to make you feel guilty. It’s just to say that I have nothing holding me down, and I don’t know where to go from here.”

“Do you want to stay in New York?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “It’s safe there. I know my coffee shop. I know how to get around. I have a routine. A grocery store. A home. But I don’t know if I’m happy there, you know?”

Pippa nodded slowly, her large brown eyes wet with unshed tears. She was the definition of “get you a friend that will cry when you cry and laugh when you laugh.” Pippa was never scared of asking the questions that other people shied away from. There were certain people in your life who were there for you during good times and bad, who understood that just because you were smiling, it didn’t mean you were okay.

“You always have a place with me, Emma.” She spoke clearly and slowly. “Even if it means I rent an apartment in town, and we live together. I want to be here for you.”

“But that would mean moving to Montana, and what about TJ?”

“TJ has the rest of his life to live with me. I don’t want to leave you alone if you’re feeling down. The last thing I want is for you to feel like you have no one and no home, Emma. You’re my best friend, and you have always supported me. You have a heart of gold, even if you don’t share that with everyone. I never want you to feel lonely. I never want you to feel lost. I am always here for you. Always. I will drop anything and everything.”

“But TJ wouldn’t—”

“Forget TJ.” She squeezed my hands. “I love him with all my heart. He holds a piece of my heart. He’s my soulmate. We will always be there for each other. And I know that he knows if I decide to move in with you again, he will understand. The bigger question is would you live in Montana?”

“I don’t know.” I looked around. “I mean, no. I doubt it very much. I’m just feeling down right now. Maybe I’m about to get my period. You know I always get emotional before that time of the month. I just need to spend some time with you and get some good sleep, and then I will be right as rain again.” I jumped up. “Let’s go outside, get some fresh air, and stop talking about all the sorrowful things that have happened to me.”

“You wanna talk about Jack?” Pippa jumped up, and I just gave her a look. “Fine, we won’t talk about Jack. Or should we give him a different name?”

“What do you mean, should we give him a different name?”

“So that we can talk about him without him knowing.” She grinned. “It’s what people do...at least in the movies.”

“We’re not in the movies, Pippa, and I have no interest in Jack, so I don’t need to talk about him with some secret name like he’s James Bond or something.”

“That’s it.” Pippa grinned. “007.”

“I am not calling Jack ‘007.’ If he ever found out about that, it would go to his head.”

“And you wouldn’t want that, would you?” She giggled. “You wouldn’t want him to think you were talking about him, like you cared or anything.”

“I don’t care about him. I don’t even know him. Pippa, do not even think about trying to set us up.”

“I just want you to be happy. I know you want to meet a nice guy.”

“I’d rather online date than go out with Heptagon.”

“Heptagon?”

“It’s a seven-sided shape.” I grinned. “If we call him ‘Seven’ or ‘Double 0,’ I think it would be obvious.”

“So, he does have a nickname. It can always be Loverboy, if you’d prefer that?”

“Pippa, you do not want me to start going off. I am not interested in Jack. Whatsoever.”

“Sure.”

“Don’t say ‘sure’ in that tone like you think I don’t mean it.” I glared at her and tried to ignore the racing of my heart at her words. “I do mean it. Jack Marley is off the table. I am not interested in him whatsoever.” I knew I sounded like a repeating parrot, but I couldn’t stop myself.

“Me thinketh the lady doth protest too much.” She giggled and held her hand up. “But fine, I will stop. You obviously have zero interest in him. Or maybe just two percent interest.”

“Pippa.”

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out.”

“How old are we?” I shook my head but couldn’t stop myself from smiling at her. “Looks like TJ really has taken you back to your childhood.”

“In all the best ways.” She nodded, not getting or not acknowledging the dig. “He is everything I’d always hoped for

in a partner but never thought actually existed.”

“I will say that, from what I’ve seen so far, he seems pretty great,” I admitted reluctantly. I loved Pippa, and I was suspicious of any man in her life, but I didn’t want to be a pessimist. She deserved the best. I truly believed that in life, we receive what we put out in the universe and that we should always think positively of our friends and family. If your own loved ones didn’t talk happy words over you, then who would?

“I want you to find your TJ, and sure, maybe it won’t be Jack, but someone else out there.” Her voice cracked slightly, and I could see that she was tearful. “You deserve the best, Emma.”

“We’re going to have a tear-fest up in here if we don’t stop.” I jumped up. “Let’s go and do something fun. I’m here in Montana—a sentence I never thought I’d ever say in my life. I want to see this city you’ve been going on and on about and maybe even meet up with some of your new friends. They were really lovely.”

“Oh, we could go to Mindy’s coffee shop. The gang is normally there every morning.”

“Ooh, yes, and her brother was really cute as well,” I said, thinking about the flirtatious Rafael. I’d quite enjoyed our banter and had hoped he’d join us at dinner, but it seemed like Jack didn’t really like him. Which was a pity as I thought Rafael appeared to be a nice guy. Okay, if I was being honest, he looked hot. He looked like the sort of guy that made your heart race, but you knew you should walk away from him.

“Ooh, do I sense some interest there?” Pippa’s eyes were alert as she gazed at me, and I knew I had to keep my cool or she’d be trying to set me up with him as well. I didn’t want to think about men right now. I had too many other priorities on my mind. Like a job. What was I going to do with my life? Sometimes I felt like I was just going day by day, but I wasn’t actually excelling at anything. I didn’t want to be going through life just to get by. I didn’t just want a job that paid me well. I wanted to be appreciated. I wanted to like the people I

worked with. I wanted to respect them. I wanted them to respect me. I knew I needed to analyze my path forward, and I needed to do that without thinking about men. I didn't want to make any decisions based on a man.

“I think right now I'm just focusing on work, you know?” I looked down at the ground as a wave of sadness passed through me. I just wanted it all to be okay. I just wanted to love life and feel like I belonged. I wanted both a job, and a man, to want me more than anything else. Though I wasn't sure if I was being greedy in wanting that.

“I will support whatever you want. Let me text TJ and tell him that we're headed over to Mindy's, and then they can meet us after the basketball game. I'll just drive TJ's truck, seeing as Jack drove.”

“Sounds good. Let me go and put on some lipstick, and maybe some mascara.” I laughed as she wiggled her eyebrows at me. “Hey, just because I'm not looking for a man doesn't mean I don't want to look good.”

I made my way back to my room, and a smile crossed my face as I looked out the window. There was a flock of birds flying by, and the image was so picturesque. The sky was looking a little overcast now, but it was dramatic in its beauty. I wondered if it would snow for Christmas. I wondered if I would still be here for Christmas. I kinda hoped so, even though I also hoped my dream job would come through as well. The problem was that I didn't know what my dream job consisted of.



## CHAPTER 10

# JACK

“That was Pippa.” TJ grinned as he put his phone back into his pocket. “She and Emma are heading over to Mindy’s coffee shop. I guess they got fed up waiting for us.”

“I had a feeling it was her.” Brandon laughed. “Otherwise, I was going to ask you who you were saying, ‘I love you,’ to so many times.” He exchanged a look with Aiden, and I could feel myself grinning as well. TJ really was a different man when he was around Pippa or talking about her. It was an interesting thing to see. I felt like I knew him pretty well, having been his best friend for years, but she brought out a different side of him, a side I didn’t know.

“I wonder if Emma is mad at me.” I thought for a moment about the morning. She’d laughed at my breakfast prank, and I’d thought we were starting to get along. “I told her she could go with me to look at puppies, but then I went to play basketball instead.”

“Do you think she cares?” Brandon asked, gazing at me. “She didn’t seem the sort to be into puppies when I saw her at the bar last night.”

“I bet she’d be interested in puppies if I were to show her.” Rafael ran his fingers through his dark hair, and I tried not to glare at him as he spoke. I watched as he picked up his dark gray towel and wiped the sweat off his face. We’d been playing three-on-three with me, TJ, and Aiden on one team and Brandon, Rafael, and Ethan on the other team. The other team had dominated us, thanks to Rafael, who seemed to have

developed an interest in bodybuilding since the last time I'd seen him. I wondered if Emma was into muscles.

"You got a thing for her?" TJ asked in surprise, his eyes surveying Rafael as he pulled off his T-shirt and swapped it out for a clean one. "Don't go messing her around."

"Would I do such a thing?" Rafael asked and then laughed. "Believe it or not, fellas, I'm a changed guy. I'm not just looking to hit it and quit it anymore. I'm looking for something real."

"How poetic." I grabbed my water bottle and took a sip. "Do the women you've dated know that's how you refer to them?"

"I was a boy, but now I'm a man." Rafael shrugged. "Plus, I have a sister, and now I'm wise enough to know that I wouldn't want anyone treating Mindy the way I've...well, you know. She deserves a good guy."

"She's dating someone?" Brandon asked nonchalantly. "I didn't know that. Who's the guy?"

"What guy?" Rafael looked confused. "I didn't know she had a man."

"You just said that..." Brandon shook his head and grabbed his duffle bag. He looked annoyed and frustrated. "Never mind. Maybe I misunderstood you."

I looked over at TJ, and he grinned at me, his blue eyes alight with humor. He gave me a knowing look, and I gave him a quick nod. We'd both started to notice that Brandon seemed like he had an unhealthy obsession with everything related to Mindy Messina, and I wasn't quite sure what it meant. Did he like her? Did he want to date her? Did he want to take out the competition? Even though her bakery and his bar weren't really in the same space, I knew that Brandon wanted to bring in more of a lunch crowd to Montana Knights, and most of us spent our time and money at Mindy's.

"My sister hasn't dated in a while." Rafael stopped suddenly and shook his head. "Actually, I take that back. I have no idea when her last date was. She hasn't shared that

information with me since she was in tenth grade, and told me she was sneaking out with Tommy Monteith and I told our parents and she got grounded.” He laughed and threw his head back. “I mean, did she really think I was going to let her lose her virginity in the back of his Chevy pickup truck? Especially since I knew that he had that thing going on with Sally.”

“Sally?” I asked, surprised. “Wait, not Sally Pines, the substitute teacher?”

“Yup.” Rafael grinned. “Tommy and Sally used to meet up on weekends. She was only a couple of years older than us, remember?”

“Wow.” I was shocked at his comment. “I had no idea. That’s crazy.”

“Yup, I tried to explain that to Mindy when she got all upset with me, but she didn’t want to hear it.” He shrugged. “But as her big brother, I’m going to look out for her, just like I’m going to look out for Emma. Though, not in a sisterly way if you know what I mean.”

“Atta boy.” Ethan started laughing and held his hand up. They high-fived, and I tried to squash the anger inside of me. I didn’t like the way Rafael spoke about Emma. And I knew I had to let it go. It wasn’t like I thought he was the worst man on Earth. He wasn’t. He just wasn’t a great guy in relationships, and even though he said that he was better now than before, I didn’t quite believe it. Not when he was speaking about Emma in that way. It was distasteful.

“Let’s head over to Mindy’s.” I decided to change the subject. I didn’t want anyone to question why I was being antsy. Shoot, I didn’t even want to question myself. I was just looking out for her because she was close to Pippa, and Pippa was going to become my family.

“I could go for a brisket sandwich.” TJ nodded. “And some fries.”

“Me, too. That game wore me out.”

“Even though you lost.” Rafael laughed. “You little slowpokes were nothing compared to me. You gotta keep up,

boys.”

“You got lucky.” TJ rolled his eyes. “Rematch later this week. Same teams. Then let’s see who wins.”

“You’re on.” Rafael grinned. “And how about we make it interesting? Twenty dollars?”

“Fifty dollars,” I shot back. “The easiest fifty dollars I’ll make this week.”

“Really, Jack?” TJ stared at me in surprise, and I could tell what he was thinking. He and I both knew that we’d have a very hard time beating whatever team Rafael was on. But for some reason, I wanted to bring him down a notch. He was entirely too cocky and full of himself. Normally, it didn’t bother me, but today it irked me.

“What, do you think I should make it a hundred dollars?” I asked, feigning a confidence that I didn’t really have. TJ shook his head, and I chuckled. “You don’t think we can beat him? I know we can. Have some faith, bro.”

“I think you’re both going to have to have a lot more than faith, but what do I know?” Rafael burst out laughing, and I proceeded to pull my phone out so I could ignore him as best as I could. My head felt hot, and I could feel the tension in my shoulders. I was annoyed. In fact, I was more than annoyed; I was pissed off. What did women see in Rafael?

“I’m going to text Pippa and tell her we will meet her there.”

“Oh.” Rafael laughed. “I want to surprise her. Make her day.”

“Make her day?” I looked up at him. “Who are you, Al Pacino?”

“Is he as hot as me?” Rafael asked, and the other guys laughed, thinking I was joking. I was frustrated that I was letting his comments bother me. What did I care if Rafael thought he was the hottest cowboy to hit Paradise Valley since sliced bread?

“If you mean does he burn, then I don’t know,” I snapped back and grinned. Rafael looked at me for a few moments, threw his head back, and slapped me around the shoulder as he laughed.

“You’ve got jokes, Jack.”

“At least I don’t have crabs.” I winked at him, and he just laughed. I could see TJ glancing at me. He knew something was off with me, but I didn’t want him to ask me any questions. How could I explain that Rafael’s comments about Emma were irking me? Emma was nothing to me. I barely knew her. She certainly didn’t mean anything to me. And I knew that I didn’t mean anything to her.

Absolutely nothing.

Aside from being an annoyance. Or, in her eyes, a bad driver. If I was honest with myself, I did feel a little bad for laughing at her. Now that I knew her better, I understood that she’d been stressed out. And my reaction had likely added to her stress. Not that I would admit that to her. I didn’t want her to think that I was accepting the blame for her bad driving.

My heart began racing as we approached Mindy’s bakery. I wondered if Pippa and Emma had made it inside already or if they were still on the way. I wasn’t sure why I cared. I’d just seen her about an hour ago. I ran my fingers through my hair, walking into the store like I had no care in the world. The smell of bacon made my stomach rumble. Even though I’d had breakfast, the workout had made me hungry again.

“Morning, y’all.” Mindy waved at us from behind the counter, and I stifled a groan as I saw that Kaye was working today. It was always weird seeing my ex-girlfriend. Even though we hadn’t dated in years, I still felt slightly annoyed having to talk to her. That probably had to do with the fact that she’d cheated on me, gotten pregnant, and then lied and said it was my baby. I’d been hurt at the time, but was long over it. What was more frustrating now was the fact that she wanted to get back together with me. She’d told me one night at Montana Knights that cheating on me had been the biggest mistake of her life and that she would do anything for me to

give her another chance. But I was just not interested in getting back together with her. She was not in any way, shape, or form a woman I wanted to spend any amount of time with.

I was pretty sure she thought I was still single because she'd broken my heart and that I'd never gotten over her, but that was the furthest thing from the truth imaginable.

## CHAPTER II



# EMMA

“So do you and TJ have plans to get married anytime soon?” I looked over at Pippa with narrowed eyes. She stared at me with a gob-smacked expression on her face. “What? Why do you look so shocked that I asked you that?”

“Emma, I just got out of an engagement. There’s no way I’m going to get engaged already,” she said, giggling. “I mean, I love TJ, and I know I wanna spend the rest of my life with him, but we’ve got time. We don’t have to get engaged or get married. I mean, people already call me the runaway bride in town.”

“I know. That’s so funny,” I said, laughing. “When I was driving here, I met this lady, Daisy. I don’t think you know her, but she knows you.”

“Oh yeah. I don’t know a Daisy,” she said, shaking her head. “But she knows me?”

“You live in Paradise Valley, one of the smallest towns in the United States of America. Did you know that the population was five hundred?” I asked her, remembering the street sign I’d seen as I’d driven into the city limits.

“Um, I don’t know if it’s five hundred anymore,” she said. “It’s five hundred one now with me.”

“Oh, that’s true. They will have to change the sign.”

“Yeah, I’m sure they’re gonna do that for little me,” Pippa said. She glanced down at the paper on my lap. “You are so

talented, Emma. This is amazing. You should totally just become an artist.”

“Um, thank you, Pippa. I appreciate the words. But I am not good enough to quit my day job and be an artist, even though, I guess, technically, there is no day job to quit because I got fired.”

She reached over and squeezed my arm. “I hope you’re not taking that personally. You know, they were...” She paused. “Well, I don’t wanna be rude, but you know what I was gonna say?”

“I do,” I said, nodding. “And I agree. They were definitely that. I just don’t know what’s gonna happen next. I feel like my life is in disarray.”

“Why? You’ve got so much going for you, Emma.”

“I mean, do I?” I bit down on my lip and stared at her for a couple of seconds. “You know, I’m happy for you. I love you. TJ seems like a great guy from what I know so far. But I’m gonna miss you.”

“I’m gonna miss you, too.” Pippa’s eyes looked sad, and I regretted my words. I didn’t wanna bring any sadness to the moment.

“But hey, I said let’s not dwell on our future sadness.”

“You could always move to Montana,” she said eagerly. “Then we wouldn’t have to be apart.”

“What am I gonna do in Montana?” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t know of any marketing jobs or Fortune 500 companies.”

“Well, have you looked?”

“Well, no, I haven’t looked, but—”

“But nothing, Emma. Think about it.”

“Yeah, I guess. We’ll see.” I looked over at an elk. “It’s just such a majestic animal, isn’t it?”

“It really is. Did I tell you I saw this video from Yellowstone?”

Pippa stared at me, and I shook my head. “What was the video about?”

“Well,” she said, “there was this guy with a phone...”

“Uh huh. Continue.”

“And the elk was lying down in the grass.”

“As they do.” I smiled.

“Yeah. Well, the stupid idiot ran up to the elk trying to take photos. He must have been a tourist or something. Then the elk gets up, and you would think the guy would back away because this is a majestic elk and he’s got huge antlers and he’s not exactly your best friend. But no, he decided to get closer to try and get a selfie.”

“Oh my gosh. What happened?” I asked. “Don’t tell me. Don’t tell me. Actually, I wanna know. Tell me.”

“Well, the elk charged him, and he fell on the ground and hid, and then the elk turned away.”

“Oh my gosh. That’s absolutely ridiculous.”

“It’s crazy what some people will do for selfies. Like, get a life. Am I right?”

“I mean, it would be cool to get a selfie with an elk, but I wouldn’t be stupid enough to do that,” I said, laughing. “I’m not that vain.”

“No, you’re not,” she said. “Oh, TJ’s texting me. He wants to know where we are.”

“Maybe because we’ve been parked here for thirty-five minutes,” I said, “and they’re waiting on us.”

“Yeah, I’m sure Jack must be wondering where you are.”

“Do not make that voice, Pippa. You sound ridiculous.” I scoffed.

“What? You know he’s missing you already.”

“Why would he be missing me?” I stared at her like she was crazy, even though my heart raced at her words.

“Because,” she said, “you guys have a thing.”

“Pippa, we do not have anything. For the last time, I will tell you that he means—”

Pippa started singing, “Emma and Jack sitting in the tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, second comes marriage. Third comes the baby in the baby carriage.”

“Oh my gosh. Really, Pippa?”

“I know. That’s so grade school. It must be because I’m just so happy in love.”

“You are too happy right now. Maybe you should sing that song about you and TJ.”

“Oh, I mean, I am not gonna lie. I can’t wait ‘til I have his babies. I hope we have a huge family. They’re gonna be so cute, and I really hope they get his blue eyes.”

“He does have nice eyes.” I nodded. “But you’ve got pretty gorgeous brown eyes, too.”

“I know. Maybe some of our kids will have blue eyes and some of them will have brown eyes.”

“Yeah. I guess you just don’t know with genetics,” I said, finishing off my drawing. I looked down at it. “That was really fun. You know, maybe if we have time, we can stop at an art store. Is there one in Paradise Valley?”

“I don’t know if there’s an art store specifically,” Pippa said. “But I’m sure we can find you some watercolor paints.”

“That would be so cool.”

“Maybe I’ll join you.” Pippa suggested.

“Yeah, you should.” I encouraged her.

“I don’t know, though. I have never been a good artist.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I said, laughing, thinking about her basic drawings. “But it doesn’t matter if you’re good or not. It just matters if you enjoy doing them.”

“That’s true,” she said. “Okay, let’s go. I don’t want TJ to call the police wondering where we are.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Your husband-to-be.”

“One day,” she said. “One day, I will be Pippa Wyatt. That’s kind of a cool name, eh?”

“Yeah? You wouldn’t be Pippa Chase-Wyatt?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m happy to just be Pippa Wyatt. I think it’s cute. TJ and Pippa Wyatt.”

“Oh my gosh. How many times have you said that?” I asked, laughing.

“Okay. Maybe a couple of times in the bathroom. I mean, I haven’t said it in front of TJ. I don’t want him to think I’m absolutely crazy.”

“Oh, he already knows you’re crazy.”

“Yeah, he does.” She giggled as she started the ignition. “But when we get to Mindy’s I’ll ask him if he knows where we can get some watercolors. Wouldn’t it be cool if you, like, opened an art store in town and sold your paintings? You could have a gallery. Oh my gosh. Wouldn’t that be so cool if I owned the local theater, and you owned the gallery?”

“Not gonna happen,” I said. “I like painting and drawing, but I’m not that good. And I certainly have no interest in opening a gallery. I mean, it would be nice to have a store that sold pieces of art, but not just art.”

“Ooh. Like books and stuff?” she asked.

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “That would always be fun.”

“That would be super cool,” she said, nodding. “Something to think about.”

I just looked at her and shook my head as we pulled off.

## CHAPTER 12

# JACK

I looked over at TJ, and he did not look concerned that Pippa and Emma weren't at the coffee shop yet. "You sure they're okay?" I asked him, raising my empty coffee cup and looking down at my empty plate. "They've been a while."

"I guess they pulled over to look at something." TJ shrugged nonchalantly as if he didn't care. I nodded slowly. If TJ didn't care, I certainly couldn't kick half a fuss. And I certainly didn't want to bring up Pippa's driving habits, seeing as I just had a run-in with Emma the day before. But Pippa was from New York as well, and she was Emma's best friend. For all I knew, Emma and Pippa had learned how to drive at the same place.

"Oh, look," Rafael said, standing up, a wide smile crossing his face. "It's the girls." I could feel myself reddening at his happy expression like he was excited to see them, but I downplayed it. I didn't want anyone to figure out that I had been apprehensive or that I was annoyed at the attention that Rafael was giving Emma. The bell over the door jangled for a couple of seconds, and TJ stood up.

"There you are, Pips. I've been worried about you." He walked over to her, and I looked over my shoulder.

She ran into his arms and gave him a big kiss on the lips. "Hey. Sorry. We saw an elk in a field, and Emma got really excited." I stared at Emma in surprise. She blushed slightly, looking as cute as ever with her short blonde bob and big, wide blue eyes.

“You saw an elk?” I stared at her. “And you just wanted to stare at it, or were you trying to make friends or what?” I grinned at Emma as I stood up and walked over to her.

“Oh yeah, I figured he might be friendlier than you,” she said. “I needed to meet one nice person in Montana that I didn’t already know.”

“You met me, didn’t you?” TJ asked, and she laughed.

“No, don’t be silly Emma,” Pippa spoke up and grabbed something from Emma’s hand. “Emma wanted to paint the elk, but we didn’t have any paints. So, I gave her this pad of paper and a pencil, and look at the amazing job she did.” She held up the white pad, and I stared at the page in surprise. There was a detailed pencil drawing of the mountain range, sky, some clouds, and a majestic elk whose antlers were large and proud. She’d shaded in the eyes so that they almost looked real. I was impressed by her talent. She really was a surprising lady.

“Wow,” I said, not even knowing what to say. “You are quite the artist.”

“I dabble here and there.”

“She’s just being modest,” Pippa said. “She totally could’ve been an artist. But she didn’t think she’d make money, so she went into marketing.”

“Isn’t that what happens to most of us?” Emma asked, blushing.

“You’re really talented.” Rafael took the pad. “I should commission you to do a self-portrait of me. Do you do nudes?” He burst out laughing, and I just shook my head as I stared at him.

“Ignore him,” I said. “Are you guys hungry? Do you want us to order something from Mindy or...”

“I’m okay,” Emma said, smiling slightly. “I had a somewhat of a big breakfast, even though part of it was burned and disgusting.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, grinning at her. “But the rest of it was pretty good, right?”



“I can’t complain,” she said, smiling.

I laughed. “So, you’re really into painting, huh?”

“I mean, yeah. Actually, Pippa and I were going to ask TJ if he knew where we could get some watercolor paints. I don’t suppose you would know?”

“Yeah, actually, I do. You forget I have a little niece and a nephew, and I get stuff for them to paint and draw all the time.”

“Really?” she asked, looking surprised. “All the time?”

“Okay, well, maybe not all the time. Maybe once or twice. But I know where to get stuff. I’ve lived here all my life. Remember?”

“I do remember,” she said. “That would be cool if you don’t mind going.”

“No, it would be my pleasure. In fact, we can go and check out the puppies first, and then we can go and check out the art supply store for you.”

“That sounds cool,” she said, nodding. “So, there’s an actual art supply store?”

“Well, no,” I said, laughing. “It’s not just art supplies. They have quite a few other things as well.”

“Oh, like what?”

“Like tackle.” I laughed.

“The art supply store is a tackle store?” She laughed.

“Well, I mean, this is Paradise Valley. They got a little bit of this and a little bit of that.”

“Okay. Well, that sounds good.”

“Are you ready to go now or...?”

“Let the girl get something to eat,” Rafael said, coming over to us. I just looked at him. “You sure you don’t want some pancakes? Mindy makes the best pancakes in town. Blueberry, banana, chocolate chip. Hey, we can even do some caramel chips if you want.”

“Oh. I mean, that does sound good.” Emma said.

“And some coffee. I can make you my famous Mexican mocha.” He smiled at her. “You don’t want to leave before you try that, do you?”

“Well, you do make it sound yummy. What is a Mexican mocha?” Emma asked, beaming at him.

“Well, that would be revealing all,” he said, winking. “Hey, Mindy.” He looked over at his sister. “I’m going to make Emma here a Mexican mocha. You got any pepper?”

“Pepper?” Emma screeched. “In a mocha?”

“Trust me. It’s not the pepper you think.”

“I don’t know if I want...”

“Trust me?” he asked.

“Okay,” she said and turned back at me. “Is it okay if I get some pancakes and a coffee before we go, or did you need to leave now? I mean, if you need to leave now, that’s fine. I can just get a ride back with Pippa and TJ and...”

“It’s fine,” I said, nodding and holding in a breath. I didn’t want to show my annoyance with Rafael. “I’ll just let them know that we’re going to be a little bit later.”

“Oh, please don’t delay anything because of me. I know that you wanted to go and—”

“Hey,” I cut her off, shaking my head. “It’s fine.” I watched as Rafael went behind the counter and started messing around with the espresso machine. I stared at him through Emma’s eyes. He was tall and handsome with dimples, and he was flirtatious and fun. And the way he was smiling at Emma and the way she was smiling back at him was annoying me. I bit down on my lip and took a couple of breaths. I was about to ask Emma if there was anything else she wanted to see when her phone started ringing.

“Oh.” She grabbed it and looked over at Pippa. “It’s the headhunter. I’m just going to pop outside and take this,” she said. I watched as she walked out the door, and Pippa looked around at us with a smile.

“She’s got so many headhunters contacting her. She was like the marketing woman of New York City. So many companies want her. I just hope that she can stay for Christmas because it would be so great to have her here. I don’t want her to go back to New York City right away.”

“Yeah. I mean, she just got here,” I said. “That would be crazy if she left right away.”

“I think she just wanted to make sure I was okay.” She looked over at TJ and squeezed his hand. “She was worried about me, and that’s what best friends do. If they’re worried about each other, they check up on them.”

“Yeah,” I said, suddenly feeling tense. Was she going to get a job and just leave tomorrow? I’d barely gotten to know her. But, I reasoned to myself, if she had to go, she had to go. Maybe that would be for the best.

About five minutes later, Emma walked back in, a smile on her face. Rafael hurried from behind the counter with a large mug and held it in front of her. “Okay, try this and tell me what you think.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking the cup and sipping. Her eyes widened with glee, and she offered him a warm, happy smile. “This is absolutely amazing. It’s got the right balance of heat, chocolate, and caffeine. Thank you so much for making this for me.”

“You’re welcome,” he said. “I’ll make one for you any time of the day or night. Just ask.”

“Really, Rafe?” Mindy said, shaking her head. “Ignore my brother. He’s such a flirt.”

“It’s okay,” Emma said. “I don’t mind.”

“She really doesn’t,” Pippa said. “And I don’t mind, either, because Emma needs to get her flirt on.”

“Pippa.” Emma glared at her best friend, and Pippa just laughed.

“What? I’m not trying to hook you up with anyone.”

“Pippa.” Emma glared again, and Rafael just grinned.

“Hey, Emma, if you ever want to flirt with me or go on a date or—” Rafael started.

“Hey, are those pancakes nearly done?” I cut off their conversation. No way was I letting him ask her out in front of me. “I really need to get over to the farm so we can see those puppies and then head over to the tackle shop to get you your art supplies.”

“Sure. Let me check,” Mindy said, giving me a knowing look. I just stared back at her. I had no idea why she was looking at me that way.

“TJ, I think we’re going to have to figure out plans for Thanksgiving,” I said, staring at my phone. “I think Mom and Dad want to know what you and Pippa want to bring. And Emma, I’m pretty sure I let you know this before, but we would love to have you. So, if you’re going to be in town, just let me know.”

“Oh,” she said, smiling. “Thank you. I guess I just don’t know yet. It all depends on the job stuff and...”

“Well, how did it go with the headhunter?” I asked, hating that I was the one that asked her, but I really wanted to know.

“She said there are, like, five companies that want to interview me and that they’re really interested in hiring me.” She looked over at Pippa. “I guess you were right—I’m not a loser after all.” I stared at her in surprise. She seemed so confident, so intelligent, so beautiful. Why on earth would she think she was a loser?

“I told you everyone wants you, Emma,” Pippa said. “You’re amazing.”

“I second that,” Rafael said. “I think you’re amazing, too.” I wanted to say I thirdered that, but there was no way I was going to. I didn’t need everyone wondering if I’d gone soft.

## CHAPTER 13

# EMMA

“Oh my gosh. These puppies are so adorable.” I bent down and played with three puppies that were running around and yapping. Their small, brown eyes looked at me innocently, and I could feel my heart aching to grab hold of all of them and squeeze them tight. I looked over at Jack, who was standing there watching me, a curious expression on his face. “I don’t know how you’re going to choose. I just love all of them.”

“Well, I can’t take all of them. Puppies are a lot of work, you know.”

“I know, and I’m not the one that’s getting them. I’m just... Oh, you’re so cute,” I said as one licked me on the hand. I picked it up and saw that it was a girl. “You’re such a sweet little girl. Oh my gosh. Yes, you are. Yes, you are.” I rubbed the puppy’s belly and held it to me. I kissed it on the side of the face and then put it back down to pick up another puppy, which turned out to be a boy. “Oh my gosh. They’re brother and sister, and they’re so cute. You can see how much they love each other.”

I sighed as Jack walked over to me, shaking his head. “You’re no help. You know that, right?”

“What? What did you want me to do? I can’t help you choose. I can’t say no to any of them. If I lived here, I would most probably want all of them.”

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing you don’t live here, then.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said, not sure what he meant by those words.

“I guess if I was Rafael, I might get all of them,” Jack said.

I stared at him in confusion. “What does Rafael have to do with anything?”

“Oh, nothing. But I was wondering if you were thinking about him and—”

“What do you mean, if I was thinking about him? Why would I be thinking about him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because he asked you on a date and...”

“He didn’t ask me on a date.” I shook my head. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, so you weren’t flirting with Rafael at the coffee shop?” he asked as he bent down to pet one of the puppies.

“No, I wasn’t flirting with Rafael at the coffee shop. I mean...” I smiled for a couple of seconds, thinking about my banter with Rafael. “Okay. Maybe we were kind of flirting, but it was nothing serious. Why? Was I being obvious? Do you think he thinks I like him or something? Did he say something to you when you guys were playing basketball?”

“What do you mean, did he say something to me?” Jack snapped.

“I don’t know. Did he say something about me or ask you?”

“Why are we talking about Rafael?” he said. “I’m here to decide which one of these puppies is going to help me on the farm.”

“What?” My jaw dropped. “You are the one that brought up Rafael. Not me.”

“I don’t recall,” he said. “Anyway, I think I might get this one. This boy looks like he’s sweet.”

“But then you’ll separate him from his sister.” I sighed. I mean, I knew he couldn’t get all of them, but this particular boy puppy and girl puppy looked so cute together. “You can’t get both of them?” I asked, standing up and walking to the side of the room. Both the boy and the girl followed me. “Oh my gosh. You have to get both of them. They’re adorable. You can’t split them up.”

“I mean, I guess I could get both.” He sighed. “You want me to get both?”

“Does it matter what I want?”

“I asked you to come, so of course I value your opinion.”

“If you are sure...” I was taken aback by his words. Why was he being so nice to me? And was he being sincere or was this some sort of joke or test? I wasn’t sure, but I wasn’t going to question him. I kind of liked it when Jack was serious like this. “Can I name one of them if you do get both of them?”

“You can name both of them if you want.”

“Really? Can I give them crazy names?”

“Oh boy. What do you mean by crazy?” Jack questioned.

“I mean, I’m not going to call them Wu-Tang Clan and Eminem or anything.”

“What?” he said. “Wu-Tang Clan and Eminem?”

“I mean, wouldn’t that be so funny if you’re on your ranch and you’re like, ‘Wu-Tang Clan, come here.’” I laughed.

“I guess so,” he said, tilting his head to the side. “You sure are an odd one, aren’t you, Emma?”

“Okay, fine. What about Paparazzi?”

“You want me to call one of my puppies Paparazzi?”

“Or you could call him Mick Jagger.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” he said. “Are you into the Rolling Stones?”

“Not really.” I shake my head. “No. What about Sprite?”

“Sprite, like the drink?” He shook his head. “No.”



“Oh, but I was going to say you could call the other one Milkshake.”

“I’m not calling my working puppy Milkshake.”

“What? ‘Milkshake, go and herd them sheep,’” I said in my best country voice, and he started laughing. His green eyes crinkled as he looked over at me, and he didn’t say anything else. He really was handsome. I didn’t want to admit that to him or Pippa, but sometimes when he looked at me and our eyes met and we just shared a secret smile, I felt my heart flutter. It felt warm and special, and there was a tingle in my stomach when I was around him. I didn’t know what it meant. It probably didn’t mean anything. It was likely due to the fact that I hadn’t been around a solid, handsome, funny man in so long, and I kind of missed that. I was starting to realize that I did want a boyfriend. I wanted to be in a relationship. And it wasn’t that I wanted to be in a relationship with him because he was annoying.

I thought back to Rafael and the way he was teasing me in the coffee shop. Now, he was a hunky man as well, and I could tell that he was attracted to me, but I had a feeling he was a flirt with everyone, and I didn’t tend to go for guys that flirted with everyone. I wanted someone that I thought would be loyal to me.

“So, I’m going to get both of them. You want to play with them while I go and speak to Sabrina and figure out the cost and everything?” Jack interrupted my train of thought.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll think of the names. Strawberry and Banana Milkshake.”

“Nope,” he said, shaking his head. “That’s not going to happen.”

I giggled and watched him leave the barn. I picked up the two puppies, and they squirmed around in my arms. They were so adorable. I carried them outside and headed toward Jack’s truck. I didn’t want to get inside yet. Not until he’d actually purchased them. “You’re so cute.” I look down at them. “And I hope that Jack is going to be a good daddy to you. While I’m here, I will make sure that he’s nice,” I said in

my best baby voice and then groaned. “Oh my gosh. I sound like an idiot,” I mumbled. “Let me see. I want you guys to have great names, but I don’t want them to be too cute or too simple. And I want them to be something that will slightly embarrass Jack,” I said, giggling as I waited for him to come out.



I GROANED as I heard the puppies yelping outside my bedroom door. I yawned slightly as I stretched and got out of bed. I headed toward the door and opened it. I could see French Fries and Cheeseburger running back and forth. They looked so cute, but I wasn’t sure why they were in the hallway by themselves. I walked toward the kitchen to see if Jack was there. “Jack,” I said, looking at my watch. It was seven a.m. and I couldn’t believe that I’d slept so long. I made my way into the kitchen and looked around. “Jack, you here? Huh?” I mumbled as I looked around. The kitchen was empty. I was about to head toward the living room when I saw a note on the kitchen table and picked it up. It was from Jack.

*Hi, Emma. I hope you slept well. Cheeseburger and French Fries are inside and may wake you up. By the way, we are not keeping those names. They are doing well. I’ve just gone out to do some work on the ranch, but help yourself to breakfast, and I will see you soon.*

“Oh, your daddy’s on the ranch working,” I said, looking down at Cheeseburger and French Fries as they rolled around on the floor. I went to the fridge and opened it, grabbing the orange juice. I then opened a cupboard, pulled out a glass, and poured some in. I took a long gulp and closed my eyes. I kind of wanted to go back to bed but knew that I couldn’t.

“Do you want to go outside and see if we see your dad? I’m not quite hungry yet, and I don’t know if you guys have eaten. Let me see if I need to get you breakfast or not,” I said. “Come on, French Fries. Come on, Cheeseburger.” I laughed as they followed behind me toward the front door. I thought it was even funnier that they had the temporary names of

Cheeseburger and French Fries. Jack had looked at me like I was crazy when I told him those were the names, and it wasn't that I thought Jack or I was going to keep those names. I knew they were ridiculous.

I opened the front door and waited for the puppies to run outside. I went down the steps and looked around. I could see Jack about two hundred feet away to the right with an axe in his hand. I frowned. What was he doing? I headed toward him and realized he was cutting wood, and he was shirtless. My heart stilled as I stared at him. I moved closer and took in his chest. It was so manly and tan and muscular. "Wow. Cheeseburger and French Fries, your papa is built," I whispered, smiling. The puppies ran around my legs, and I laughed at them. I was really going crazy. They had absolutely no idea what I was talking about. At that moment, Jack looked up and waved. I blushed slightly because I wasn't sure if he'd realize I was staring at him. He started to come toward me, and I stepped back, but I didn't realize that one of the puppies was behind me, and I tripped and fell into the mud.

"Oh, no," I groaned as I sat up.

Jack came running over to me. "Oh my gosh. Are you okay, Emma?"

I stared at him and nodded. I felt winded staring into his green eyes. There was sweat all over his face and chest, and he was slightly dirty, but I'd never seen him look hotter. *Oh my gosh*, I thought, *why is this man so handsome?*

"You've got to stop falling into the mud like this, Emma," he said. "You don't even have your heels on."

"I am fine. It was the puppies," I said, trying desperately to stop myself from blushing. Jack held out a hand, and I took it gratefully. He pulled me up, and our fingers touched for a couple of seconds too long. I pulled them away quickly and stared at him.

"Thanks for the help," I said disjointedly. I knew I sounded like a fool.

“Oh, you’re okay. I was just cutting some wood,” he said, and I watched as he flexed his muscles and brushed some dirt off his shoulder. I licked my lips unconsciously, and he grinned at me and gave me a small wink. I frowned at him for a couple of seconds.

“Enjoying the view?” he said, and my jaw dropped again. I couldn’t believe he’d asked me that.

“Excuse me,” I stared at him as if I had no idea what he was talking about.

“What?” he said. “Did you fart?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “I was just coming out to see if you had fed the puppies.”

“Okay, and then you got a really nice view. Lucky you. I guess your morning’s been made.”

I could not believe how cocky he was. “Trust me, Jack, I’ve seen better,” I said in my most disdainful tone. He was looking at me like he thought he was a juicy steak and I hadn’t eaten in ten years.

“Sure you have,” he said, chuckling.

“Really, I have. Like every day walking down the street and every—”

His phone started ringing, and he held up his hand. “Save it for later.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve got a call,” he said. He turned around, and I just growled behind him. I heard him laughing as he looked back at me. “Go and have some breakfast, Emma. I’ll be in in a few minutes.”

I rolled my eyes and stomped back into the house. Just when I thought he was a nice guy, he went and did stuff that made me want to wring his neck. I couldn’t believe how obnoxious he was. I walked back into the house and heard my phone ringing. “Oh, snap. The interview,” I said to French Fries as I quickly ran inside and picked up the phone. “Hello?” I said, breathing deeply.

“Hello. Is this Emma?” A sharp voice spoke into the phone.

“Hi. Yeah, this is Emma. Is this—”

“This is Patricia Essentia. I’m calling from Cooper Incorporated about the interview.”

“Oh, yes. Yes. I was waiting for your call.”

“Indeed. Is now still a good time?”

“Yeah, of course. It is,” I said, taking a seat at the kitchen table. I watched as French Fries try to jump up onto the chair. “Down, French Fries,” I whispered under my breath.

“Excuse me?” Patricia said, sounding annoyed. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I was just speaking to French Fries and Cheeseburger. Not the food or anything. I’m not crazy. They are my best friend’s boyfriend’s best friend’s new puppies.” I groaned. I knew this was not going well. “Sorry, I just got up and... Anyway, sorry. We can continue.”

“Certainly,” Patricia said, but I could tell from her tone that I already was not going to get this job. I couldn’t believe that I’d forgotten about my interview, I couldn’t believe that I’d babbled about Jack’s new puppies, and I couldn’t believe that I’d allowed myself to sound like an idiot. I was going to have to focus, and I was going to have to do it quickly. I was not going to let Jack’s green eyes and his muscular body distract me. I had to remember that he was annoying. I had to remember that I wasn’t going to be in Montana for long. I had to remember that my life was back in New York City and that I needed to get back there as soon as possible.

## CHAPTER 14

# JACK

I finished cutting the wood and decided to go back to the ranch house to check on Emma and the puppies. I'd seen the way she'd been looking at me, and it made me smile, especially when she'd been blushing. I knew I'd acted like a bit of an idiot when I'd made the comments about her enjoying the view, but I couldn't stop myself. I wasn't sure why I sounded like a bro or an asshole every time I spoke to her. That really wasn't who I was, but something about her brought out the teasing and defensive side of me. Maybe it was because I had hoped she was enjoying the view. Maybe it was because I kind of wanted her to kiss me, which was absolutely ridiculous because my entire life, aside from once, I had always been the one to want to kiss the girl first, or at least to be the one to make the move.

As I made my way inside the house, I heard what sounded like someone giggling. I paused and listened for a few moments. Was Emma laughing? What was she laughing about? Suddenly, it struck me that perhaps she was on the phone with Rafael, but I knew that he didn't have her number unless he'd gotten it from Mindy. But then I didn't even think Mindy had her number unless she'd gotten it from Pippa. I sighed as I walked toward her bedroom. I was going to have to get over my annoyance with Rafael and Emma's relationship. I didn't even know if she was interested in him.

The laughing continued as I got closer to her room. I was about to knock on the door and walk inside to ask her what was so funny when I realized what I was hearing wasn't laughter but tears. I stood there silently peering through the

open door. Emma was lying on the bed, her face in the pillow, sobbing. The two puppies were on the bed next to her, gazing at her, looking nervous and sad, and I wondered what was wrong. I felt uncomfortable. I didn't know what to say. For a moment, I wondered if I was the one who had made her cry. Had I teased her too much? Had I been too much? I wondered if I should call Pippa. Maybe that would help. Maybe she needed her best friend. I had no idea what I could say or do.

I was about to turn and go back down the hallway when my elbow hit the wall. "Ouch," I muttered and then froze as she twisted on the bed and looked up at me. She started rubbing her eyes, and I could see her face going redder with embarrassment. *Oh man*, I thought. "Is everything okay?" I asked. I knew my voice sounded awkward, but I didn't really know what else to say.

"No," she said softly. "I mean, yes. Maybe." She shrugged and looked down at her legs.

I stepped inside the room. I couldn't leave now. "What's wrong?" I asked, making my way closer to her bed.

Her big, blue eyes were red, and her cheeks were blotchy. "My interview went poorly," she said, sobbing. She swallowed hard, and I stared at her. I wanted to make a joke about her interview skills being as good as her driving, but I knew this was not the time.

"There'll be another interview," I said. "I mean, didn't you guys say that there are plenty of companies that want to hire you?"

"Yeah," she said quickly. "That's true."

"See? Nothing to cry about." I marched over to her and rubbed her back gently for a couple of seconds and then stepped back. The feel of her skin through her T-shirt made me feel hot and bothered, and I knew that was an inappropriate feeling for the moment. "Is anything else bothering you?" I asked, a sixth sense telling me that she wasn't just crying because of the bad interview.

"I don't know," she mumbled, not looking up at me.



I knew from having a sister that “I don’t know” meant that there was something else wrong. “Hey, what is it, Emma? I know you don’t know me very well, but...”

“It’s nothing,” she said, quickly shaking her head. “Thanks for asking, but I’m all good.” She grabbed one of the puppies and put it in her lap and started stroking it. I sat down on the mattress next to her and grabbed the other dog and stroked it, too. They really were adorable.

“They’re really cute, you know, these puppies,” I said, not knowing what else to say. “I think you saw my note. I’m not going to keep their names.”

“You mean you don’t want to call them Cheeseburger and French Fries?”

“No, I don’t.” I chuckled softly. “Cute names, but not the right names.”

“I’ll think of something better,” she said and then hiccupped.

“That would be cool,” I mumbled, and we sat there for what could have been five minutes not saying anything.

“I just feel low sometimes,” she said, looking up at me, her blue eyes filled with sadness. A sadness that I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen before, a sadness that broke my heart and I didn’t even know why.

I tilted my head to the side. “Is there a reason why?” I asked, not wanting to pry but wanting to see if I could help.

“I don’t know if you know. Most probably not. Pippa’s not really one to talk about other people’s business, but my mom died a few years ago, and well, it’s been an uphill battle trying to feel better about it, you know?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I know those words aren’t adequate. I know they can’t bring your mom back or make you feel better, but for what it’s worth, I’m really sorry. That must’ve been really hard.”

“It was,” she said. “I don’t know why I said that in past tense, actually.” She ran her fingers through her hair. “It still is

hard. Sorry, I didn't need to bring this up. I guess I've just been feeling really low. My mom was the one I used to go to for advice, and I could ask her anything, anytime of the day or night. If she didn't pick up, I'd text her, and inevitably she'd call me within a couple of hours, you know. And she'd always give me good advice." Her voice choked. "And I guess I just kind of wish I could ask her what she thinks I should do with my life right now. I don't seem to know which way is up and which way is down, and it's a scary feeling not knowing where you're going."

"Do you know where you want to go?" I asked her, wanting to know more, but knowing that if she wanted to tell me, she would share it with me.

"I don't know," she said. "And I think that's the scariest thing. All my life, I knew what I wanted to do and where I wanted to go and who I wanted to be, and I felt safe and comfortable. I had my job, and I was excelling and making money, and I had Pippa, and we had the city. And now she's moving here, and I've lost my job, and I don't even know what I want anymore."

"I can understand that. Can I tell you a little secret?" I wasn't sure why I was opening up to her and why I was about to tell her the only thing I'd never told anyone else in the world. But for some reason, I wanted to share with her.

"What is it?" she asked, her blue eyes surveying my face with wonder. Even through tears, she looked beautiful. "And do not say that you were going to be Mr. America or Mr. Universe or whatever."

"What? You don't believe me?" I chuckled, and she shook her head. "No, that's not what I was going to say," I said softly. "There was a time in my life when I didn't want to take over this ranch, when I didn't want to be the next in the line of Marleys to run this farm. I didn't want the responsibility to pass it on to future generations." I sighed as I rubbed the puppy's belly. "I wanted to be able to be selfish. I wanted to do what I wanted to do."

"And what was that?" she asked, her eyes crinkled.

“You know what?” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t even know. I just wanted to run away from here, from this place, from the legacy. My dad doesn’t know. My mom doesn’t know. My sister doesn’t know. Heck, even TJ doesn’t know. It would seem like a dagger in the heart to tell him that, you know.”

“Because he’s your half-brother and he never knew?” she asked softly, and I nodded.

“I grew up with Dad. I know who I am, and yet it’s a lot.”

“You could always do something else if you wanted to.”

“That’s the thing: I don’t want to. I love it here. I think I was just so in my head about what it meant to be Jack Marley, what it meant to be responsible for all this.” I pointed outside the window, and she gazed out and looked. “It’s beautiful and majestic, and we hire a lot of people. It’s scary, but I know now that this is what I want.”

“I’m glad,” she said. “You seem like you were made for this life.”

“Why? Because I am just a hick?”

“I never said you were a hick,” she said, frowning. “I don’t think that. I think that you’re strong and determined and confident and, yeah, a little cocky, and sure, you’re a cowboy, but cowboy doesn’t mean hick. It’s just your way of life. I think it’s cool.”

“You think I’m cool, do you?” My heart thudded, wondering what that meant.

“No, that’s not what I said.” She shook her head. “I just meant that being a cowboy is cool. Not that you are cool per se.”

“Tomato, tomahto,” I said, laughing. “I am cool, you know.”

“I think you’re okay. Sometimes,” she said.

“Well, you know what, Emma? If you ever want to run stuff by me, my ears are always open,” I said sincerely. “If

you're not sure what you want to do or where you want to go or anything, you can ask."

"Thank you. That means a lot to me." She looked surprised.

"What is it?" I asked, trying to keep my eyes off her lips. They looked so pink and luscious, and I just wanted to kiss them, but I knew I couldn't. She would probably slap me and then we'd be back to square one. She'd be hating me and probably move back to TJ and Pippa's cabin, and I knew TJ would be really upset if that happened.

"Hey, do you want me to take you riding?" I offered before she could say anything else.

"Riding like horseback riding?"

"Well, I mean, yeah." There was something dirty I could have said in response to that, but I wasn't going to be that guy. Not with her.

"That might be kind of cool. Yeah. Thank you. I'd like that."

"I'm glad," I said. "I can show you more of the ranch, and we can chat and maybe figure out what you want to do next with your life."

"If we can figure out what I want to do next with my life just by riding horses, then sign me up every day," she said, laughing. "Because that would be amazing."

"I think you'll find it will be amazing either way," I said.

## CHAPTER 15

# EMMA

“So how are you enjoying it?” Jack asked me as we rode the horses down by the river. It was a glorious day, and I could even see small fish jumping in the water.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, rubbing the neck of the chestnut mare I was riding. “I didn’t really think I’d be into riding horses if I’m honest, but this is really enjoyable. And my legs are only aching a little bit,” I admitted, laughing.

“Oh, that’s normal,” he said. “If you’re not used to riding horses, it will ache a little bit, but it will start to feel better the more you ride.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” I said, gazing at him. He looked really handsome in his tan cowboy hat and blue jeans. I could feel my heart fluttering as I gazed at him. He’d been so sweet and kind to me all afternoon. He was probably still slightly apprehensive over finding me in tears in the bedroom. I just hadn’t been able to stop myself from crying. The interview had gone horribly, and even though Patricia hadn’t told me I hadn’t got the job, I already knew that I didn’t. It just seemed like life was at an impasse, and it wasn’t that I didn’t think I could get another interview with someone else or that I couldn’t get another job. It was just that when I’d gotten off the phone with the headhunter, I’d wanted to call my mom. I’d wanted to tell her everything that had happened. I’d even started dialing the numbers, and then I’d remembered I could call but she wouldn’t answer. *Oh, Mom*, I thought. It was a weird thing losing someone you loved so suddenly and

unexpectedly, someone so young, someone that should have had decades left.

I'd cried like I hadn't cried in years, and when I'd seen Jack standing there, my heart had fallen. He'd looked like a deer in headlights, and I'd felt like one. It had been awkward, but then he'd made me smile and laugh, and he'd offered me comfort. I was starting to realize that his go-to mechanism was humor, and while I understood that, it wasn't something that worked in every situation, but he seemed to know when to turn it on and when to turn it off. There had been a couple of moments when he'd been looking at me and I'd been looking at him while we were sitting on that bed, and I thought he was going to kiss me. And if he had, I wouldn't have said no.

"So I figure we can ride back up to the house and maybe make some dinner." He gazed at me as he stopped his horse.

"Sure," I said. "Are you wanting me to cook you dinner, or are you going to make dinner for me?"

"I was thinking we could make it together," he said softly. "Maybe we could make tacos or fajitas. We could do steak or chicken or pork if you want."

"What about fish? What if I want pescado tacos?" I laughed.

"Well, then we should go and get some rods and go fishing."

"I'm joking. Steak is good. I love tacos. Do you have cilantro and onion and corn tortillas?"

"Well, I have flour tortillas."

"Oh, that's not the same." I glared at him. "Flour tortillas are what gringos eat. If you want to be authentic, you have to have corn tortillas."

"Wait, what?" he said.

"I said no flour tortillas, but corn tortillas and cilantro and onion, if we want to have real tacos."

"Are you Mexican and didn't tell me?" he asked.

“No, but I love Mexican food. Surprisingly, there’s a lot of authentic Mexican food in New York City.”

“You could have fooled me,” he said. “I would’ve thought there’d be more authentic Mexican food in Mexico than in New York City.”

“Well, obviously, Jack.” I stared at him. “Sometimes, you are ridiculous. You know that, right?”

“I’ve been called worse things in my life,” he said, laughing. “So do you want to try and gallop back or...”

“No,” I said quickly. “I don’t want to gallop. I would just like to walk calmly as I have been. You do know this is my first time on a horse, and you’re a wonderful horse. Yes, you are, JJ. Yes, you are,” I said, rubbing the horse’s neck again. She continued walking slowly, and I smiled. I wasn’t sure what I would’ve done if the horse had started sprinting across the field. I would’ve gone flying, and then Jack would’ve laughed and made some comment about my poor riding skills, I would’ve been upset with him, and then we would’ve been off to the races again.

“So we’re going to do steak tacos,” he said.

“Are you hungry or something? You keep bringing them up.”

“I’m definitely hungry.” He laughed. “I’ve been hungry for a hot minute.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Why? You’re not hungry?”

“I could eat some tacos,” I said. “Are we going to have rice and beans as well or...?”

“I don’t really know how to make rice and beans, but...”

“I can teach you if we’re cooking together.” I offered.

“That sounds like a plan. I do love me some rice and beans. I don’t know if I’ve got cilantro, but I can check in the fridge. I definitely have onions.”

“Yay. Well, that’s good.”



“You sound so enthusiastic.” Jack joked.

“Do I?”

“I’m being sarcastic.”

“Oh, okay.”

“You couldn’t tell?”

“I could tell,” I said with a giggle as we made our way back to the house. “I haven’t been distracting you from your work, have I? I know you haven’t gotten much done today.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “It’s the holiday season, so everything’s winding down right now. We’re not going to actually be doing much around here, and I gave the guys the week off.”

“Wow. A whole week.”

“Hey,” he said. “It’s a paid week off. There’s a lot of guys that work here. And gals,” he said quickly, “don’t go calling the feminist police on me.”

“Jack Marley. Sometimes...”

“What?”

“Nothing,” I said, shaking my head. “I am going to keep it polite.”

“What were you going to say? Sometimes you want to kill me.”

“I would never say such a thing.” I laughed.

“Sure you wouldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t. I used to work in marketing, and at some of the companies I worked at, I did HR, so I would never actually tell someone out loud that I wanted to kill them.”

“Oh, what? You’d just shoot them in their sleep?”

“No. Oh my gosh. That’s crazy.”

“True,” he said, laughing.

We finally made our way back to the front of the house, and I watched as Jack jumped off his horse and then headed

over to me. He grabbed the reins and stopped the horse down and held it steady. “Do you think you can get down by yourself or would you like me to help you?”

“I can get down by myself, I think,” I said, taking a deep breath and lifting my right leg out of the stirrups. I wobbled slightly, and he moved over to the side and grabbed me. “Hey, I said I could do it myself.”

“I know, but just in case you didn’t want to fall into the mud for a third time, I figured I’d help.”

“Wow. What a gentleman you are.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I’m glad you’re finally acknowledging it.”

“Uh-huh,” I said as my feet touched the ground. “I guess I’m the only woman that’s ever acknowledged that.”

“I wouldn’t say the only woman.” He laughed.

We walked toward the front of the house, and I frowned as I saw that there was someone sitting on the rocking chair. It was a lady in her mid-to-late twenties. She was wearing a cowboy hat and a pair of tight jeans. She jumped up as she saw Jack and me approaching.

“Hey there,” she said, beaming. “I was wondering where you were, Jack Marley.”

“Hello, Kaye,” he said, nodding. “This is—”

“I know who that is. You’re Emma, right?” she asked, staring at me and looking me up and down.

“Yeah. I guess word gets around town fast,” I said quickly.

“This is Paradise Valley.” She nodded. “You’re Pippa’s friend?”

“Yeah. We’re best friends.”

“Good,” she said. “Hey, Jack. I was wondering if I could talk to you for a couple of minutes.”

“Right now, Kaye?” he asked, gazing at me and then gazing at the lady.

“Yeah. Right now. It’s important, okay? Like, real important.”

Jack sighed. “Do you mind, Emma? I’ll be inside in a bit.”

“Okay, sure. That’s fine,” I said, nodding and wondering what the conversation was going to be about. “I’ll just head inside and wash up or something. I’ll meet you in the kitchen later or...”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” he said, his mind already occupied by Kaye. “It shouldn’t be more than a moment.”

“Okay. Well, nice to meet you, Kaye,” I said, smiling at her, trying to be as friendly as possible, even though I was super curious as to what she really wanted from him.

She didn’t return the smile. Instead, she walked up to Jack and grabbed him by the bicep and pulled him down the stairs. “Honey, we need to talk,” she said.

I could feel my heart freezing at her words. Honey? What was going on? I looked back at Jack and Kaye as I made my way to the front door, but neither one of them was paying attention to me. Was that his girlfriend or his ex or something? What was going on here? She was definitely laying her claim on him and letting me know that he was hers. He hadn’t seemed that excited to see her, but then I didn’t know what an excited Jack would look like. I felt myself wondering what was going on and who she was to him. I thought about calling Pippa, but then I didn’t want her to think I was interested or wanted any information because I didn’t.

Just because we’d had a fun afternoon together didn’t mean anything. It didn’t mean that I was interested in him, or he was interested in me or that this was going to go anywhere. It couldn’t go anywhere, especially because I was staying at his place. How awkward would that be? I didn’t need any more complications in my life. I was just going to forget him and remind myself that this was not going to go any further.

## CHAPTER 16

# JACK

The last four days had gone remarkably well. Emma and I had fell into a little pattern. I would wake up, head out, work on the ranch for a little bit, and then when I'd get back, she'd have coffee and breakfast waiting for me. She would make oatmeal with raisins, cinnamon, shredded coconut, and brown sugar, and then she'd also have boiled eggs and toast. Sometimes she'd make bacon, though she told me it wasn't good for me to eat bacon every day. Then I'd go back out to the ranch, and she would do some painting and play with the puppies. I'd come back and make her sandwiches for lunch, or we'd go to Mindy's and meet up with Pippa and TJ. Emma was enjoying going around the ranch painting, and I loved to see her artwork. She really was talented. I was impressed.

"Hey, sleepy head." I looked into her bedroom on Sunday morning. "Don't forget, we're going to go to my parents' for lunch today."

"I know," she said, nodding as she tied her shoelaces. "We're not leaving for a couple of hours, though, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. Why?"

"I was just going to go for a walk."

"Oh, want company?" I asked her.

"I mean, if you want to join me, I wouldn't say no. I was just going to get some fresh air."

"That sounds good," I said. "How's everything going?" I asked her as we made our way to the front of the house.

“You mean work-wise or other stuff-wise?”

“Everything,” I answered. “I know you were feeling sad about your mom and the job stuff, and you haven’t really mentioned either one of them recently.”

“Honestly, I’ve been at peace,” she said. “I guess I kind of understand what Pippa was talking about.” She smiled at me. “It really is beautiful here. And Pippa and I have been going back and forth about her play and the best marketing.”

“Oh yeah. How’s that going?”

“Really well. She’s finishing off the screenplay. I’ve been reading it and giving her my feedback.”

“Yeah, I did notice you were reading a lot when you weren’t painting.”

“I guess I could be a lady of leisure if I had a lot of money.” She laughed. “So what about you? How’s stuff going on the ranch?”

“Not bad,” I said. “I’m sure you know that TJ’s trying to build some cabins and he is going to be doing a tourist spot, and that got me to thinking that perhaps we could do something here as well.”

“Oh, that would be cool. Down by the river as well?”

“Yeah, I think so. I’d have to discuss it with Dad and TJ.”

“Is that weird?” she said.

“What?” I asked her.

“Having to discuss stuff with TJ now when it was just between you and your dad before?”

“You’d think so, right? Most people wouldn’t be happy to have to share their inheritance, but I love TJ. He is a great guy, and he and Pippa will likely get married and have kids. Though it’s likely his kids that will live here.”

“You don’t want to have kids?” She sounded surprised.

“No, I don’t think so.” I shook my head. “In fact, I don’t really ever see myself getting married.”

“Does Kaye know that?” she asked, and I chuckled.

“Kaye?”

“Yeah, your friend that came the other day.”

“Oh, I mean, it’s not really something I discuss with her.”

“Would she be happy to know that you never wanted to get married and have kids?” she asked me, not blinking.

“Probably not, but do I care if she cares? No. It’s my life. Right? We all have to live for ourselves.”

“Wow. Spoken like a man.”

“What? Am I meant to want kids just because...” I paused. “Okay. It’s not that I don’t want kids. It’s just that I don’t see it happening. They call me the Last Single Cowboy in Paradise Valley for a reason, you know.”

“They call you the Last Single Cowboy.” She started giggling. “Who calls you that? From what I know, half of your friends are single.”

“True, but they’re not cowboys.”

“Really?” she asked. “They all look like cowboys to me.”

“Well, Brandon runs Montana Knights, the bar. Aiden—you do remember who Aiden is, right?”

“Yeah, of course. I remember who he is.”

“Well, he is a vet, and Ethan runs the newspaper, so they’re not technically cowboys.”

“Okay. So I guess you are technically the Last Single Cowboy in Paradise Valley.”

“Well, obviously I’m not the only single cowboy in Paradise Valley.” I laughed.

“Yeah, I would think that would be kind of crazy if you were the only single man in town. Every woman would be after you.”

“I mean, there are a few that are after me. I can’t lie.”

“Sure, you can’t,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m sure you’re very happy to tell me about all the women that want you.”

“Hey, I didn’t say they all want me like that.”

“Then how do they want you?”

“Why don’t we change the subject?” I asked her. “So what about you? Dated anyone recently?”

“Not super recently, no,” she said. “Oh, wait, what about your friend Rafael?”

“What friend Rafael?” I questioned, pretending that I didn’t know who she was talking about.

“Mindy’s brother, duh, from the coffee shop.”

“Oh, you mean Rafael Messina. He hasn’t lived in Paradise Valley for a while. And when he did live here, he was a Player, with a capital P.”

“Okay,” she said. “So what does that mean?”

“What do you think it means? It means that if you have any intentions of dating him or trying to make him your boyfriend, I would think again because he will just break your heart.”

“Ouch,” she said. “Well, thank you.”

“I’m just saying he is not the best guy.”

“Okay, well, thank you again,” she said.

“You’re welcome. So hey, I had a question for you, Emma.”

“What’s that?” She looked over at me, her eyes intent as she studied my face.

“Well, as you know, I have a niece and a nephew.”

“Yeah, what about them?”

“So I’m actually writing a book. They asked me a long time ago if I would write a book about the ranch, and I did. I would like to gift it to them for Christmas. In fact, I want to try and sell it.”



“Okay,” she said. “That’s cool.”

“It is cool,” I continued. “But it’s for a younger generation, and I need artwork.”

“Okay,” she said, still not getting what I was saying.

“Like an illustrator.”

“Cool.” She nodded. “That sounds fun.”

“I’m asking you.” I laughed. “Would you illustrate my book?”

“Oh, no way. I am not good enough to be an illustrator. Plus, I don’t know how long I’m going to be here.”

“What if you just do what you can do while you’re here?” I asked her. “It would mean a lot to me.”

She stared at me for a couple of seconds. “Are you sure? I mean, I’m not a professional artist and I…”

“I know you’re not a professional artist, but your artwork is amazing, and I think it would fit the book so well. I think my niece and nephew would absolutely love it. I’d really love it if you could help make this dream come true.”

“Well, can I think about it?” she asked. “I mean, I want to help, but…”

“But what?”

“I just don’t know how long I’m going to be here. I…”

“You’d be here long enough to at least do one drawing, right?” I asked softly, my heart sinking at the thought that she might leave soon. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. I wasn’t sure how I could go back to a day-to-day routine without her. It would be weird. I was so used to having her in my house. I was so used to enjoying meals with her and then watching TV with her, and every night it was kind of awkward. She would say her good night and go to her bed, and I’d sit there and watch another half hour of TV because I knew if I didn’t, I would want to go into her room, and well, that was just not an option. I didn’t want to overstep. And even though I could feel the chemistry between us, neither one of us seemed ready to

take that next step. And I could be wrong. It could be that she wasn't interested in making out with me as much as I wanted to make out with her. I hoped she was. But then where would that get us? I didn't know.

"Fine," she said. "I'll see if I can do some paintings. I guess if I have to leave before we're done, I can just do them from New York and mail them to you. Does that work?"

"That's perfect," I said in response, even though I knew I didn't want her to go. I didn't want her to go back to New York even if it meant she wasn't with me. I didn't care about that. Of course, I wanted her in my life, and I wanted things to be better. I wanted us to have a connection. But more than anything, I wanted her to stay in Paradise Valley, which was crazy. I just hadn't had this sort of connection with someone in a while. She felt like a kindred spirit. She was easy to be around, she was beautiful, she made my heart race, and she made me smile. And even though we butted heads, I didn't care. I found it fun.

"And you know what I'll even do for you?"

"What?" she asked, blinking at me.

"I'll throw in some free driving lessons."

"Do not start with that again, Jack Marley," she said, glaring at me. "Or I will change my mind."

"Okay," I said quickly, holding up my hands. "I'm just joking."

"I know," she said, laughing. "Because if anyone needs the driving lesson, it's you."

## CHAPTER 17

# EMMA

“Oh, there you are, Emma.” Pippa came running up to me as we parked outside Jack’s parents’ home.

“Hey,” I said, “I haven’t seen you in a couple of days.”

“I know. I’ve been so busy finishing off this play. I really do think that it’s in the most amazing shape, though. I think it’s going to do really well.” She paused. “Well, for Paradise Valley, anyway. It’s great. Everything that I’ve read has been awesome, and I can’t wait to read more. Will you help me with the auditions?”

“What do you mean, help you with the auditions?”

“Well, I need to audition people in town, and I’m going to feel bad telling people no, but if I have a partner who can tell them no...”

“Oh my gosh. Really, Pippa?” I giggled, shaking my head.

“What? You don’t live here. They won’t hate you.”

“Sure they will.”

“What are you two laughing about?” Jack asked as he headed toward us. He had his signature cowboy hat on, which he took off as he nodded at Pippa. “Good to see you again, Pippa.”

“No need to be so formal, Jack. We’re practically family.”

“That we are,” he said, nodding. “Where’s TJ?”

“He’s inside helping your mom in the kitchen with something.”

“Oh, she’s got him to work right away.” He laughed. “Better him than me.”

“Your niece and nephew are waiting for you,” Pippa said. “They’ve been eagerly awaiting your arrival.”

“As they should,” he said. “I’m fun Uncle Jack.”

“What? You’re fun?” I joked, and he just gave me a look. We shared a smile, and he walked up the steps.

“You coming, Emma?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there in a second.” I looked over at Pippa, who was staring at me with an incredulous expression on her face. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Since when did you and Jack get so chummy-chummy?”

“Well, we kind of had a moment,” I whispered to her, not wanting Jack to hear as he waited for me.

“What do you mean ‘a moment’?” She gasped. “Oh my gosh. You’re not saying what I think you’re saying?”

“What are you talking about, Pippa?”

“Did you have an ‘oh’ moment?” Her eyes were wide as flying saucers, and I couldn’t stop myself from laughing.

“No, we did not have that sort of moment. Are you crazy? Who do you think I am?” My heart raced at her words as my mind went to places it shouldn’t. I wasn’t even going to think about going there with Jack Marley. Not for even a second.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I was just wondering. I mean, he’s cute, and you said you had a moment, and I’m trying to \_\_\_”

“I’ll tell you later.” I headed up toward the stairs to where Jack was standing. Pippa followed behind me and I hoped that she didn’t mention anything about Jack in front of him “You could have gone inside, you didn’t need to wait for me.” I said to him, feeling guilty that he was just standing there.

“I know, but I wanted to introduce you to my parents. I’m sure they would’ve been like, ‘What happened to Emma? What did you do to her? Don’t tell us you killed another one of those tourists.’”

“You killed another one? Very funny, Jack.” I shook my head, a begrudging smile crossing my face.

“What I thought you liked my sense of humor.”

“About as much as I like your driving.”

“Ouch!” He mock shuddered and grabbed his heart. “That one hurts.”

“Sure it does.”

Pippa moved up next to me and just looked at me with a small smile and knowing wink. I didn’t even bother acknowledging it. Yes, Jack and I teased each other, but it didn’t mean anything. We didn’t fancy each other. We weren’t flirting or anything.

Jack opened the front door and held it open for both of us as we walked through. I loved that he was a gentleman like that. When I was in New York, I would say that one in every ten men held the door open for me at a business. I was a feminist, and I did agree that women could do whatever men could do, but sometimes it was just nice to meet a man that had charm, politeness, and old-fashioned ways. Well, not all the old-fashioned ways, but some were nice.

“Hey, is that you, Uncle Jack?” a little boy cried out and came running to the front door.

“It’s me.” He picked the boy up and swung him around. “How are you doing, Sam?”

“I’m good. Mommy said I can have a chocolate chip cookie for dinner.”

“I didn’t say for dinner!” a female voice called out from the back. “I said you can have one if you eat all your vegetables.”

“I don’t want to eat my vegetables, Uncle Jack.” Sam made a face, and, in that moment, he looked quite similar to

his uncle. "I don't like broccoli."

"I know. I don't like it either, but I eat it just so—"

"You can have a chocolate chip cookie afterward," Sam said.

"Exactly. And maybe Grandma can make you some spinach and you can be like Popeye."

"Who's Popeye?" the little boy asked.

Jack shook his head. "How do little kids these days not know about Popeye?"

"I guess it's because you're old, Archie Bunker." I grinned.

"Very funny, Emma." He pointed at me and walked Sam over to me. "This is Emma. She's staying with me."

The little boy looked at me with wide eyes. "You're pretty."

"Why, thank you. What's your name?" I asked him.

"My name is Sam."

"Nice to meet you, Sam."

"What's your name?"

"I just told you her name, Goof," Jack said.

"Oh, yeah. You're Ella."

"No, I'm Emma with an M. E-M-M-A."

"E-N-N-A," the little boy said, and I laughed.

"Close. M as in Mary."

"Mary, like Jesus Christ's mother?"

"Yeah, I guess Jesus Christ's mom was called Mary."

"And his daddy was called Joseph."

"Yeah. I guess someone's been going to Sunday School," I said, grinning at him. He was a cute little boy.

“I like going to Sunday School because we get candy.” He admitted with a naughty smile.

I looked over at Pippa, who was smiling. “And you love candy, don’t you, Sam?” She added and he nodded enthusiastically.

“Almost as much as chocolate chip cookies,” he said. “Come on, Uncle Jack, I want to show you something. Uncle TJ is making potatoes with Grandma.”

“Do you mind?” Jack asked as he looked up at me.

“No, go ahead. Pippa and I will follow right behind you.” I watched as they walked away and then looked over at Pippa. “Sam is so cute.”

“They’re both so cute. Sam and his sister, Stasia. I mean, I wasn’t ready to have kids for a while, but after being around them, I’m like, ‘I could pop out a couple now.’”

“Really, Pippa?”

“I mean, not right now, obviously,” she laughed. “In a couple of years, though. It will be so dreamy to have TJ’s kids.”

“Oh my gosh. You’re so in love, and you’re so staying in Montana forever, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’ll visit New York, and I’ll come and see you. It’ll be fun.”

“I know. It just won’t be the same.”

“I know,” she said, grabbing ahold of my hand. “I kind of don’t want you to go. I know that’s selfish of me, but...”

“I’m glad you said that, though. It makes me feel like I mean something to you.”

“Are you crazy, Emma? Of course you mean something to me. You’re my best friend. I love you. I want us to always be in the same city.”

“I know, but it looks like that might not happen.” I sighed. I didn’t want to be a Debbie Downer, though. “Guess what?”



“What?” she asked.

“Jack’s writing a children’s book.”

“He is?” She looked at me in surprise. “I didn’t think he was the sort of person that was into writing books.”

“Yeah. It struck me by surprise as well, but he asked me if I would...” I paused and made a face.

“If you would what?”

“Okay, this is kind of embarrassing, but he asked me if I would illustrate it.”

“Oh. And you said?”

“I said that I would do as much as I could to make it look good, but I didn’t know if I would be in town to really do everything. I don’t know how long his book is going to be.”

“I’m taking it that it’s a kid’s book.”

“Yeah, he said he’s making it for his niece and nephew. I guess they asked him.”

“What’s it about?”

“I don’t know yet, but I’m assuming something about the ranch because he mentioned drawing animals.”

“Oh, that’ll be cool. Like a Beatrix Potter sort of thing?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t.”

“So you’re going to stick around to illustrate the book?”

“I mean, I told him I’ll do what I can while I’m here, but then I’ll send him the other stuff from New York.”

“Oh, that’s true. I guess you can always mail it. And you guys can do FaceTime and Zoom to talk about stuff.”

“I mean, I don’t know about all that. He can just text me or email me.”

“Come on now, Emma, you’ve got to admit that you think he’s—”

“Oh, Pippa, please bring Emma inside,” an elderly woman came out and greeted us. “Please forgive me for not

welcoming you as soon as you entered the house, Emma.” She smiled at me. Her blue eyes were shining happily. “I was peeling potatoes, and well, TJ wasn’t being as much of a help as I thought he was going to be.”

“I could have told you that,” Pippa said, laughing.

“I’m Mrs. Marley, Jack’s mom.”

“Hi. It’s so nice to meet you.”

“Come on in. My husband is anxious to see you and my daughter as well.”

“Thank you very much for inviting me.”

“Oh, any friend of Pippa’s is a friend of ours. How are you liking it over at the ranch?”

“It’s gorgeous. You guys are really lucky to live in such a place.”

“You know, when I was younger, I always wanted to leave Paradise Valley. I didn’t want to be one of those farm girls, but now I appreciate it so much.”

“Oh,” I said, smiling. I nearly said, “I wonder if that’s where Jack got it from,” but I didn’t because Jack had told me no one else knew about the fact that he’d contemplated not taking over the ranch.

“I think it’s something we all go through when we grow up in the country, wanting to get away. But I suppose that’s what it’s like for a lot of people in the city as well. They want to get away to something different. The grass is always greener, I suppose.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

We followed behind her into the kitchen. I saw TJ standing at the counter with an apron around his waist, and I couldn’t help but smile. Jack was sitting at a table with his nephew, niece, and an older version of himself. That must’ve been his dad.

“Hey, Dad, this is Emma,” Jack said, looking up at me, his eyes crinkling. “She’s the one that can’t drive.”

“Very funny, Jack.” I rolled my eyes. “Your son is the one that can’t drive. I hate to break it to you.”

“Well, very nice to meet you.” Mr. Marley stood up, walked over to me, and gave me a big hug. “How are you liking it here?”

“Love it. It’s amazing.”

“So do we have another convert to the area?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” I said quickly.

“Hey there, Emma.” TJ gave me a quick wave. “I’m just peeling potatoes like a scullery maid.”

“Very far from a scullery maid,” Mrs. Marley said, laughing. “After the potatoes, I’m going to have you washing the brussels sprouts.”

“Oh, yay.” TJ drolled.

“I don’t like brussels sprouts!” Sam said from the table, and everyone laughed.

“Would you like something to drink, Emma? Pippa?” Mr. Marley asked. “We have soft drinks, wine, liquor, and beer, and I think we might even have some lemonade.”

“Ooh, lemonade sounds good.”

“We have apple cider, too,” TJ spoke up. “I made some with Pippa last night.”

“You guys made apple cider?”

My eyes widened as I gazed at Pippa. “Yeah. I mean TJ made it, and I kind of helped. I don’t know how good it is.”

“It’s delicious,” TJ said. “Come on now, Pips.”

“If you say so.” She grinned and I could see a red hue on her face.

“Does everyone want some apple cider? I can serve it up.” TJ offered and I nodded enthusiastically.

“I would love some.” My mouth was already watering.

“I’ll have some as well,” Mr. Marley said.

“Okay. You want to help me, Emma?” Pippa offered.

“Sure,” I said. I followed behind Pippa into a small pantry room. “This is really cool. They’re so nice,” I said to her. “I can see why you fell in love with the family.”

“Aren’t they great? And to think that TJ’s actually related to them.”

“You know what’s crazy is when I see TJ and Jack and Mr. Marley together, I can totally see the resemblance.” I stared at her. “Isn’t that crazy?”

“No, I see it, too.”

“And how’s TJ doing about everything? He seems to be really settled in, but...”

“He’s doing great,” she said. “I think he’s really coming to terms with the fact that he’s got this new family, and it’s not something he’s lost for years, but something he’s gained for more years. Does that make sense?”

“I think so,” I said. “That’s awesome.”

## CHAPTER 18

# JACK

“So are you excited for trivia night tonight?” I asked Emma as she made herself a cup of tea.

We were standing in the kitchen, and she looked beautiful in her white-and-navy dress. Her hair was growing slightly longer, and I wondered if she was going to grow it out or not. It had been five days since we’d had lunch at my parents’, and everything had been going really smoothly.

“I’m not going to be much help.” Her voice trailed off and I wasn’t sure exactly what she’d said.

“You’re not going to be much of what?” I asked her curiously.

“I’m not going to be much of an addition to a team,” she said. “I’m certainly not going to make y’all win, if that was the hope. I don’t think I’m going to be a prized asset.”

“But you’re so smart.” I tried to think of another way to compliment her.

“Very funny, Jack. You really think I’m smart?”

“You are, and you’re beautiful and talented, and you’re...” I froze as I realized what I’d said.

“You think I’m beautiful?” She turned toward me, her eyes filled with glee. “Really?”

“I mean, yeah. I’m sure there are plenty of men that think you’re beautiful.”

“I’ve just never heard you say that to me.”

“Well, I don’t lie, do I? You’re beautiful, but that still makes you a bad driver.”

“Being beautiful makes me a bad driver?”

“Well, no, that’s not what I meant.” I was flustered now. “Have you finished your tea yet? We should get going.”

“I think I’ve got you a little bit messed up in the head,” she teased, sipping on her tea.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I don’t know.” She giggled. “I just think that you are...”

“I’m what?”

“Nothing,” she said. She finished the tea and put the cup back down. “Let me just wash this out and—”

“Just put it in the dishwasher and we can go.”

“Okay, Bossy Boots.”

“I’m not a Bossy Boots.”

“I kind of think you are, Jack.”

“I kind of think you are, Emma.”

“Uh-huh.” She rinsed out the cup and placed it in the dishwasher. “Okay, I’m ready. Bye, French Fries. Bye, Cheeseburger.” She gave the puppies kisses on their foreheads. French Fries rolled onto his back with his little legs in the air, and she rubbed his belly.

*I would love for her to rub my belly. Stop it, I lectured myself internally. Don’t get those thoughts, Jack.*

“So what are your strong suits on the trivia team?” she asked me as we made our way outside.

“I’d say I’m pretty good with sports and farm stuff.”

“Oh, does farm stuff come up a lot in your trivia night?” she asked with a small laugh.

“Surprisingly, it does. I don’t know if that would be the same everywhere, but here in Paradise Valley, there are a lot of farm-related questions.”

“Okay, well, I will get zero of those questions correct.” I didn’t doubt her, but I decided not to mention that fact.

“What do you think your strong suit is?” I asked curiously, hoping to learn more about her.

“Definitely literature, but I guess Pippa is good at that as well. We both are avid readers.” She smiled as she stared at me. “We love reading.”

“Yeah, I had a feeling. Pippa’s pretty good with the literature and celebrity gossip stuff,” I said, thinking of previous trivia nights.

“Oh yeah. Pippa loves TV as well.”

“And you don’t?” I was surprised. She’d mentioned several TV shows in the short timespan we’d known each other.

“I mean, I watch TV. I’m just not as into reality TV as she is. I’m more into dramas and murder mysteries.”

“Oh, what sort of murder mysteries?”

“What murder mysteries do I *not* watch?” She said with a giggle as we got into the truck. “I love *Law & Order SVU* and regular *Law & Order*. I love *Criminal Minds*. I used to love *Cold Case*. And now I’ve really been watching a lot of British cozy mysteries.”

“Oh, would I know any of them?”

“Have you ever heard of *Midsomer Murders*?” she asked.

“Sounds slightly familiar,” I said, though that was a lie. I’d never heard of it.

“Well, I love *Midsomer Murders* and *Shakespeare & Hathaway*. And I recently started watching *Madame Blanc*.”

“Okay,” I said, shaking my head. “I have to be honest. I’ve never heard of any of these. What channel do they come on?”

“I watch them on Amazon through Prime TV. I pay for Acorn and BritBox.”



“Never heard of those, either,” I said, laughing. “I mean, of course I know *Law & Order SVU* and *Criminal Minds* because they come on NBC and CBS, but I have never heard of Acorn.”

“Of course, you would know *Criminal Minds*. You want to know something funny?”

“What?” I asked her, wondering what funny story she would have connected to *Criminal Minds*.

“When I got here and I was driving around, I was thinking to myself, ‘This is kind of like an episode of *Criminal Minds*.’”

“What? Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” I frowned, hoping she wasn’t going to say that I made her think of a psychopath. That wouldn’t be promising.

“It’s a bad thing,” she said, her eyes wide and ominous. “A very bad thing.”

“I hope you don’t feel that way anymore.”

“I don’t,” she said, shaking her head. “I actually kind of feel like I am on *Little House on the Prairie*.”

“*Little House on the Prairie*?” I burst out laughing. “Oh my gosh, because we’re so quaint and small-town?”

“Kind of. It’s just really nice here. Everyone is so sweet and so nice and—”

“That’s because you haven’t met all the people in town. Trust me when I say we have the same drama that every other town has.”

“Really?” she asked.

“Really.” I nodded. “But let’s not talk about that.”

“What do you want to talk about, then?”

“I don’t know. How’s the job search going?”

“Oh, not bad.” She smiled. “I had a very promising conversation yesterday, and it looks like I might get the job.”

“Oh. And what would you be doing?” I asked.

“Well, that’s what I’m not so excited about. It’s marketing for another tech company.” She let out a long, deep sigh.

“What sort of tech company?”

“They provide storage options for bigger companies.”

“Storage options?” I asked her.

“Not storage units—online storage, server-type stuff.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “I think I know what you’re talking about, but not really. So what exactly would you be doing?”

“I would be helping market their services to mid-size companies who need a lot of online server space.”

“Oh. You lost me,” I said.

“Don’t worry. It’s not very interesting, but the job pays well.”

“Is that all you care about, then? The money?”

“No,” she said, looking offended. I was pleased at that. I was hoping she wasn’t a gold digger. Not that I thought she was. But then, you never really knew.

“I want a job that fulfills me. I want a job that makes me happy. I want a job that challenges me.”

“And you think this job will do that?”

She stared at me for a couple of seconds and wrinkled her nose. “No, not at all. So then... Then yeah, I guess I would be taking it because it pays well.” She sighed. “I guess we don’t all get to do what we really want to do.”

“And what is it you really want to do?”

“That’s what I’m still trying to find out,” she said, laughing, even though I could tell the question had made her a little bit stressed out. “I suppose that was a meaningful question.”

“What do you want to do? Where’d you want to go in your life? Who do you want to be?” It was such a surface question, and most people were able to answer it on a surface level.

But when they thought about it in a deeper and more meaningful way, it was a lot harder. Because most of us didn't have the opportunity to really think about who we wanted to be, and where we wanted our lives to go. We're just thinking about how to pay our bills and how to survive. And that made life tougher.

"I think if I had kids, it wouldn't be such a meaningful question," she said softly.

I looked over at her. "Oh?"

"Because then, I'd just have to make money to take care of them, to have food on the table, and a roof over their heads. And I guess now because it's just me, I kind of have the opportunity to do what I want...within reason, of course. And that makes it even scarier because I don't want to waste the opportunity." She sighed. "You know what I mean?"

"I know exactly what you mean. You're in an enviable position," I said. "A lot of people would love to be able to do what they wanted. But that makes it harder to actually choose something, because you don't want to screw it up."

"Exactly," she said. "Sometimes you can be really wise, Jack."

"What do you mean, 'sometimes'? I think all the time."

"You would," she said as I pulled up into a parking spot. I stopped the car and turned to look at her as I unbuckled my seatbelt.

"I think you can be anything you want to be, Emma. You are one of those people that excels in so many things."

"I don't know about that," she said.

I grabbed her hand. It felt warm and soft under mine. I squeezed it. "Don't doubt yourself. You are amazing and wonderful, and you truly are gifted in so many ways. I know that you can be anything you want to be."

"You could be a motivational speaker. You know that, right?"

“I don’t really think I could be a motivational speaker to many people, but I feel like we’re kindred spirits. I know that sounds kooky.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Maybe that’s why we bumped heads on that first day,” I said. “Maybe we’re just too similar.”

“Yeah. Or maybe it’s because you’re a bad driver,” she said.

I burst out laughing. I realized that I was still holding her hand, and was surprised she hadn’t pulled it away from me. “So you ready for some trivia?” I asked her softly.

“Yeah, I think I am. I’m ready for some beer as well.” She laughed. “Maybe even more than the trivia.”

“I didn’t know you were into beer.” The comment surprised me. Most women I knew much preferred cocktails and wine.

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about me, Jack Marley.” Her blue eyes peered into mine mischievously and my stomach turned excitedly.

“Well, I hope I learn them soon,” I said softly, letting go of her hand reluctantly. I liked holding her hand. It was soft, warm, and gave me a thrill.

We just stared at each other for a couple of moments. I was about to lean in to kiss her when there was a knock at the window.

“Hey! There you guys are.”

It was Pippa and she was grinning excitedly like she’d been waiting all night for us to arrive. I tried not to frown as I withheld a sigh. My eyes flitted to Emma’s lips for a few seconds and then into her eyes. I had really wanted that kiss and if I wasn’t mistaken, she’d been looking forward to it as well.

## CHAPTER 19

# EMMA

“Hey, Pippa. So good to see you.” I felt slightly awkward as I greeted my best friend. I was sure that Jack and I were just having a moment, and I was sad that we’d been interrupted. Not that I didn’t love being around Pippa. I was here to see her, but I’d been enjoying my moment with Jack. Even if it had made me feel slightly nervous. I’d wanted him to kiss me and I wasn’t sure what that meant about our quickly evolving relationship.

“I’ve been waiting all evening for you,” she said, giving me a big hug. “Hey there, Jack.” She waved over to Jack and then nodded toward the entrance to Montana Knights. “Everyone’s waiting inside for you. Charlotte said that the trivia will start in about ten minutes.”

“You guys could’ve started without me,” I said, laughing. “Hopefully, you guys are not waiting on me because I’m not that big of an asset.”

“What? What are you talking about, Emma? You’re the smartest woman I know.”

“Then you don’t know many women, do you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I love you,” I said, giving her another quick hug. “So how’s it been going?”

“Really good,” she said. “I wanted to tell you all about the book club that Mindy, Charlotte, and Brielle want to start.”

“Book club?” I asked, looking surprised.

“Yeah. We all love books, and I figured it could be really fun. And you know there’s a bookstore on the street.” She nodded down the street.

“Yeah. So?”

“Well, we can have the book club there. You know, it might even be going up for sale.”

“Okay, and?”

“Wouldn’t it be really cool if you bought the bookstore? Then you could sell local artists’ paintings, including your own, and we can have book club night and—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” I held my hand up. “Emma, are you seriously suggesting I buy a store in Paradise Valley?” I narrowed my eyes at her, and she just smiled.

“Think about it,” she said. “Then we could still be together and have lots of fun and enjoy our friendship till the end of time.”

“Oh my gosh. You sound like a cartoon.” I laughed as we walked into Montana Knights. I looked around and felt the familiar sense of homecoming. I could see a fire in the fireplace on the opposite end of the bar. Brandon held up his hand in a small wave, and I nodded as I looked around. TJ was sitting with the guys in a booth, and we headed over.

“Want to get something to drink first?” Emma asked, and I shook my head.

“No. If everyone’s been waiting on me for the night to start, then I can get a drink in a little bit.”

“Hey there, Emma.” Mindy jumped up and gave me a big hug. Her brother Rafael was sitting next to her. He stood up and hugged me as well.

“Hey there, good looking,” he said, giving me a kiss on the cheek. I blushed at his compliment as I stared into his eyes. He really was so handsome and tall and strong. He was the sort of guy that could make you forget your own name if you wanted to. “So can I get you something to drink?” he asked, and I shook my head.

“Hey,” TJ said, giving me a nod. “Jack, there you are.”

“Yep, I’m here.” Jack sounded amused as he came and stood behind me. “Hey there, Mindy. Hey, Rafe,” he said in a short tone. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Fancy seeing you here as well, Jack.”

“What? I come here every week for trivia night.”

“And I also like to join for trivia night when I’m in town,” Rafe said as he smiled at me. “Emma, are you sure I can’t get you a drink?”

“I mean, maybe. I guess if everyone’s not waiting on me.”

“No, we weren’t waiting on you. How small of a town do you think this is?” Rafe laughed and put his hand behind my shoulder. “You want anything, Jack?”

“I’m good.” Jack grunted as he went and sat down next to TJ. I looked back at him, and his green eyes were shimmering as he stared back at me. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. We’d had such a touching conversation in the car that I’d actually felt closer to him, but I had to remember that he was still Jack Marley. He was still obnoxious. He was still the self-proclaimed last single cowboy in Paradise Valley. He wasn’t anyone that I was going to get close to or want anything with or even have a dalliance with.

“So I was wondering if you would perhaps like to...” Rafe started but stopped as Charlotte came over to us.

“Hey there, Emma. So good to see you again.” She walked directly over to me and gave me a big hug. “You are looking absolutely stunning as always.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“I just love your hair. I love blond hair, like super blond. And you’re super blond. Are your parents Scandinavian or something?”

“I guess. I’m not sure.” I laughed as I touched my hair self-consciously. “I’m trying to grow it out.”



“Oh, you’ve got the perfect bone structure for short hair,” she said. “You really don’t have to.”

“You really are strikingly beautiful,” Rafe whispered in my ear, and I looked at him with wide eyes. *Okay, so he’s definitely flirting with me*, I thought.

“You’re too sweet.” I touched my bob again self-consciously. “I was actually just thinking that—”

“Hey, I decided to get a beer after all,” Jack said, nodding at me and Rafe and then pushing himself between us. “What do you two want? Drinks on me.”

“We were just having a conversation,” Rafael said, staring at Jack with bemused eyes.

“Yeah, well, I guess you can continue it later. The trivia night’s about to start, and I’m sure we’re all in need of a good pint of beer, aren’t we?” Jack looked back at me and blinked. “What’d you say? Beer, Emma?”

“Sure,” I said. “Sounds good.” I looked over to the right and saw Pippa staring at us. She had a wide smile on her face, and I wasn’t sure what she was thinking. I wasn’t sure what Jack was thinking, either. Did he always have to be so rude? I just didn’t understand it.

And then I froze as I saw Kay come into the bar. I tried not to roll my eyes. Why was it that she always seemed to be around? She headed straight over to Jack and winked at him. I watched as she touched his shoulder and batted her eyelashes.

“Hi, Jack. So good to see you.”

Jack stared at her and nodded. “And you.” He looked over at Rafe and then at me. “Would you like something to drink, Kay?”

“Oh yes, please,” she said eagerly. “A glass of wine.”

“I was getting beers, but...”

“Oh, then beer’s fine,” she said. “Thank you for asking. That means so much to me.” I tried not to roll my eyes as I saw her flirting with him.

Pippa then joined us, and I whispered into her ear, “What is going on with those two? I just don’t understand. Are they a thing or something?”

“No,” Pippa whispered back. “Well, they used to be a thing. That’s Jack’s ex and his near baby mama.”

“What?” My jaw dropped. “No way.”

“Oh, yeah. And I’m pretty sure she wants him back.”

“Oh,” I said, looking at them. Well, that was something for the books. I wasn’t really sure what to say. I felt slightly weird hearing the comments, but I didn’t know why. “So Rafe,” I said, calling out to him.

“Yes, Barbie?” he said back to me, and I tried not to roll my eyes. I absolutely hated it when men called me Barbie just because I had blond hair and blue eyes.

“I was wondering what your topic of knowledge is.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” he said with a long wink. “But if you want, I can definitely tell you sometime.”

## CHAPTER 20

# JACK

I tried not to pay attention to Rafe and Emma as I spoke, though I was feeling really annoyed inside. As much as I tried to keep them apart, they just seemed to keep coming back together, and I could see the way Rafe was staring at Emma like he wanted to eat her. And I could see the way she admired him because he was a good-looking guy. And it pissed me off. Frankly, I was annoyed.

“So what do you think, Jack?” Kay said. I looked down at her in surprise. I’d almost forgotten that she was standing there next to me. I blinked at her and tried to withhold a sigh.

“Sorry, I was thinking about something else. What did you say?” I said to my beer and tried to focus on her and not on the way Emma was laughing as Rafe told her some joke about wrestling a bear. Which was obviously not true because if he tried to wrestle a bear, he would be dead.

“So, Jack,” Kay put her hand on my arm and squeezed, “you know, I’m so grateful to you for always being there in my life and for offering to buy me a drink.” I blinked as I stared down at her. What was she going on about?

“Hey, you’re welcome, Kay. You know we’re friends.” Which was kind of a lie. We weren’t really friends. She was my ex-girlfriend. She had cheated on me and lied to me and kind of broken my heart, but that was so many years ago, and frankly, I was one hundred percent over her. I looked over at Emma again as she ran her fingers through her short blond bob. It seemed to me whenever she was self-conscious or

nervous, she touched her hair, and I wanted to tell her that I'd noticed that, but I didn't want her to think that I was creepy.

“So, Jack, I really want you to give me another chance. No, I want you to give *us* another chance.” I froze as I realized what Kay was saying.

“Sorry, what?” This time I did let out a sigh. I couldn't stop myself.

“I want us to be an us again, Jack.” She grabbed my hand and squeezed. “You're the only man I've ever really loved. You're the only man that—”

“Oh shit,” I said and bit down on my lip.

“I'm sorry. Did I upset you?” she said, and I shook my head. I didn't want to hurt her feelings. I didn't want to be cruel. I knew some women had a way of twisting information so that they seemed like the victim. I didn't want to be the bad guy. I didn't want people to say I was rude or crude or mean or didn't care about how she was feeling, but there was no way I wanted to get into another relationship with Kay. I had absolutely no interest. I didn't want to ever be in a relationship again if I was quite honest with myself. I had no desire to ever get married.

“What did you say?” Kay said, looking frazzled. I could see Emma staring at me as well. Whatever I'd said, she'd heard.

“Sorry, what?” I said to Kay.

“You just said you don't ever want to get married again.”

I blinked. I hadn't realized I'd said it out loud, but it was true. I looked over at Emma, who was now touching Rafe's shoulder, and I got pissed off again. “I have no desire to ever get married,” I said, annoyed. “Women are way too much drama, and they're way too flaky. You think you know a woman. You think you're vibing. You think you're joking. You think you've got something in common. You think they like you, they think you like them, and everything should be great. But then another man comes along, and then another, and then another, and they just don't know what they want,” I

said. "I'm more than happy being single for the rest of my life, and I'm sorry, Kay, but that's just not what I'm interested in. I don't want a girlfriend, and I certainly don't want a wife."

I sipped on my beer and brushed past Kay, walking over to Emma. "We should go and sit down now, you know? Maybe we can partake in the trivia night that we came for."

"Wow," she said, her eyes widening. "No need to be rude. I was waiting on you."

"Sure you were," I said, looking over at Rafael. "Why don't we go sit down?"

"Yeah, okay," she said, walking next to me. We sat down in the booth, and I took a couple of deep breaths.

"Everything okay?" TJ asked, looking slightly surprised.

"I'm fine. I'm just annoyed," I said, shaking my head.

"It's okay if you want to go. I can always get Emma back later, or she can stay over—"

"I'm fine," I said, cutting him off. I heard Emma talking to Pippa about *Yellowstone*, the TV show, again, and I couldn't stop myself from making a comment. "Sounds like you really want a cowboy, huh?" I stared at her, and she stared back at me for a couple of seconds until she looked away.

"Just so you know, Jack, I don't want you, so you don't have to worry about that."

"I'm not worried," I snapped back. "Haven't you heard? I'm the last single cowboy in Paradise Valley, and I'm always going to stay that way. So if you want to mess around and flirt with every Tom, Dick, and Harry, or Rafael," I said, "then you go ahead." She stared at me for a couple of seconds, then shook her head. It was at that moment I realized I'd spoken loud enough for everyone in our group to hear.

"What, Mindy? Don't look so surprised," I said. "I think it's fairly obvious to everyone here that your brother is interested in Emma, but Emma's most probably going back to New York City real quick because it sounds like she's about to get a job. So maybe tell him not to get too invested."

“Okay,” Mindy said, rolling her eyes and looking over at Brielle. “What is it about men? Do they get their period, too?”

“I don’t know,” Brielle said, laughing. “PMS in men definitely seems to be a thing.”

I took a deep breath and looked at TJ. He looked concerned, and I could tell he was worried about me. “I’m fine,” I said, shaking my head. “Kay was just asking to get back together with me and saying all sorts of stupidity, and it’s just a busy time of year. There’s a lot going on.”

“Okay. You know if you ever want to talk, I’m here for you, bro.”

“I know. Isn’t it funny that now when we say ‘bro,’ it’s actually true?” I said, and he chuckled lightly.

“Isn’t it funny that when you used to say ‘bro,’ you knew it was true, and I just used to say it because you were my best friend?”

“Touché.” I grimaced, feeling like an asshole. “I’m sorry about that.”

“You don’t have to apologize anymore,” he said. “We’re brothers. Brothers forgive each other.” He smiled and wrapped his arm around my shoulder and squeezed. “Don’t worry about it anymore, Jack. I love you. And I know why you did what you did. You don’t have to carry that burden around with you anymore.”

## CHAPTER 21



# EMMA

I wasn't surprised that we lost trivia night, not if everyone was counting on me to win. I was surprised that I got a couple of the answers right, but then again, they hadn't been really hard questions. The drive home with Jack had been pretty quiet. He seemed like he was in a bad mood, and I didn't really have anything much to say to him. I was quite annoyed by the things he'd said to me, and I was really taken aback by his attitude. When he'd been talking with Kay, I'd assumed they had something going on. They'd looked very chummy, and I thought perhaps they were getting together. Initially, I felt a flutter of surprise in my stomach when I heard him telling Kay that he wasn't really interested in getting back with her.

But then he'd gone on to say he wasn't interested in dating at all, really, and he never wanted to get married, and he'd given me a look like he thought I needed to hear that, like he thought I was interested in him and wanted him, which was so far from the truth it was laughable. Sure, I thought he was handsome, and sure, I thought we'd gotten on a little bit, but that didn't mean I wanted him. That didn't mean I wanted to stay in Paradise Valley to see where anything could go. The only reason I was even contemplating looking at the bookstore was because of Pippa and her friends and how welcoming and nice they were, but I wasn't going to let that dictate my next move. I didn't want Jack to think I would stay here for him.

As soon as we arrived back to the farmhouse, Jack jumped out of the truck and headed to the front door. He opened it and let me in, then closed it behind me.

“Have a good night,” he said politely as he hurried to his room and shut the door.

“Have a good night as well,” I mumbled under my breath as I made my way to my room. Once I was in there, I heard him go into the bathroom and start brushing his teeth, so I sat on the edge of the bed and waited. He hadn’t told me that we shared a bathroom, but I noticed when I’d walked in and the shower was wet that I wasn’t the only one using it. I was thankful that I had noticed, because I wasn’t normally very observant, and I would’ve hated to have been in the shower one day and have him walk in and see me. When I heard him closing the door to his room, I went in and brushed my teeth, then went back into my own room.

It was weird being here, staying at his place. It was a really nice ranch house, and normally I enjoyed his company, but I felt slightly tense. I felt like I shouldn’t be here. I felt like I was in a place I wasn’t really welcome, and that was because of how everything had gone down at Montana Knights. I changed into my pajamas and lay there in the bed looking up at the ceiling, letting out a long, deep sigh. I was tired, but my brain was working a million miles a minute. I just didn’t understand what had gone on. I didn’t understand why Jack had been so cold. Did he really think I liked him? Did I like him?

Sometimes when I was by myself, I liked to question what I thought I knew about my life and really delve in deep. It was very easy to lie to myself about people in situations as a defense mechanism, but sometimes I wanted to dive past that. I wanted to know what I really and truly felt. As I lay there, my stomach curled slightly; maybe I did like Jack just a little bit. Not as anything really special, but as someone I was attracted to and who maybe in the back of my mind I hoped was attracted to me. “Well, he’s not,” I mumbled, trying to remind myself that I needed to be very, very cold toward him from here on out. I must have been more tired than I thought, because I fell asleep.

I woke up the next morning and stared at my phone. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. I knew I didn’t want to get

out of the bed just yet. I didn't want to have to see Jack or share breakfast with him, so I just went through my emails. I noticed I had another interview and they'd asked me to call in when I had time, so I called the number right away. I wanted to get out of Montana as soon as possible.

"Hello, this is Emma. I was calling about an email I got," I said to the receptionist that picked up the phone.

"Oh, hi. Yes, I've heard you were going to call. Hold on. Let me put you through to Mark."

"Mark?" I asked, confused. I had no idea who Mark was.

"Yeah, Mark's the head of the recruiting department here," she said enthusiastically. "Hold on."

"Okay, thanks." I listened to the music while waiting, tapping my fingers against my bedsheet.

"Hi, Emma," a loud, booming voice said into the phone.

"Hi, is this Mark?"

"Yeah, so great you could call us. I'm glad that you weren't too busy with the holidays coming up."

"Oh, no, I'm good. I'm just in Montana visiting my friend but not really doing much." I laughed slightly. "I got your email, though."

"Yes, I just wanted to let you know that everything is working out well. We contacted your references, and we'd like to make you an offer."

"Oh?" I asked, surprised. "Really?"

"Yeah, so we've got your starting salary at \$250,000 a year with stock options, and then there is a bonus at the end of the year. Most people get about \$40 to \$50K, so that would take you up to about \$300,000. We have a five percent match for your 401k every year up to \$25,000, and we provide—or I should say the company provides—free healthcare and free childcare, which as I'm sure is absolutely a godsend in the city."

"I don't have children, but that does sound really cool."

“Well, yeah, if you decide to have children, what’s really cool is that we have a maternity leave program that allows you to work from home for twelve years and a paternity program that allows you to work from home for six months.”

“Wow. Women get to work from home for twelve years?” I said, surprised.

“Oh, I misspoke.” He chuckled. “I meant twelve months.”

“Oh, okay. Well, that’s still good.”

“Yeah, we think it’s pretty good. This company is really amazing, and I think you would be a great addition. There’s just one little thing.”

“Oh?” I asked. “We would love for you to start next Monday. We have a new project coming up, and well, we need brains like yours.”

“Monday,” I said, my heart racing. But that was really close. It was the holidays. I thought the job wouldn’t start until the new year.

“I know, and most of our positions wouldn’t start until the new year, but this one, well, we need you there on Monday. So are you in?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“We really need you now, Emma. I think you would be absolutely perfect for the position, your credentials, your brains, your initiative.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling happy at the compliment but slightly nervous. I did want to get out of Montana, but that quickly? That was even before Thanksgiving. “Can I let you know?” I asked softly, and he paused for a second.

“Well, I guess. I was hoping to ask you...”

“I’ll let you know. It’s just a lot to think about,” I said.

“Okay. Well, if you need to think about it, do you think you can let me know by tomorrow?”

“Can you give me a couple of days, please?” I asked.

“Sure. But we will need to know by the end of the week,” Mark said. “We do really want someone to start on Monday, and as I’m sure you must know, we had a lot of qualified candidates. You were our number one, though.”

“Well, I really appreciate that.”

“Oh, and did I forget to mention there is a hundred thousand dollar signing bonus? As long as you remain employed for twelve months, you get to keep it.”

“Oh, wow. That’s quite a lot.”

“I mean, if it will make you say, yes, I am authorized to make that \$150,000.”

“Wow,” I said.

“We really want you, Emma. You’ll be a great fit for the team. You’ll be working directly with the president.”

“Oh, that’s cool.”

“You would be the vice president of marketing for the entire company.”

“That’s amazing.”

“I think so. I think this would be a really great fit for your career, Emma. You would take New York City and the world by storm.”

“Thank you. I just need to think about it.”

“Hmm.” He sounded displeased at that. And I knew that it most probably sounded crazy. Who needed to think about a position that paid \$250,000 with a \$150,000 signing bonus? I just didn’t know if it would make me happy. I wasn’t really excited by the job, and the more I thought about it, I wasn’t excited about going back to New York City, not without Pippa, not without something else to be happy to look forward to.

“Well, my other line’s beeping,” Mark said. “I’m going to let you go, but please let me know as soon as possible.”

“Okay. Thanks, Mark,” I said.

I turned off the phone and jumped out of bed. I could hear the puppies running up and down outside in the corridor, and I knew that I didn't care if Jack was in the house or not. I needed to get a cup of coffee. I needed to think, and then I needed to call Pippa.

I made my way to the kitchen and was surprised to see that Jack was still there and not out on the ranch. "Hey, morning," he said, looking me up and down. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Yeah, that would be really nice. Thank you," I said, trying to ignore the warm flutter in my heart as I stared at him.

"Hey, I wanted to apologize for yesterday."

"Oh?" I blinked, confused by his words.

"I may have come off a little bit..." He sighed and didn't continue.

"You may continue," I said, laughing. "You may have come off a little bit what?"

"I don't know, alpha, ignorant, arrogant, annoying." He shrugged. "And you're my guest, and I didn't mean to make you feel that way."

"To make me feel what way?" I said with a straight face. I was surprised at the fact that he was apologizing and that he realized he'd made me feel slightly uncomfortable. Most men weren't aware like that, and if they were, they usually were defensive or had excuses.

"I think," he said as he opened a cupboard and took out a cup, "I was just slightly annoyed by certain events that went on, and maybe I took out my frustration on you, and you're my guest, and I really don't want you to feel that I don't want you here or that I'm trying to get with the last single bachelor in Paradise Valley." He groaned.

"Sorry. That was really something between me and Kay, and I shouldn't have made you feel like it was directed toward you in any way."

“That’s okay. I didn’t take it personally,” I lied. “I mean, why would I? It’s not like you and I have anything, or...”

He poured some coffee into the mug. “You can help yourself to milk and sugar,” he said, staring at me. “Look, I just wanted to say Rafael, he’s a great guy. He’s been a friend of mine for a while. He’s Mindy’s brother. I think he loves his sister more than anything in the world.”

“Okay, and you’re saying this because?”

“Everyone in Paradise Valley knows that he’s a little bit of a, well, confirmed bachelor and a player, and I just don’t want to see you getting hurt.”

“What?” I stared at him, blinking and trying not to laugh. “What are you talking about?”

“I mean, you were flirting with him, and he was obviously flirting with you, and...”

“Flirting doesn’t mean he’s going to break my heart. It just means that we—”

“So you admit you were flirting with him,” he cut me off and glared slightly.

“What? You just said that you...”

“I mean, I didn’t expect you to actually agree with that. I thought you would say you were just having a conversation and you didn’t realize he was flirting with you and...” He paused. “Okay, maybe I sound a little bit extra right now.”

“You sound a lot extra right now.” I stared at him. “What is your issue?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Everything has just been kind of crazy, and I still feel very guilty about what went down with TJ, and...I don’t know. It’s just a weird stage in my life right now.”

“Why?” I said. “You have everything to live for. You have an amazing ranch. You’re writing this book for your niece and your nephew. You have a new brother. You have an amazing sister. You have amazing parents. You have great friends. You’re living your best life,” I said.

“You would think that.” He nodded. “I should be living my best life.”

“Well, aren’t you?” I asked him as he handed me a cup of black coffee. I went to the fridge and pulled out some milk, then added a couple of sugar cubes. I sipped it and moaned. “This tastes amazing. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said. “And I don’t know. Do you ever just get that feeling that even though you should be happy and you should be settled and satisfied, there’s something missing?”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, surprised to hear that his words echoed the thoughts I had in my mind about my life all the time. I said, “Honestly.” My stomach growled.

He grinned. “You wants some eggs and toast?” he asked.

“Oh, you don’t have to make that. I can.”

“No, it’d be my pleasure. Have a seat.”

“Thanks, Jack,” I said, sitting at the kitchen table and watching as he took out a loaf of bread from the bread bin and put two slices into the toaster.

“Would you like your eggs scrambled, fried, or boiled?”

“Poached,” I said, laughing. “Joking. I could do a fried egg over medium.”

“Sure,” he said. “You want some avocado with the toast?”

“Ooh, are you going to make me avocado toast with an egg?”

“I can,” he said. “I know how you New York women love your avocado toast.”

“I think women all over the world, period, love avocado toast, actually. It’s a thing.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” he said, laughing. “Well, let’s have avocado toast a la Jack Marley coming up.”

“Thank you,” I said.



He looked at me for a couple of seconds and then grabbed an avocado from the fridge and started cutting into it. “So you sometimes feel like your life isn’t what you wanted it to be as well?” he said softly without looking at me.

I thought about his question for a while and then answered. “I just got offered a job,” I said.

“Wow.” He turned and looked around. “Congratulations. In New York?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Where else?”

“I mean, obviously in New York,” he said quickly. “Are you going to take it?”

“I’m not sure.” I let out a deep sigh and then sipped some more of my coffee. “It’s crazy. It’s the job I’ve been working toward for years. It’s vice president of marketing. I’d be working under the president of the company. The salary is unheard of. I would most probably never have to worry about money again. If I had kids, I could have maternity leave.”

“Are you’re planning on having kids anytime soon?” he asked.

“Oh yeah. Didn’t you hear me and Rafael were...” I burst out laughing at the expression on his face. “I’m joking, Jack. I’m joking.”

“Oh,” he said. “Very funny. Ha ha.” He shook his head, and I just rolled my eyes. “Do you like him or not?”

“You really seem to dislike this dude,” I remarked.

“I don’t dislike him,” he said, grabbing a frying pan and putting it on top of the stove. “I just don’t think he’s the right guy for you.”

“You keep saying that like you’re invested in my love life. I haven’t even gone on a date with him. I mean, it’s fine. You don’t have to worry about me. I’m not your little sister.”

“I know you’re not my sister, Emma,” he said, then he paused and turned to look at me. “I don’t look at you as my little sister.” He shuddered.

“Well, thanks. That makes me feel great.”

“I don’t mean it like that,” he said, heading over to me and stopping in front of me. “Obviously, I don’t fancy you as my sister. That would be gross and incestuous.”

“Wait, what?” I looked up at him, blinking.

“You heard what I said.”

“You fancy me?”

“I mean, you’re pretty and funny, and you’re cute and...”

“You think I’m pretty and funny and cute?” I laughed. “Really? The last single cowboy in Paradise Valley thinks I’m pretty, funny, and cute.”

“You don’t have to keep saying the last single cowboy as if that’s my name.”

“Well, you’ve brought it up many times, so I felt like that was the moniker you wanted to go by.”

“It’s not,” he said, grabbing my hands and pulling me up. “It’s definitely not.”

“Oh yeah, and?”

“And, I don’t know, maybe this is just a little more complicated than I thought.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean that I’ve been thinking about doing this for the last couple of days, and I hope you don’t mind,” he said as he leaned forward and pressed his lips against mine.

My eyes widened slightly as he kissed me, but I couldn’t stop myself from kissing him back. His lips were moist and warm, and my heart fluttered. We only kissed for what must have been a minute, but it felt like an eternity. He stepped back, a wide smile on his face.

“So yeah, it’s complicated,” he said.

I couldn’t stop myself from nodding in agreement and blushing. What had that been about and why had it felt so good? Jack had kissed me, and I kissed him back, and I liked

it. This was really weird and complicating everything, and I just didn't even know what to think.

"You want to play a game of Scrabble after your breakfast?" he asked, as if he hadn't just kissed me and blown up my entire world.

"Scrabble?" I just blinked at him. Had I heard that right? Was that code name for something else, or...?

"I love Scrabble," he said. "I have dictionaries so we can check the words as well. We always have to have dictionaries, because people like to make up words. And I'm one of those people that does not let made-up words fly."

"We can play Scrabble," I said. "You don't have to work or...?"

"No, I want to spend time with my guest," he said. "I want to spend time with you."

"Okay, that sounds good." I nodded. "Fun, even."

"Great," he said, smiling warmly. "And you forgive me for yesterday?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Jack. We all get into bad moods sometimes. I'm just glad to know that yours is over. I was a little bit worried."

"You were?" he said.

"Yeah, I'm staying with you. I didn't want it to be awkward."

"It's not awkward now, right?" he asked, staring at my lips, and I blushed slightly.

"No, you kissing me isn't awkward. Maybe I even kind of liked it."

"Kind of?" he said. "What do you mean? You didn't love it?"

"Ah, that's the secret you'll never find out," I said, and we both started laughing.

## CHAPTER 22

# JACK

“I’m telling you that supercalifragilisticexpialidocious is really a word,” Emma said, giggling. “Sure, I don’t have enough letters to make that word, but it is a word.”

“Is it really?” I said. “Or is it just made up?”

“It may have been made up, but I’m pretty sure it’s in the dictionary now,” she said. “You can check.”

“I’ll believe you,” I said as I put down my word.

“What’s that?” She looked at me.

“What? You’ve never heard of jogly?” I said with a straight face.

“Jogly?” She shook her head. “I’ve heard jolly, and I’ve heard juggle. I’ve never heard of jogly.”

“Oh, it means when you’re jolly and ugly, you’re jogly,” I said, grinning at her.

“That is not a word, Jack,” she said, shaking her head. “I veto that word. That is not a word.”

“It is a word, and it’s going to give me fifty-seven points, which means I’m going to win this game,” I said.

“You are definitely not winning. Where’s the dictionary?” she said, reaching over to grab it from me.

“No, no, no. Don’t you trust me?” I said, staring at her lips again. I could still remember our kiss and the way she’d responded. It had made me feel like a million dollars, and I hadn’t felt this light in what felt like decades.

I had spoken to TJ in the morning, and he had sold me some whole truths. He told me that Pippa had asked him why I'd seemed so upset with Emma, and I'd realized that I'd taken my bad mood out on her because I'd been jealous of her flirting with Rafael. I didn't want to admit that to her. I barely wanted to admit it to myself, but I knew it was true.

"Come on, Jack. Let's check. You're not getting fifty-seven points for that."

"I think I am," I said, holding the dictionary up and away from her.

"No, let me see." She stood up and came over to me. "Let me get the dictionary, Jack."

"Or what?" I said, standing up as well and holding it in the air. She stood up on her tippy toes and tried to jump up and grab it from me.

"You're the one that said you'd like to use the dictionary," she said, giggling.

"Yeah, so I could check your words. Not so you could check mine."

"Jack, that's not fair," she said, laughing, holding onto my shoulders, and trying to jump up to grab it.

"Who said life was fair, Emma?" I loved these moments with her when it was light and fun and we were just enjoying being around each other. She was most probably one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen in my life, but I felt connected to her, more than just physically attracted. There was something about her personality, the way she was easy to laugh, the way her eyes always lit up when she was excited about something, the way just seeing her, put a smile on my face.

"I don't think so, Emma," I said, stepping back. She grabbed my arm and pulled me toward her so she could try and grab the dictionary.

"I don't think so," I said, trying to sidestep her but accidentally tripping over my own feet. I went crashing to the ground, and she came crashing down with me.

“Ow,” she said as she rubbed her elbow, “that hurt.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.” I looked at her elbow. “You want me to kiss it better?”

“You wish,” she said, giggling, reaching over and trying to grab the dictionary from me, even though we were still on the ground.

“I don’t think so,” I said, grabbing her arm and pushing it back. We ended up rolling around and wrestling on the floor as she tried to take the dictionary. She was breathing deeply, and I could hear her heart racing as I held the book above my head. I rolled her onto her back and held her hands back.

“Tell me you could believe that that’s a word.”

“It’s not a word,” she says. “I know it’s not a word. You are not going to win with a word like jogley, Jack Marley.”

“What do you mean?” I said, laughing. She pushed me back, and I fell back in surprise.

“You’re not going to win that quickly,” she said, grabbing the dictionary from my hand and trying to open it.

“I don’t think so,” I said as I started to tickle her.

She burst out laughing and dropped the book to the side. “That’s not fair. I’m really ticklish.” She giggled.

“Oh, yeah. How ticklish?” I continued to tickle her under the arms, and her body moved back and forth. She was laughing hysterically, and I couldn’t stop myself from laughing as well.

I looked down into her face. Her big blue eyes were smiling up at me, and I was so happy to have her here with me. I reached down and kissed her again, and she kissed me back. We kissed for a couple of minutes, and then I just laid back on the ground, my shoulders rubbing next to her.

She looked over at me, her eyes wide. “You kissed me again.”

“I did,” I said, “and I enjoyed it.”

“It was okay,” she said, grinning, “but that doesn’t mean that I’m going to accept jogle until I see it in the dictionary.”

“Okay, so you mean my kiss wasn’t good enough for you to take me at my word?”

“Nope,” she said, laughing. “Sorry.”

“Aha, I’m sure you’re sorry.”

“I am. Well, not really, but you know.”

“I know what?” I asked her.

“You know that’s not a word.”

“Okay. I’ll admit it’s not a word if you admit you enjoyed my kiss.”

She bit down on her lip and stared at me. “I’ll admit I enjoyed your kiss if you admit you’re a bad driver.”

“But I’m not a bad driver.”

“Fine, that you’re an obnoxious, rude driver.”

“I don’t think I’m generally an obnoxious and rude driver. Was I slightly rude that day? Maybe, but then again, it got your attention, didn’t it?”

“All attention isn’t good attention,” she said, and I laughed.

“That is true.”

“So you admit it?” she said.

“Maybe. Why? If I admit it, what do I get?”

“You don’t get anything.”

“What? Not even another kiss?”

“Jack, we really shouldn’t be kissing. We—”

Her phone started ringing, and she jumped up. “I should get that.”

“Yeah,” I said as I stood up and stared at her as she answered her phone. She was right, of course. I didn’t know why I was kissing her. I mean, I knew why I was kissing her. I



was kissing her because I liked her. I was kissing her because she was fun and cute and one of the only women I'd met in a long time where I could actually see a potential relationship, which was ironic seeing as I just spent the last couple of days going on about how much I wasn't looking for a relationship.

"Hey there, Mindy," she said, and I tried not to groan. If Mindy was calling to set her up on a date with Rafael, I was going to scream and shout.

"Oh, yeah. I didn't forget the dating event," she said, and I frowned. What dating event? "Oh, tomorrow night? That sounds great. Yeah, I'm sure Jack would want to come. Oh, he needs to fill out a survey? Yeah, email it to me, and I'll share it with Jack. Perfect. Thanks, I'll see you tomorrow." Emma smiled and hung up the phone. "That was Mindy."

"I kind of guessed when you said her name," I said dryly, and she rolled her eyes.

"She was calling about the speed dating event that she and Charlotte are setting up. She said we need to fill out a survey so that we can be matched up with our best matches."

"Really? I'm not interested in that," I frowned, "and I'm surprised that you are."

"Why?" she asked, looking at me innocently.

I wanted to say I was surprised she was interested in going to a speed-dating event after she just kissed me, but I didn't want her to think I was crazy or possessive or anything. "Well, seeing as you just got that job in New York..." I said quickly, which made my heart thud. Was she going to take it? Was she going to leave me so quickly? I couldn't imagine life without her in it, which was weird, because I hadn't known her that long, but she'd already become an integral part of my life.

I started to understand how people in dating shows connected with others so quickly. There was something to be said about living with someone and spending a lot of time with them in a short amount of time, especially if you were attracted to them. It really made things move faster. It was like

someone hit the accelerate button in your feelings, because I was definitely starting to develop feelings for her.

“It’ll be fun, Jack,” she said, shaking her head. “I mean, it’s all in good fun. It’s not like I’m going to marry them, right? I need some fun before I go back to New York.” She stared at me for a couple of seconds. “I mean, you can do whatever you want, of course.”

“I don’t want to stop you, and if you want to do a speed-dating event, we’ll go to the speed-dating event. I mean, you’re going to do it, too.”

“The only person I’d like to go on a date with is you,” I said. Her eyes widened, and she looked shocked. “Just joking,” I said quickly. “A couple of kisses don’t mean I want to take you on a date. You know that you’re a New York City girl.”

“Yeah.” She blinked in confusion, and I wondered if I’d messed up. I wasn’t even sure how I felt. I wasn’t sure how she felt, but I didn’t want to complicate things any more than they’d already been complicated. I wasn’t sure what I was doing, and I wasn’t sure what she was thinking.

“We’ll go,” I said, “and you’re right, jogly’s not a word.” I looked at my watch. “I should go and check some stuff on the ranch before dinner.”

“Okay,” she said, nodding, “and I’ll take the puppies out.”

“That’ll be nice. Thank you,” I said stiffly. I sighed as I realized I was going back into my shell. “Hey,” I said, turning around and looking at her, “it was fun this afternoon. I enjoyed playing Scrabble.”

“I enjoyed playing as well,” she said, “even if you did try to cheat.”

“Well, I hope you enjoyed everything about the afternoon.” I grinned at her, and she blushed lightly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She gave me a beguiling look.

“You don’t know what I’m talking about?” I stepped toward her, grabbed her hands, and pulled her into my arms. “Really?”

“What are you doing?” she asked, her eyes widening.

“Nothing,” I said, kissing her forehead, then the tip of her nose, then her lips before stepping back. “Tonight, we can grill steaks for dinner,” I said, as if I hadn’t just given her a trio of kisses, like she was my girlfriend or something.

“Steak sounds good,” she said, nodding, her eyes wide with a look that made my heart stir.

I could tell she had something else to say, but I didn’t want to talk right now. “Great,” I said. “I’ll see you in a little bit.” I hurried out of the room. I wasn’t sure what I was doing.

## CHAPTER 23

# EMMA

“Hey, Mindy. Hey, Charlotte. Hey, Brielle,” I greeted my new friends as I entered Montana Knights. I looked around at the bar and started clapping my hands. “Wow, you’ve really transformed this place,” I said as I looked at the twinkling lights and the tinsel that was decorating the front of the bar.

“We thought we should make it festive,” Charlotte said. “Plus, Brandon gave me a budget of two hundred dollars, and I was sure going to use it.”

“Well, you did awesome.”

“We also have some matches for you,” Mindy said, clasping my hands. “I’m so excited for you.”

“Awesome. Do you have matches for yourself as well or...?” I paused as I stared at her and Charlotte. They looked at each other and just shook their heads. “Oh, no. You don’t mean to tell me that you’re not going to be a part of this as well.”

“Well, we were thinking about it, but how weird would it be if we tried to match ourselves up? The guys would think we did it on purpose,” Brielle said as she looked over at Mindy.

“Yeah.” Mindy nodded. “And to be honest, I got matched with Brandon.”

“Brandon, the owner of this bar?” I said, my eyes wide.

“Yeah, and I don’t even want to think about dating him for a second,” Mindy said, shaking her head. “I have no idea how

that happened.”

“Maybe it’s meant to be.”

“I doubt it. But, I mean, the matches that we’ve come up with for everyone else should be great,” she said, giggling. “You want to a glass of wine while you wait?”

“Yes, please. Do you have any Cabernet Sauvignon?”

“Of course. You’re at a bar,” Charlotte said as she walked behind the bar and grabbed a bottle of wine. “Here you go. First one’s on me.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “You guys have spoiled me far too much. Here, I want to buy the first two bottles of wine for everyone.”

“What?” Mindy said, looking at me in surprise. “You don’t have to do that.”

“You’ve treated me to free breakfast and free drinks. You girls are amazing, and I really appreciate it.”

“Have you thought any more about the bookstore?” Mindy asked, and I shook my head.

“Pippa was talking to you about it, huh?”

“It would be a great idea. I’m sure they’d love to sell it to you. I’m—”

“I got offered a job in New York,” I said quickly, “making a lot of money. I’d be running the marketing department. I could retire in five years if this went really well.”

“But you’d be in New York,” Charlotte said, “without us and without Pippa.”

“And without your new husband-to-be,” Brielle said, and we all started laughing.

“Where is Pippa?” I said, looking around.

“I think she’s going to come later,” Mindy said. “I think TJ wasn’t super excited about her coming to a dating event.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.” I laughed. “Well, I guess I will try not to feel awkward here by myself.”

“But you’re not here by yourself. You’re here with us,” Mindy said, linking arms with me. “And we’re your new friends. Also, where’s Jack? I thought he was signing up as well. We have a couple of matches for him.”

“You do?” I said, feeling my heart sink.

“Yeah. Why?” Mindy narrowed her eyes and stared at me. “Are you curious who his matches are?”

“Not at all,” I said quickly. I didn’t want to bring up the kiss, and I didn’t want to even think about it. In fact, now there had been multiple kisses. Jack and I had kissed. It was hard to believe, even harder to fathom. He’d been a good kisser as well, and I’d enjoyed it, really enjoyed it, but I didn’t know what it meant. I didn’t think it meant anything, if I was honest, especially seeing as I told him about the job and he had seemed to realize that was something important to me.

“Hey, you okay?” Mindy said, waving her hand back and forth in front of my eyes. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Sorry. I was just thinking about my job. I have to let them know on Monday or Tuesday if I’m going to take it, and I’m just not sure yet.”

“Don’t take it,” Charlotte said, laughing.

“I think you should take it,” Brielle said. “Not because I don’t want you here, because of course I want you here, but a high-powered job in New York City that would allow you to retire in five years? That’s unheard of. You could come back and buy fricking Main Street then.”

“I don’t think I’d have that much money to retire,” I said, laughing. “But that’s an idea.”

“We don’t want you to go, though,” Mindy said, “and I’m sure Pippa doesn’t.”

“I know Pippa doesn’t. And honestly, I don’t even have a group of friends like you guys back in New York. It was really me and Pippa against the world. But...”

“But nothing,” Mindy says. “Just see how tonight goes, and maybe you’ll change your mind.”

“Maybe,” I said. I took the glass of wine and sipped on it gratefully. I stared around the bar and watched as Brielle walked over to the jukebox in the corner and turned on some music. Elvis Presley was singing, and I took a seat. I loved Elvis’s voice. It reminded me of when I was a child and my mom would grab my hands and we’d dance around the living room. I sang under my breath to the music playing through the speakers.

I closed my eyes for a couple of seconds and thought about my mom and the happy times we’d had. I missed her. Some days, I almost forgot she was gone. And then others, it hit me like a slab of bricks on the head, and I couldn’t even think. Tears threatened to bubble, and I opened my eyes and took a deep breath and then another sip of wine. I didn’t want to start crying, not here, not now, not when I was so happy and excited and looking forward to the future.

I touched my lips gingerly as Jack’s face appeared in my mind. He was different than I thought he was going to be. He wasn’t just the cocky, arrogant, annoying cowboy I’d first encountered on that first day. I hadn’t thought I would grow to like him. He had been so annoying, so unlike the other men I knew, but maybe that’s why I had grown to like him so much already, because he was real. He was true to himself. He didn’t fake his personality. He didn’t fake his jokes even if they were corny half the time. I didn’t know what was going on between us, and it almost didn’t matter. The journey was almost more fun not knowing what was going to happen.

A part of me wanted to say that I should just let go and try and find a job where I could work from home and stay in Paradise Valley and see what could happen between Jack and me and hang out with my new friends. Maybe I’d meet someone else. Maybe Rafael would be a good match, even though Jack had warned me against dating him. I thought it was sweet that Jack was worried about my heart being broken. I’d never met a man like him before that genuinely cared about my feelings. Most of the men I’d met in New York City were only looking out for themselves. It was weird that you could grow up in a place and it could feel like home for your entire life, then you visited somewhere else and almost immediately



you realized that you'd been missing something you didn't even know you were missing.

I sat back and took another sip of the wine, watching the girls as they ran around and set up the tables, laughing and singing. It was nice being here. It was almost too good to be true. I'd never imagined that I could fall in love with a place like Paradise Valley, Montana. I'd never imagined that I could live in a rural setting and actually enjoy it, but here I was.

"Okay, everyone's going to start arriving within twenty minutes," Mindy said, jumping up and down. "I know I shouldn't be so excited, but I am. This is so much fun."

"I know," Charlotte said. "I'm excited, too."

Brielle looked at them and burst out laughing. "Guys, it's not like we're millionaire matchmakers or anything. We don't know what's going to happen."

"We don't, but it will be fun watching these love stories blossom," Mindy said, and I just smiled.

"Welcome, everyone," Mindy said. The bar was packed now. There were at least forty different men and women sitting, dressed up, waiting to find out who their matches were. "I'm so excited that so many people joined us for our first annual Christmas dating bonanza," she said. "Charlotte and I have gone through all of the applications."

"Not applications," Charlotte said. "You mean the quizzes."

"Oh, yeah. All the quizzes," Mindy continued. "And we've found everyone two perfect matches just like on the TV show *Married at First Sight*."

"Get on with it," a guy from the corner shouted, and a bunch of guys around him started laughing.

"Thank you very much, Tad." Mindy gave him a glare. "But let me explain how this is going to work. All the women will sit at one table, and then men will come up to me to find out which woman he is sitting with first. You will have ten to fifteen minutes to talk with your partner, then I will ring a bell

and the second match will sit next to the women. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah. Why do I feel like I’m in school?” Tad shouted again, and his friends laughed. I really hoped that I wasn’t going to be matched up with him.

I looked across at the bar and saw that Jack was sitting with a couple of guys I didn’t know. He gave me a little wave, and I smiled and waved back. He looked really handsome tonight in his white shirt and blue jeans. I tried to ignore the way my heart fluttered. He was not my boyfriend. He was not my husband. He was no one special. I was going to see who my matches were and just have a good time.

“Okay, women. Everyone, stand up,” Mindy said. “Please find a table with your name and take a seat.” I got up and walked around the room and looked for a table with my name on it. I took my seat and then finished the last of my wine. I wondered who my two matches were going to be, if I’d find them attractive, if they’d be funny. I was excited.

I wondered who Jack’s matches were. I noticed that Kay was here, and I wasn’t that happy to see her. She looked really pretty tonight, and for some reason, I’d hoped she’d look like a wicked witch. I didn’t want Jack to think for one moment that maybe he’d made a mistake. I didn’t want to question myself as to why, but it was mainly because I didn’t want Jack to be hurt again, just like he didn’t want me to be hurt by Rafael.

“Okay, guys. Come and get your placements,” Mindy shouted out. I sat back and waited to see who was going to approach me. Lo and behold, Rafael came and sat in front of me.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t Emma,” he said, glancing at me.

I stared at him and smiled widely. “Hey,” I said. “Good to see you. Are you really my match?”

“I guess I am,” he said. “Would you like something else to drink before we get started?”

“I’m okay. Thank you, though.”

He sat back in the chair and looked around. “I hope no one’s going to get upset that I’m here.”

“Who would get upset?” I laughed. He looked over his shoulder and nodded. I looked to where he was nodding and saw Jack. He was glaring at us, and I offered him a small wave. This time, he didn’t wave back.

“I think Jack might have a thing for you,” Rafael said, and I shook my head.

“No. He just thinks you’re a little bit of a player, and he doesn’t want me to get hurt.”

“Is that what he said?” Rafael rolled his eyes.

“What, you’re telling me that a man as handsome as you has not had a bunch of girlfriends?”

“No. I’m not saying that.” He grinned. “I’ve had plenty of girlfriends and plenty of women that I’ve dated who weren’t girlfriends, but I’m not a rake or anything like that.”

“A rake? What is this, the 1800s?” I laughed.

“Something like that,” he said. “So tell me more about you.” He leaned forward. “I mean, I know every time we try and chat, our conversation is interrupted, and I’d like to get to know you. I think I’ve made no secret of the fact that I find you very attractive.”

“What would you like to know?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “What do you do for fun? What do you want to do with your life?”

“Wow, those are some big questions.”

“I’m a big guy. What can I say?”

“Well, for fun, I like to paint and—”

“Oh, I can’t stand painting,” he said. “I just don’t have the patience.”

“Oh. Well, you know. It’s one of those things that I think you either like or you don’t like.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“I really like reading as well. Some of my favorite books are—”

“Oh my gosh, I can’t stand books,” he interrupted me. “I much prefer movies like *The Terminator*, *Spider-Man*, any of the Marvel or DC movies,” he said. “I’m really into horror as well.”

“Oh, I’m not into horror,” I said, shaking my head.

“What? *Halloween* is like the best movie ever.”

“Okay.” I laughed. “I also—”

“Do you like to watch football?” he cut me off.

“Not really.”

“Oh. Well, we’ve got to go to a football game. Maybe that can be our first date,” he said. “I love football and ice hockey and baseball and basketball. I’m not so much into soccer, but I’m getting into it now that Messi is in Miami. I think it would be really cool to go and see a game. Don’t you?”

“Sure,” I said, quickly realizing that even though Rafael was very handsome and flirtatious, his personality was not really one I meshed with, and we didn’t have anything in common.

The bell rang, and Mindy spoke up. “Okay, everyone. I hope your first dates went fantastically. I want the guys to come over to me to find out their second match. Women, I hope you had a marvelous time with your first date. Let’s change. We’ve got about five minutes for guys to get the information and then take a seat.”

“Well,” Rafael said, looking slightly annoyed, “it was great talking to you and getting to know you better, Emma. Or should I say Barbie?”

“No, I prefer Emma. Thank you.”

He grabbed my hand and kissed it. “You’ll always be Barbie to me,” he said. “Maybe we can get dinner tomorrow or...”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said.

“Great,” he said, “and then we can get a nightcap at my place.” He spoke loudly, and it was at that time that Jack walked by. Jack stared at my hand that was still in Rafael’s and then looked me in the face. There was a blank expression, and I blushed slightly as I pulled my hand away. “So that was an amazing first date,” Rafael said, grinning at me. “Thank you for making it so special.”

“Thanks?” I said, not knowing what to say as Jack turned away with a disgusted expression. I sat back and took a deep breath and waited to find out who my next match was going to be. Mindy rang the bell, and the men headed back to their tables. I was shocked when I saw Jack standing at my table.

“Well, this is awkward,” he said, standing next to the chair without taking a seat.

“You’re not my second match.”

“Yeah, I was kind of surprised as well,” he said as he took a seat. “I guess you just really wanted to see me again tonight.”

“I see you every day.”

“True. So is this your way of trying to get me to kiss you again?”

“I never tried to get you to kiss me in the first place, so no.”

“But you enjoyed it, right?” I couldn’t tell if he was teasing me or genuinely asking me. It was hard to tell what his mood was. He was acting weird.

“Who was your first date with?” I asked him, wanting to change the subject.

“Oh, it was with a girl named Vanessa. Have you met her yet?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. He pointed to the other side of the room, and I stared at a beautiful Asian girl with long black hair and big brown eyes. She looked over and waved, a big smile on her face. “Oh, she’s cute.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty gorgeous,” he said, nodding. “Vanessa Mai, Jack and Vanessa,” he said, and I just stared at him.

“So you’re into her or…” My heart raced as I wondered what he thought about her.

“I mean, might take her on a date, you know? Then she can come back to mine for a nightcap.”

“Very funny,” I said, knowing now he was referring to my conversation with Rafael. “I’m not going to go back to his place for a nightcap, obviously.”

“I just don’t know what game you’re playing here, Emma. Are you into him or what?”

“What do you mean?”

“I just mean I don’t know if you think you’re in some Hallmark movie dating and dangling every single guy in Paradise Valley, but I really feel like it’s not a good look.”

“Excuse me?” I stared at him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, you were kissing me recently, and now you’re flirting with Rafael and—”

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no. You are not going to speak to me like that, Jack Marley. You need to grow up. You’re the one who’s told me you love being the last single cowboy in Paradise Valley. You’re the one who said you never intend on getting married and you don’t want anything from anyone. So just because we kissed—because you kissed me, let’s not get it twisted—doesn’t mean that I can’t speak to other men and possibly go on a date with them if they asked.”

“So you do want to go on a date with Rafael?” he asked me.

“Oh my gosh, you’re so frustrating. You do know that, right?”

“Well, maybe I’m just confused. Do you like me or not?”

“I don’t know. Do you like me?”

“What do you think?” he said, growling.

“What do you mean, what do I think?”

“I mean, what do you think? I kissed you, didn’t I? I’ve got you staying in my home. I take you places. I take off work. I’m annoyed right now about you flirting with Rafael. Of course I like you.”

“You like me?”

“Yes,” he said.

“So what does that mean?”

“It means that,” he sighed, “I don’t want you going on a date with Rafael, and it has nothing to do with him being a player.”

“Oh, so you like me like me.” My heart raced as I stared at him.

He just shook his head. “I mean, don’t be mistaken: we don’t know each other that well. But yeah,” he grinned, “I think I kind of like you like you.”

## CHAPTER 24



# JACK

“So I was thinking we could take a brother’s trip next year.” TJ handed me an envelope and looked down with a slightly embarrassed look on his face. I couldn’t tell why he was so bashful all of a sudden, and a part of me wondered if he was wanting to break up with me as a friend. I wasn’t sure why I still allowed my guilt to fill my mind. If anyone should feel guilty, it was his mom and our dad, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that keeping his ancestry a secret from him for so long hadn’t been for the best.

“So you can shoot me or something?” I joked and attempted a laugh. I was surprised when he grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me into him slightly. There was a stern look on his face, and I frowned as his eyebrows creased.

“Jack, you have to let the guilt go.” He squeezed me and punched me on the shoulder. “I know that you never kept anything from me to spite me. I love you, bro. And it makes me nervous to see you carrying this around with you. I don’t know why you feel the need to keep apologizing. Well, that’s not true. You feel the need because you’re a good man and you’ve been carrying this with you for a while, but I got you. You have held me up all these years. I want to see you happy, bro.”

“I just feel like I messed up. I can’t shake it.” I sighed and looked out the window. Emma was painting in one of the fields, trying to perfect her cows and sheep. I could see her figure in the distance, and a warm feeling filled me. I liked having her here. Really liked it. I knew a lot of my tenseness

was a result of the growing feelings I had for her and the jealousy I felt when I saw her with Rafael. It was infuriating and annoying, and it killed me to see them together.

“Also, what is going on with you and Emma?” TJ asked as he watched me looking out the window.

“What do you mean, what is going on?” I asked him.

“Well, every time she’s with Rafael, you seem to get upset, so...”

“I already told you, he’s a player. We both know that. I just don’t want her to get hurt.”

“Is that it, though? Really, Jack?” He sighed as he stepped back. “Look, I know you might not want to tell me exactly how you’re feeling, but...”

“Fine, I like her,” I admitted and felt slightly taken aback as the words came out of my mouth.

“I knew you liked her, dude.” TJ shook his head. “And I’m glad you’re finally admitting it.”

“What do you mean, finally admitting it?”

“Dude, you liked her from the first moment you saw her.”

“What are you talking about? She hated me.”

“She hated you because you were laughing at her, but I know that you liked her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look, remember when we came back to my place that day when Pippa was standing there in the wedding dress?”

“How can I forget?” I asked him, laughing.

“Remember how you said you could tell as soon as you saw me looking at her that there was something there?”

“Yeah. I could see the way you looked at her that you were in love with her. Duh.”

“Well, I can tell the way you looked at Emma from the very beginning, you like her.”

“Oh my gosh. I thought you were going to say I love her.”

“Well, I don’t know,” he said. “There is such a thing as love at first sight.”

“You’ve been with Pippa too long if you think I’m in love with Emma.”

“I don’t know, but maybe your heart does.”

I blinked at him for a couple of seconds and shook my head. “So you started a conversation about wanting us to go on a trip, yet it somehow ends up being about Emma?”

“Because I want you to be able to acknowledge everything,” he said. “The best thing about the fact that we’re brothers is we can always be honest with each other, whether or not we feel the other person wants to hear what we have to say. That’s a sign of a good friend and a good brother. Of course, I’m always going to be here to back you up, but I’m also going to be here to tell you the hard truths, the things that you might not want to hear.”

“You think I don’t want to hear anything about Emma?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. What I’m saying is I think you might not want to acknowledge the fact that you have deep feelings for this girl. And if you do, you’re going to have to think about saying or doing something.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Well, she’s been offered a job, right?”

“Yeah. And?”

“And it’s in New York. Do you really want her to go back to New York?”

“It’s not for me to stop her from going back. If she wants to go, she wants to go. It’s a good opportunity for her.” TJ rolled his eyes. “What?” I protested. “She barely knows me. I barely know her. What do you want me to do, go rushing out into the field and tell her, ‘Don’t leave. Stay with me’? She’d think I was crazy.”

“Is that what you want, though?”

“Is want what I want?” I just stared at him.

“You want her to stay, right?”

“I mean, if she chooses to stay of her own volition, I’m not going to stop her, but I don’t want her to stay because of me.”

“I get that,” he said with a slow nod, “but admit one thing to me.”

“What?” I said.

“Part of the reason you’ve been anxious and nervous and tense is because you do feel something for her and you’re scared of those feelings and what they could mean.”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, his words running through my brain, and it was as if he’d tricked something inside of me. I nodded slowly. It was true. When I’d seen Emma that day in the truck beating her fists against the steering wheel and glaring at me, my heart had flickered for a second, not because I’d fallen in love with her at first sight—I didn’t believe in that—but I had been attracted to her and had wanted to get to know her better.

When I’d seen her standing there with Pippa and TJ on the ranch, it had been like a sign, and when she’d started shouting at me and going off, a little thrill of delight had hit me because she was a challenge and I loved a challenge. Only it was more than that. She was sweet and fun and caring and compassionate and artistic, and she was the sort of woman that I would have chosen for myself if I could see myself getting married. But that was the problem. I just didn’t know if I could see that in my life. I let out a deep sigh.

“What is it?” TJ asked me, looking concerned. “I didn’t mean to upset you or...”

“I think the reason I don’t want to say anything to her or pursue anything is because I’ve always said I didn’t want to get married. After the drama that went on with Kay and then with other women I dated, life has just felt so much calmer without having to worry about women having expectations.”

“Do you think Emma would have those expectations?” he said. “And if she did, would that make you feel like you were

being trapped?”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, then looked back out the window. Emma had gotten up and was walking somewhere further along in the field. I didn't want her to leave. I knew that. I thought about waking up to her every single day. I thought about making breakfast for her, her making coffee. I thought about our lives being together forever, and I realized that that didn't scare me. In fact, it was something I could look forward to. I'd love for her to wake up in my bed. Something in me stirred, but I ignored it. I didn't want this to be about carnal knowledge or thoughts because it was about more than that. Of course, I wanted her. I wanted to know her in the most biblical sense, but it was her brain and her personality and the way she laughed that really called me to her.

“I guess if I had to get married, it would be to someone like her,” I said reluctantly.

“If you had to get married,” TJ said, laughing. “No one's making you get married, but does she make you think that you might enjoy it?” he asked me, and I just stared at him for a couple of seconds.

“Okay, you're right. Why are you so smart?”

“Maybe because I was born that way,” he said. “Maybe it's in our DNA. Or maybe not because you're being an idiot right now.”

“What do you mean, I'm being an idiot?”

“I mean, if you want her and you think she's the one for you, then you've got to make a move before she heads back to New York.”

“I don't want to—” I started, and he held his hand up.

“Stop. You can't do long distance.”

“What do you mean, I can't do long distance? I'm sure if I wanted to...”

“Long distance is not really the way to go in this situation,” he said. “Just think about it. I'm not telling you that

you need to make a move or to let her know your feelings before she makes a decision, but I am telling you that you need to figure out what you want before she makes a decision without knowing how you feel.”

“Fine,” I said. “Is that all?”

“No, I haven’t spoken about this trip I want us to take next year.”

“Oh, that was real?”

“Of course it was real,” he said. “I thought perhaps we could go climbing, maybe Mount Kilimanjaro.”

“That would be cool. Would Pippa let you?”

“I don’t know. She would most probably let me if Emma let you.”

“Very funny,” I said, shaking my head. “But, hey, I just remembered I was going to tell Emma something about one of the illustrations for the book. Do you mind if I head out real quick and come back?”

“No, it’s fine,” he said. “I’ve got to get back to Pippa anyway. She wanted me to take her down by the river so we can go fishing.”

“She wants you to take her fishing or you want to take her fishing?”

“Okay, fine. You caught me. I want to take her fishing, but she’s looking forward to it.”

“Sure she is,” I said, laughing. We headed toward the front of the house, and I gave him a big hug. “Thank you for everything, by the way.”

“There’s no need to thank me. That’s what brothers are for,” he said, and I just nodded.

I headed out to the field. Emma hadn’t noticed me yet. I was about to call out her name when she started screaming. I looked around and tried not to laugh as I saw she was running from a cow. She most probably thought that the cow was chasing her, but I knew he wasn’t. She started screaming, and I

ran toward her so I could save her. Unfortunately, she must have thought I was the cow, because when I went to grab her, she turned around and hit me in the face.

“Oh, no! I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” she said as she looked at me. “I didn’t even see you, Jack!”

I was on the ground looking up at her, rubbing my forehead. “You’ve got a mean hook on you,” I said, laughing. “I can’t believe you thought you were going to punch a cow in the face.”

“He was chasing me. I really thought he was going to try and eat me because of all the hamburgers I’ve had.”

“Nah, he wouldn’t eat you because of all the hamburgers you’ve had. Maybe all the steaks you’ve had.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“I mean, I’m not going to lie and say it didn’t hurt at all.” I chuckled.

She kneeled down on the ground and touched my forehead gingerly. “Oh my gosh. Are you okay?” she said, looking nervous. “I really didn’t mean to hit you.”

“It’s fine,” I said, grabbing her hands and pulling her toward me.

Her big blue eyes were innocent and sweet. I couldn’t pretend to myself that I wasn’t falling for this woman. I pulled her into me and kissed her and stroked her hair. She kissed me back, and we just stared at each other for a couple of seconds.

“I was just painting,” she said, “trying to get some stuff done before I have to head back.”

“I know,” I said, my heart racing.

She started kissing me again, and I stroked the side of her face. I could feel her heart racing.

“I hope you don’t have a black eye because of me.”

“Me too,” I said, laughing. I sighed as I realized that I wanted to do unspeakable things to her, so I jumped up and grabbed her hands. “We should go inside,” I said, laughing.

“What? Why? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” I said. “Maybe too fine.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I really enjoy kissing you, and we’re in a field, and it’s romantic, and you’re looking mighty beautiful today.”

“Thank you,” she said, staring at me, her face going red. “You don’t have to compliment me, especially not after I hit you.”

“You didn’t hit me on purpose. I know it was a mistake,” I said, laughing. “Anyway, I just don’t want to have my dirty way with you.”

“Have your dirty way with me? My, my! What do you mean, Jack?”

“I don’t think you want to know,” I said. “You’re a lady, and I’m trying to be a gentleman.”



## CHAPTER 25

# EMMA

“I think I’m going to have a mocha, please,” I said to Mindy as she took my order.

Pippa was sitting on the other side of the table, drinking an iced tea. She leaned forward as Mindy walked away, and grabbed my hands. “I am so mortified that a cow chased you.”

“I know, but you’re not more mortified than I am that I hit Jack in the face.”

“Are you sure you didn’t do that on purpose?” She laughed, and I shook my head.

“I mean, of course when I first met him, I would’ve given any opportunity to be able to hit him in the face.” I laughed. “But I wouldn’t do that now that I’ve gotten to know him.”

“And because you like him?” she teased.

“I never said that, but I mean, he is kind of cute. I just don’t really know what is going on. It’s not that he’s hot and cold, per se; it’s just that he keeps backing away from me when things seem to be getting closer and closer.”

“But you said that’s because...” She paused and gave me a knowing look.

“I mean, sure. Do I think he wants to do more than kissing? Yes. Do I? Maybe.” I giggled. “Don’t be mortified,” I told her.

“I’m not mortified,” she said, shaking her head. “You’re adults, and if you guys want to do the boom-chicka-wow-wow,

then you should.”

“Really, Pippa?”

“What? I’m just saying.”

“Anyways, I like that he’s respectful, and that would complicate stuff. I’m staying with him. If we started hooking up, it would just be real weird.”

“Really? It sounds like it would be romantic and sweet to me.”

“I don’t know about that. I mean, it would be cool, but I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head, trying not to think about it. “Because I would be one hundred percent honest.” I loved the fact that Jack wasn’t trying to get into my pants. I loved the fact that he wasn’t trying to seduce me. I loved the fact that he was trying to get to know me as a person. And even though we had enjoyed some special moments, he wasn’t trying to push it across the line, which was what most men did in these situations.

“Oh my gosh, don’t look,” Pippa said as her eyes widened.

“Don’t look at what?” I said, looking around.

“I told you not to look,” she groaned.

My eyes widened as well as I saw Rafael walking up to me with three red roses. “These are for you, Emma.”

“Oh, hi,” I said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He paused. “Now, if you don’t mind, I had something that I wanted to do.”

“Okay.” For a few moments, I was worried that he was going to propose to me. Oh my gosh, what if he dropped onto his knees and proposed? I would die. “Mindy told me you were thinking about leaving Paradise Valley,” he said.

And I just stared at him, thinking, *Please do not propose. Please do not propose.*

“And so I wanted to sing you a little something.”

“Oh,” I said, staring at him in surprise. “You don’t have to do that,” I added quickly as Pippa giggled.

The door to the store opened, and TJ walked in. “Hey, what’s going on?” he said as he approached us.

“Rafael just said he wants to sing a song to Emma,” Pippa said, and I looked at her with huge eyes. What was going on? I really didn’t need this right now.

“He does?” TJ started smiling and pulled out his phone.

“What are you doing?” Pippa said.

“I’m just letting Jack know that Rafael is about to serenade Emma.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said quickly.

“Oh no,” TJ said, laughing. “I very much need to do that.”

“Hey, if everyone is ready, I will start singing.” Rafael pulled out a guitar from behind him, and my jaw dropped. This sounded like it was going to be one of the most mortifying moments of my life. While it was true in the movies that a serenade looked romantic, it didn’t feel that romantic right now. Rafael strummed the guitar as Mindy came back with a mocha in her hand.

“Oh my gosh, what are you doing, Rafe?” she asked her brother, shaking her head.

“I’m serenading the beautiful Emma,” he said. “Um,” he said, and then he started singing. “You are my beautiful blond, blue-eyed girl. And you’re not from Paradise Valley, but you could make my home a paradise if you decided to stay with me and go on a date and show me that you really appreciate me.”

He paused, and my eyes widened as he grinned. He pulled out another rose and threw it. “This is for you, my bronze, beautiful woman.”

The door opened again, and I could feel my heart racing as I looked to see who had entered. It was Jack. He strode over to us, his eyes looking confused as he saw me with the roses in

my hand and Rafael standing there in front of us with a guitar. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“Be quiet, Jack,” Rafael said, grinning. “Can’t you see that I’m here trying to impress the beautiful Emma?” He continued, “Your beauty is beyond compare. I don’t think anyone could not stare at someone as wonderful as you. Yes, I would like you in my bed, but I’m not going to be a complete —”

“That is enough,” Jack interrupted him. “You need to stop right now, Rafael.”

Rafael paused and then stared at Jack. “Excuse me? This is for Emma, not for you.”

“I don’t think Emma really wants you to be doing this,” Jack said, shaking his head. I stared at him, not saying anything. I could see Pippa looking intrigued. “Come on, Emma. Does this really impress you?”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. “I mean, I think it’s kind of sweet.”

“Really?” he said, then repeated, “Really?” as he looked around. “Everyone thinks this is sweet?”

“I think it’s kind of romantic,” Pippa said.

“You think this is romantic?”

“Yes, I do.”

“In other circumstances, I might find it romantic. In this circumstance, I felt a little bit out of place.”

“This impresses you,” Jack said, staring at me again.

“I mean, it doesn’t not impress me,” I said, shaking my head.

He let out a deep sigh and walked over to Rafael. I froze for a second. Was he going to hit him? Were they going to fight over me? I couldn’t believe it. “No, Jack,” I said quickly, jumping up. “Please don’t.”

“Please don’t what?” he said, staring at me in confusion.

“Please don’t hit him.”

“Hit him?” He shook his head. “I wasn’t going to hit him. Can I borrow the guitar?” he asked Rafael.

Rafael shrugged and handed it over to him.

“So, Emma, I have a question to ask you,” Jack said, and my heart froze again.

*Oh my God, please don’t ask me to marry you,* I thought.

“Are you into me?” he asked me, and I just looked at him.

“Wait, what?”

“Are you into me or not?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, feeling embarrassed that he was asking this in front of everyone.

“I want to know if you like me.”

“I mean, I don’t know. You told me you’re not looking for anything, so...”

“Well, I changed my mind,” he said, strumming his guitar.

“What do you mean, you changed your mind? What are you saying?”

“I am saying that I like you and that I want you and that I’d like you to be my girl.”

“What?” My jaw dropped. And then Pippa jumped up and rushed over to me.

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh,” she said. I stared at her, and she took a step back. “Sorry, but this is so exciting. I’ve never seen a public declaration like this before in my life.”

“So Emma,” Jack said, strumming the guitar.

“Yes?”

“I guess I’m saying that from the first time I saw you,” he started singing, “my heart went pitter-patter. And I fell for you. And now I just want you to know that I like you and I want you, and there’s no use in questioning my feelings, because the

inevitable has already happened. I've fallen for you, and I want you to stay."

"But," I stared at him, eyes wide, "you said you weren't interested in relationships or getting married, or..."

"Maybe I didn't even know what I was saying. Plus, we haven't finished the book yet. Please give Paradise Valley a chance. Please give me a chance."

"I don't want to rush anything," I said quickly. I wasn't sure if he was saying this because he just didn't want me to be with Rafael or because he really meant it.

"We won't rush anything." He stopped singing.

"I just don't know what to think. I just..."

"When I kissed you," he said softly. "How did it make you feel?"

"Great," I said.

"Kissing you made me feel like a million dollars, Emma. Listen to me. I like you. You like me. Let's stop the craziness."

"What craziness?"

"The craziness of you thinking about leaving Paradise Valley, the craziness of you thinking that you want a job in marketing when we both know you don't. I know that you feel like you've been walking this fine line and you feel like you're alone, but you're not. You've got everyone here in Paradise Valley who wants you to stay. And you know something else, Emma?"

"No," I said, my heart racing.

"I was wrong just now."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't like you."

"Oh." I felt my heart falling into my stomach.

"I don't like you, but I love you. Something that TJ said to me really struck me. He said, 'Maybe you had love at first sight.' And you know what? I never believed in it before, but

being around you, being with you, seeing you smile, seeing you blush, I know it's true. I loved you from the first moment I met you. Will you be my girlfriend? Will you stop me from being the last single cowboy in Montana? Will you give me a chance?"

"Yes," I said, knowing that I couldn't have written a better moment, knowing that I really liked him, knowing that I'd been falling for him from the first moment I'd seen him as well. There was just something about the way he made me feel. There was something about the way he protected his family, the way he tried to protect me. I knew it in my heart.

"So I'm guessing that's a no for me, then?" Rafael said, and I looked up. He burst out laughing. "Hey, I'm just joking. I know this is you guys' moment."

Jack looked at him and then looked at me. "What are you talking about?"

"TJ and I kind of had a feeling that you were into Emma. And I know you, Jack—you cannot make up your mind about anything. So we thought that a little healthy competition might make you come to your senses."

"You what?" Jack said and looked over at TJ. "Really?"

"What can I say? You're my brother, and I love you, but I know from firsthand experience that you're slow to do anything," TJ laughed, "and I didn't want you to lose Emma. I could tell that she was the one for you, and I could tell that she was into you, too."

"You could?" I said, surprised.

"Yeah, Pippa told me."

"Pippa, you what? But I didn't even tell you."

"You're my best friend, Emma," Pippa said, grinning. "You think I don't know when you're into a guy and when he's gotten under your skin?"

"But you didn't even say anything."

"I wanted you to figure it out. But once you got that job, I knew you'd be goofy, and TJ knew Jack would be goofy. So



we wanted to make sure you guys realized what you had before it was too late. We have the rest of our lives to do and find and pursue, but I didn't want you guys to have to wait decades like me and TJ did. You guys have each other now, and you can make the best of it."

"I love you," I said to Pippa, giving her a big hug. And then I walked over to TJ and gave him a hug, too. "When I got here, I wanted to make sure you were the right guy for my girl, because... Well, anyways, you know. You just don't know. But you're great, and I'm so glad that you are her boyfriend and her fiancé, because you're amazing."

"Thank you," he said. "That means a lot."

I walked over to Jack and grabbed his hands. "And you, Jack Marley? You drive me crazy, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Oh, my darling," he said, giving me a big kiss in front of everyone. "You don't know how that makes me feel. I'm just so glad that I came to my senses and let you know before it was too late. I will always love you. And I don't care how slowly you want to take this, because I am here for you every step of the way. We will figure out where our paths are going to take us. We will figure out where life is going to take us, because the only thing that matters is that we take the same path and that we're together. I will always be here to support you."

"And I will always be here to support you as well," I said, smiling at him. "This is kind of crazy. I can't believe I've fallen for someone so quickly."

"Hey, there's a saying that once you drink the water in Paradise Valley, you're never leaving," he said, grinning at me.

"Yeah, well, I guess that saying is true." I laughed as he rubbed my back. "Why did I not realize that this was going to be the place for me?" I said, shaking my head. "I just don't know how I was so slow."

"Oh, I think you knew," he said, "from the moment you got here, this was your home."

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